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Motherhood 2.0: Digital Motherhood as Visual Culture

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Lara Jennifer Schweller

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Victoria E. Johnson, Chair  
Professor Kristen Hatch  
Professor Catherine Benamou

2014



## **DEDICATION**

To

all of the mothers in my family.

Your incredible lives as women, mothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters have always provided me with the perspective I needed and shaped who I am today. I am eternally grateful.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### FIELD OF STUDY

Motherhood in Digital Visual Culture

## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Motherhood 2.0: Digital Motherhood as Visual Culture

By

Lara Jennifer Schweller

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor Victoria E. Johnson, Chair

In the cultural and media context of the late 2000s, a series of performances of motherhood revealed a conflicted state of “ideal” contemporary American maternity and struggles over what constitutes the labor of women’s work. Prompted by the images of these performances, which crossed popular digital media registers including the blogosphere, reality TV, and film, I address issues of motherhood attendant to a postfeminist, neoliberal era wherein performances of motherhood are often communicated through 2.0 platforms that stress interactive and relational communication between media icon and audience. By examining popular cultural texts through a scholarly lens, I point to tropes of motherhood that emerge during this particular postfeminist moment of digital visual culture: the stay-at-home career enabled by new technologies and economies, the over-extended mother, and the threat of the dystopian, technologically-dependent mother and mother-to-be. By moving from examining the performance of motherhood over different platforms of delivery from the blogosphere, read on a personal or home computer, to reality TV, watched at home on a personal computer or a television, to film, which opens in a public theater, I point to the way in which different digital-

era media platforms, which operate with different levels of “domestication” and formal histories, offer specific stories about motherhood and different opportunities for mothers to either break down or re-adhere to traditional models of femininity. The conceptual framework of a 2.0 model refers not only to the interactivity that is the new, cultural model which frames the production and reception of these texts, but it also references a digital era in which personal computing and screen objects are used for social networking. I contextualize these representations of motherhood in postfeminist, digital, visual culture as a historically specific extension of and re-imagination of traditional models of femininity and motherhood that emerge in the broadcast era. These representations, and this specific visual culture, pose a critical site of analysis and gender study at this moment in their ability to articulate our culture’s negotiation of gender in relation to new models of technology, power, and economic anxiety in a recession era.

## Introduction

In the mediated cultural context of the late 2000s, a series of performances of motherhood revealed a conflicted state of contemporary American ideals of the maternal and struggles over what constitutes the labor of women's work. Prompted by the images of these performances, which crossed popular media registers including the blogosphere, reality TV, and film, I address issues of motherhood attendant to a postfeminist, neoliberal era wherein performances of motherhood are often communicated through 2.0 platforms that stress interactive and relational communication between media icon and audience. By critically examining popular culture texts, I point to tropes of motherhood that emerge during this particular postfeminist moment: the stay-at-home career enabled by new technologies and economies, the over-extended mother, and the threat of the dystopian, technologically-dependent mother and mother-to-be. By moving from examining the performance of motherhood in the blogosphere, to reality TV, to film, I point to the way in which different digital media platforms, which operate with different levels of domestication and formal histories, offer specific stories about motherhood and different opportunities for mothers to either break down or re-adhere to traditional models of femininity. These different modes of address offer new opportunities for women's voices and stories, in part, because of the ways that they are consumed and, in part, because each technology has a different formal history of addressing and representing codes of femininity and the maternal. Media like the blogosphere and reality TV are more often "domesticated" and made intimate through platforms of delivery like personal computers, tablets, and home televisions, which not only invite consumption within the home, but also nurture a particularly personal, one-to-one, relationship between the object and the consumer.

While blogging's popularity arises just before and during the 2.0 era and offers the most interactive relationship between author and audience, the representations of reality TV stars play into television's formal history of liveness and direct address, foregrounding a possibility of interactivity with the viewer. While films are increasingly viewed in the home and on mobile and portable screens, they are still tied to a notion of public viewing in the theater whose address is unidirectional. And although film stars also engage fans through twitter feeds and live appearances, I point to the ways in which the consumption of blogs and reality TV creates a more personal relationship between performer and audience.

I utilize the framework of the 2.0 era in two ways. The 2.0 era, in its more well-versed definition, marks a distinct paradigm shift, beginning in 2005, of technological innovation in personal computing as well as the rise of interactive media platforms, wherein the producers and consumers of content communicate and often co-author texts. The 2.0 era also marks a period of time in which the rhetoric of motherhood labor, specifically the affective labor of community building and care-taking, aligns with the new rhetoric of digital media: interactivity. By examining this discursive overlap, I address the negotiation of women's work during this time period as part of the shift in the ways that mothers who perform across these technologies play into or provoke American ideals of the maternal.

The types of mothers we see in this era, and the discourses they generate, are intertwined with what Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, in their text *Gendering the Recession*, suggest is "The Great Recession," which, after, "...the semicollapse of the global financial system in 2007-8 inaugurated a set of profound cultural shifts" (1). This climate occurs just after the economic boom in the early 2000s in which a postfeminist identity included "...a preoccupation with self-fashioning and the makeover; women's seeming 'choice' not to occupy high-status public roles;

the celebration of sexual expression and affluent femininities—[all] enabled by the optimism and opportunity of prosperity (or perception of it)” (1). The types of mothers I address, who rose to media prominence on the cusp of, during, and just after this shift, are suggestive of the ways in which notions of ideal maternity became troubled as new models of femininity emerged in the cracks left by an economic collapse that occurred right as new methods of communication, community formation, and technological innovation became increasingly accessible.

Negra and Tasker write, “In popular culture the recession has largely factored as an opportunity to reboot established, enduring ideological precepts about class, race, consumerism, individualism, work, and (as is the particular concern in this book) gender” (10). These ideological issues have risen to the forefront in “...a recessionary discursive environment in which class tensions are consistently processed as gender conflict” (21) and in which “home and community [are positioned] as sites of crisis and new figurations of labor” (13). The rebooting of gender norms, a discursive environment where class tensions, and, I argue, tensions over race and power structures, are processed as gender conflict, and a re-valuation of the domestic as a site for new forms of labor and also new outlets for anxieties, are all evident in the performances of motherhood I turn to in this dissertation.

In line with Negra and Tasker who note that, “...media studies offers a unique disciplinary pathway for interpreting recession culture given its focus on the analysis of collective symbolic environments that hold enormous sway in shaping public views,” and that “media culture” itself, as an object of study, already, “involves hegemonic processes of sense making; stitching together at times contradictory modes of conventional wisdom, media formats from financial journalism to reality television offer an understanding of the operations of power,” (1-2) I work through the images of the performances of motherhood as a method of uncovering

the moments where troubled motherhood and femininity are reflective of larger cultural anxieties over the failing economy, shifts in gendered power structures, class, and race. Given that *Gendering the Recession* intervenes in the academic fields of media studies and visual studies to “[address] a corpus of texts with high cultural profiles that generate significant commentary but little full-fledged analysis,” (3) I move forward with a comparative study of images of motherhood in mommy blogs, reality TV, and, the Hollywood films that Kelly Oliver calls “momcoms,” to study the textual information and representational entanglements of a media landscape characterized by what Anna Everett terms “digitextuality,” thinking through the new narrative and representational opportunities inherent in media platforms that function within a 2.0 model. Digitextuality, a play off of Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality, is Everett’s theory in which “new media digital technologies make meaning not only by building a new text through absorption and transformation of other texts, but also by embedding the entirety of other texts (analog and digital) seamlessly within the new” (“Digitextuality and Click Theory” 7). In an era of media convergence where similar images of and performances of mothers flow across different media and screen platforms, we must articulate how those representations accumulate meaning by engaging and repurposing different modes of both media and commodity consumption. This model of new media as a generative site where old content might acquire new meanings, audiences, and contexts through new acts of representation is indicative of a 2.0 model that, in its promotion of interactivity, nurtures the type of inter-text based on similar ideas of accumulation and multiplicity.

The 2.0 model is one that privileges the significant commentary generated by fans and audiences. It is a model where this commentary-driven feedback is often interpolated by the authors of texts, informing their performances and communication. The “text” is one in constant



flux, always in a potential state of incorporating new authors and new content. However, a 2.0 model that is stressed in the blogosphere, and in some TV shows that invite audience participation, is a different model from contemporary films like momcoms. Oliver defines a momcom as, “Big-screen representations of pregnant bellies [that] give us new romcoms” (3). These momcoms, “. . .promise women romance, love, and sex, all through the transformative power of pregnancy” (3). While representations of motherhood, and the performances of specific mothers, seem to fluidly cross textual and formal media boundaries, I mobilize the images and narratives of these mothers in an effort to delineate the important differences in the representational strategies of different media like mommy blogs, reality TV, and momcoms, which are generated by different sources, and within different economic structures, despite their market-driven designation as a homogenous, collective women’s “visual culture.” As I compare and contrast representations of mothers, I especially consider the following points of comparison: the agency of the performing mother in authoring the text itself, the possible proximity between that mother’s lived reality and her audiovisual and textual representations, and the mode of address and venue of media consumption.

Judith Butler’s definition of the performativity of gender as a materialization of gender discourse is essential for my reading of ideal maternity in mommy blogs. Butler writes, “In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names” (236). The feedback of performativity comes from the way that the performative subject draws upon representations of gender already circulating through visual culture, and through this citation, re-instates them as cultural norms. Functioning similarly to a citational practice of digitextuality, Butler’s theory of performativity reveals the way that an accumulation of

performed gender moments actually serves to bolster a codified version of gender norms. Performances of motherhood function similarly, however, in a 2.0 media environment. These performances of motherhood in different media venues welcome interactivity, and in some cases, seem to break down normative gender roles through the sheer number and multiplicity of audience and user voices contributing to the text.

While the technology of the 2.0 model emerges in media networks and communities, suggesting a more utopian model of communication between producers and consumers of cultural content, it does so in tandem with increasingly subtle and ubiquitous methods of surveillance that register across all levels of power from national, to market, to institutional, to self-surveillance. The institutional and self-monitoring of online communication and action are part of a neoliberal, information-driven society where the onus of individual success begins with self-evaluation and then self-improvement. The technologies engaged by mothers in their performances of motherhood offer new opportunities for communication. However, these performances often reveal our culture's distrust for new technologies and a dystopian underbelly evident in narratives of technologically-enabled motherhood labor that manifests as both economic labor and pregnancies that rely on reproductive technologies.

### **Interactive Media and New Models of Labor**

In a 2009 episode of the *Rachel Ray Show*, Rachel Ray and Kate Gosselin sit at a simple kitchen table. They pose in front of a fully outfitted kitchen that defines Ray's persona with rich, warm colors and an understated upper middle class status. The kitchen boasts light, wood accents that are highlighted by a color scheme of orange and blue, including the vintage-feel orange

Viking stove. As seems standard in an era of media convergence, and digitextuality, the television show's website directs interested viewers to an online site where they are able to purchase a fully outfitted, high-end stove. On the wall of the set hang two "R" decals set in a folksy 1970s font, playing off of the use of the similarly dated hue of orange that is not only the color of the oven, but the color of the show's more modern "double-R" logo. While the set is thoroughly modern, it is injected with nostalgic references, dating it back to the first heyday of televised cooking shows.<sup>1</sup>

Ray earned her bearing as a television personality through years of local television programming before being picked up by the Food Network where she became famous for her approachability, cost and timesaving techniques, and her deconstruction of fine dining codes and terminology. She debuted her talk show, the *Rachel Ray Show*, in 2006, capitalizing on her fame and her performance of colloquial knowledge. In this particular episode, she interviews Gosselin of the TLC show *Jon & Kate Plus Eight*. Gosselin has, at this point, undergone media scrutiny during her and her ex-husband Jon's divorce, in between seasons four and five of their show. The interview addresses these marital issues and the aftershocks of media attention that resonated on gossip sites and in tabloid magazines.

Lauren Berlant's theory of the intimate public sphere is key to helping us think through the way that political and cultural ideologies are played out through discourses of motherhood and femininity, such as those discussed in this scene. Berlant writes, "An intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and other

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Child's show, *The French Chef*, aired in 1963, followed by Graham Kerr's *The Galloping Gourmet* in 1969. After a July 2011 show with Graham Kerr, Ray's website noted that he was her inspiration for the show and for her first step into the kitchen. Given this, it makes sense that Ray would visually, and nostalgically, reference the 1970s. Kathleen Collins's book, *Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows*, and Dana Polan's book, *Julia Child's The French Chef*, were particularly useful in understanding the origins of the home cooking show in the 1960s and 70s.

things that express those people's particular core interests and desires" (*The Female Complaint* 5). Ray invokes the intimate public of "women's culture," which Berlant cites as one of the first and most prevalent intimate publics, by representing certain codes of femininity. The powerful exchange occurs through women's, in this case Ray, Gosselin, and the female audience and consumers of the show, "participation" in the intimate public which, "seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails" (5). The community building that takes place between Ray and Gosselin over coffee, in the kitchen, articulates a series of identifiable codes of behavior, modes of consumption, and visual cues that come to define public personas in terms of casual femininity, constructing opportunities for communication within specific (and specifically gendered) structures of consumption.

The audience is drawn into the intimacy of a conversation that is relayed through close-ups and the ritual of afternoon coffee. Ray is almost always framed in front of the sink, complete with sponge and partially used soap, as if to suggest that she is the woman at work. The actual work is not cleaning up the kitchen; it is that of directing insightful dialogue and questions that prompt guests to air their "dirty laundry." The redemptive qualities of public sharing have a particularly gendered feel in this case (Shattuc). Ray's set evokes an intimate public sphere of "women's culture" (Berlant) where gossip becomes validated discourse on the state of the family, and thus, politicized discussions are framed through feminized modes of communication. At the beginning of the conversation, Ray and Gosselin only talk to each other, and the audience, both in studio and at home, remain silent participants. This is until Gosselin turns and addresses her audience directly. She says,

At the beginning the interest that our show brought, you know, as far as fans and people coming up to us bothered me, annoyed me and by that I mean like probably the first two seasons. Somewhere in season three it occurred to me that these are people who love our children, who love our family, who support us and without them there is no “stay at home career” for us and so I have to say personally thank you to the fans for the encouragement, to the moms who say you do it on TV I do it at home we’re all doing the same thing and thank you.<sup>2</sup>

In this dissertation I analyze a shift in “women’s work” that Gosselin articulates in this monologue: a mother’s “stay at home career.” Women’s work is labor that occurs in the home—it is the maintenance of the home and the family and involves both physical and affective labor. In line with Negra and Tasker’s claim that in the recession era, the home is re-charged as a site for “new figurations of labor,” I address how iterations of new domestic work, couched in gendered terms of affective labor, are shifting in response to new communication and technological opportunities (13). Women’s work is traditionally devalued because it is not reimbursable through salary and because it occurs in the private sphere. Gosselin has managed her performance of motherhood as her primary source of income. Not only was she continuing to tape episodes for *Kate Plus Eight* at that time (the post-divorce version of the show), earning a rumored \$47,000 an episode, but she was also in negotiations for a spin-off show, *A Twist of Kate*.

Motherhood is Gosselin’s career and it is one made possible by new models of entertainment, self-promotion, and audience interactivity. While Gosselin’s paid labor is highly visible through modes of performance, many other mothers continue to work under the veil of invisible labor and without capital gain. In this dissertation I turn to new models of the performance of motherhood to show how mothers coded both as celebrities, like Gosselin, and as average mothers, are shifting the visibility of their labor and its ability to be quantified. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions in this document are my own. In this particular case, the quotation marks in “stay at home career” are a translation of the air quotes Gosselin made while on the show.

not only a revisionary look at the status of “women’s work” it is also a consideration of how new, highly interactive, forms of domestic media provide opportunities for visibility in the new economies of a recession era. The intersection of digital culture and postfeminist versions of motherhood, often characterized by retreatism into the home, re-visualizes the opportunities of affective labor, dissolving the boundary between remunerable labor and women’s work in the home.

Lynn Spigel’s valuable work on the way that the labor of white middle-class mothers of the 1950s was elided in the home revealed the idealization of the invisibly toiling mother as the proper mother and citizen in post-war America and in post-war American television. I draw upon her work to consider how within a neoliberal, postfeminist, and “post-race” era, performances of mothers are still charged with issues of visibility in terms of race and class. In a neoliberal era where methods of self-betterment are intimately intertwined with popular media, and are underscored with notions of citizenship that are ideologically bound to a post-boom, and post-9/11 culture, being “white,” being of an imagined “middle class,” and being able to manage “women’s work” either invisibly or without complaint, seem integral to the imagination of proper or ideal motherhood. The performed versions of motherhood that deviate from these ideological structures are all moments for troubling the foundation of these imaginations. In this dissertation, I highlight these troubled versions of mothers and their relationship to new technologies.

Just two months before Gosselin’s appearance on the *Rachel Ray Show*, NBC’s the *Today Show* aired a new segment titled “Digital Motherhood.” This segment focused on mommy bloggers who earned consistent and increasingly measurable financial rewards for weaving product endorsements into their everyday writing. The narrator of the segment introduces the

first case study when she says, “Say goodbye to these iconic mothers from television in years passed,” as the screen splits between images of *The Brady Bunch*, *All in the Family*, *The Cosby Show*, and *One Day at a Time*. The show cuts to an interview with a mother who claims that a mother’s daily routine is so busy that technology helps her to manage. The narrator chimes in, “and say hello to motherhood 2.0.” In order to distinguish contemporary motherhood, this segment directs us towards “classic” images of motherhood that have been channeled into our collective memory through television. Together we revisit the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, suggesting that “classic” motherhood ends at some point during the 1990s and that there is a teleological drive of improvement. Effectively, this segment speaks to how televisual technologies work upon us and model our expectations of motherhood through an ongoing onslaught of performative representations that culminate in the celebrated “digital mother” of our time. This segment suggests that “classic” motherhood actually ended in the 1990s (and that it ever, in fact, existed), only to be replaced by a contemporary form of motherhood where the management of household work, the household economy, and the family is “newly” enabled by new technologies and the opportunities of social networking online. The era of digital motherhood that began shortly after “classical” motherhood “ended” in the 1990s is similar to the era of post-war technologies that Lynn Spigel analyzed in her texts *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* and *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*; in that new technologies were expected to usher in new time, money, and space saving techniques. Given Spigel’s documentation of the fantasy that space-age technologies of the 1960s would solve both issues of household labor and international political conflicts, her work on the utopian and dystopian narratives embedded in domestic technologies is

essential for thinking through the idea of Motherhood 2.0 and mothers who are utilizing new social media technologies to manage motherhood in a variety of ways.

Some women use their iPhone to organize their schedules, entertain their toddlers, and virtually sync with their baby monitors. Some women use social networking sites geared towards women to connect with other mothers—building outlets for questions, complaints, and celebrations of motherhood. Some women are blogging about their daily life, and throughout these narratives, are adding nods to corporate products. One part of the “Digital Motherhood” segment focuses on Melissa García, behind the website *Consumerqueen.com*, who writes daily entries about how to save money on household purchases. García has taken coupon clipping into the next century by coupon surfing across the Internet and blogging about her successes and tips. Major U.S. corporations also contact Melissa to review their products and reward her with free samples. This model of compensation is a trend among mommy bloggers who have begun to engage in corporate sponsorship as a means of supplementing income.

Digital technologies have become intimately intertwined with our culture’s conception of ideal motherhood. The *Today Show*’s series “Motherhood 2.0” hailed a specific group of mothers in a way that has a particular cultural resonance: they identified white middle class mothers as an ideal and as a consumer group of early technology adopters. They are women who consume technology and use technology in order to become more socially connected, to engage with their peers and their children, and to learn about how to be better and more efficient versions of U.S. contemporary culture’s imagined idea of maternity.

The nickname, 2.0, suggests a type of relational motherhood that is evocative of shifts in technological interactivity. If “Web 1.0” was dominated by applications and interfaces with a unidirectional flow of content then “Web 2.0” would stress a relational methodology that



privileged interpersonal interaction and a user-friendly interface. In this dissertation, I focus on this paradigm of interactivity and relationality as a structuring force for networked mothers and for the maintenance and production of new audiences for shows about mothers. In analyzing the reception of these shows, I address the way that mothers negotiate representations of motherhood. While so-called “regular” mothers are using 2.0 platforms and networked technologies like blogs, smartphones, and surveillance cameras to manage and to perform motherhood in new ways, and to form new social communities, a celebrity mother like Gosselin performs motherhood and housewifery as an identity for her primary career, building off of models set in earlier generations by Betty Crocker and Martha Stewart. Her performance plays into American cultural fantasies of motherhood. Despite her above-average amount of children and multiples, she embodies a particularly American average-ness that is achieved through her consistent self-labeling as “a normal mom,” her rapport with her fans, her middle class status, and her unmarked racial status that seems to neutralize her mixed-race family through an embodiment of a “post-racial” ideal family that is part of the digital and recession era of the 2000s.

Richard Dyer’s work on whiteness is particularly relevant here. Dyer works to reveal “whiteness” as a culturally constructed category rather than the unmarked identity that it appears to be in mainstream visual culture. As well, John Caldwell’s chapter on the televising of the Rodney King Riots in Los Angeles speaks to a “televsual form of crisis management,” where specific visual codes are used to contain representations of the other (*Televisuality* 302). The lure of this imagined and mediatized maternity is a visually discursive image that blanches representations of difference across multiple registers of race and ethnicity, class, and sexuality. However, as this dissertation argues, this fantasy of a race-less and class-less motherhood and

domesticity breaks down over the anxieties attendant with digital motherhood. If the televisual culture of the U.S. imagines the ideal mother to be part of a hetero-normative union and to be ethnically, racially, and sexually neutral or “white” then her counterpart is a single woman of marked ethnicity, color, and sexuality. Mothers who activate and harness media as part of their labor are celebrated when they comply with this fantasy and use media prodigiously to promote this standard and to visibly improve their efficiency as an ideal mother. However, at the point where mothers seem to stop using technologies and new media in the service of the child or the maintenance of this imagined, ideal maternity; the markers of “singleness,” race, ethnicity, and class resurface as a mother’s dominant, and often unruly, attribute. This is the case with Gosselin, after her divorce, and it is also the case with the Octomom, Nadya Suleman; a single mother, of Iraqi heritage, who was on welfare while giving birth to multiples. As these markers (re)surface, they rupture the problematic foundation of American digital visual culture—one where race and class conflict is either elided or simplified into a narrative conflict that can be resolved within 30 to 60 minutes.

I focus on the concept of the “stay-at-home career” as a significant contemporary shift in the paradigm of “women’s work.” “Women’s work” refers to gendered housework and affective labor performed at home.<sup>3</sup> Typically, and historically, this work has been understood as unquantifiable because it does not produce capital. As feminist scholars and Marxist theorists have argued, this is a problematic assessment of this work because it continues to devalue female labor and to shut down the potential for re-thinking alternative forms of remuneration. Affective labor, or, the labor of caring and sustaining community, although unable to produce capital gain, reproduces the health and welfare of the community, and so, the worker.

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<sup>3</sup> While there has been a rise of stay at home fathers and shifts in gendered divisions of labor, I focus exclusively on women and motherhood until the epilogue, which addresses these other shifts within a post-feminist context.

While my scholarship is in debt to these arguments and this history, this dissertation focuses on the ways in which new media platforms demand that we reconsider the quantifiability of “women’s work” as mothers visibly perform these tasks on television and across the Internet. Our contemporary visual culture exposes images of women’s work in new ways: labor that was previously unquantifiable, amorphous, and shuttered behind the façade of the private home (and sphere) is now work that can have increasing and measurable economic rewards. It is also work that is increasingly visible through reality TV and interactive Internet platforms. Often, this labor is virtually interactive: it connects mothers to other mothers, to their children, and to celebrity performances of ideal motherhood through Internet, television, and networked technologies. At stake is the politics of visibility within popular media and the opportunities for digital domestic media to empower women to form interactive virtual communities that trouble an idealized image of maternity in the efforts of re-imagining a more varied contemporary maternity. By comparing representations and performances of motherhood across popular media in the blogosphere, reality TV, and film, I consider how specific digital platforms offer different modes of representation. While domestic technologies like the home computer and the television house the blogosphere and reality TV, which prompt interactivity and become a site for the community building often associated with both affective labor and the care-taking of a family, the generic and formal codes of film offer fewer opportunities for new versions of motherhood.

This dissertation aligns with feminist readings of media by privileging and examining everyday forms of communication, by critically assessing images of maternity that are dispersed through popular media, by analyzing popular media as a site conducive to the construction of maternity and femininity, and by problematizing the myth of a public vs. a private sphere that is imbricated with the false binary of labor vs. leisure and male vs. female gender roles. “In line

with accounts of neoliberalism,” Negra and Tasker, “...theorize this process [of media culture] as one in which media texts work to bridge the private and the public” (2). In this neoliberal era, not only is there little distinction between the private and the public sphere, but media texts, which are instructive of self-betterment and proper motherhood and citizenship, are part of what connect the public-sphere notion of citizenship to the private-sphere idea of motherhood. This project engages feminist analysis as a methodology to point to the way that a contemporary discourse of U.S. maternity is still rooted in traditional models of privatized, sentimental, female labor. This project prioritizes this methodology alongside the investigative and interpretive models of visual and cultural studies and television and media studies. These methodologies are key to this project because they provide critical models through which I will examine how popular images and media inform our cultural understanding of societal institutions and ideological constructions like motherhood.

### **The Labor of “Women’s Work”**

This dissertation builds upon the histories of U.S. female labor by examining new forms of affective (often immaterial), intellectual, and motherhood labor. In addressing modes of female labor my argument works to re-contextualize the term “women’s work” within the 2.0 era. The development and mass use of new digital and networked technologies require that we rethink the limits of this term. The work of motherhood, often denoted as “women’s work” that is invisible and of the private sphere, is increasingly visible across Internet and television platforms and increasingly measurable in dollars. This new economic visibility problematizes the traditional markers of this form of female labor because its virtual mobility troubles the myth of

a public and private sphere divided by gender, it points to the way this labor can be analyzed through a framework of capital and industry, and it makes visible the immaterial work of community formation and sustainability.

In *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama*, Kathleen McHugh argues that the invisibility of women's work or domestic labor is an effect of "how the affectively oriented roles of mother and wife sentimentalize domestic labor and make it very difficult to see or understand as labor *qua* labor" (5). The housewife and mother of the 1950s are, according to McHugh, fantasized through classical Hollywood melodramas as classless, white, and able to seamlessly and simultaneously attend to the beautification of the self and the home. We, as consumers of these films, are left with an ideal of women's work, the housewife, and the mother that requires the actual labor of housework and child rearing to be invisible. As McHugh suggests, the invisibility that is espoused in these films evolved from popular 19<sup>th</sup> century how-to manuals and from the assumed affective and sentimental nature of the motherhood identity. McHugh traces her reading of Hollywood melodrama to 19<sup>th</sup> century manuals written in the spirit of Taylorization, a theory of scientific management that emphasizes efficiency. By tracing her version of domestic labor back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, McHugh links codes of gender, work, and divisions of space of the 1950s to the Victorian Era.

This link between codes of gender in the 1950s and the Victorian era is addressed in the work of feminist geographers like Daphne Spain and Gillian Rose. Rose documents the home as closed off and privatized, tracing its architecture back to English Victorian manors. Spain extends that concept to demonstrate that these domestic spaces restrict women from the public sphere institutions that would provide access and agency. Feminist scholars argue that a division between the public and private sphere that is gendered is a historically false mythology that has

served to structure and enforce gender divisions and is ultimately linked to a Victorian “cult of womanhood” (Welter).

In her book *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Spigel speaks to the way that television, as an object, serves to actualize and reinforce these divisions of space, mapping them onto labor and leisure activities. For women the home is a place for work, while for men, it is one for leisure. Spigel shows how American advertisements for televisions in the 1950s consistently situate the male reclining in front of the television in the living room while the woman is pictured, peripherally, in the kitchen; or how the mother labors in front of the television even while her family sits passively, watching. This enforces the way that the space of the home can be subdivided into different leisure and labor areas and bolsters McHugh’s claim that popular images of “women’s work” in the 1950s make labor invisible, or in this case, peripheral.

McHugh speaks to the way that women model themselves based on mediatized images that circulate within popular culture.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many feminist studies of television and media have established a connection between television and “women’s work.” Most notably for this project, Spigel argues that, “The fluid interconnection between leisure and labor at home presents a context in which to understand representations of the female audience during the postwar years” (75). Spigel documents, through archival research in women’s home magazines and television trade journals, the way that television was prefigured as improving the efficiency of a woman’s household work by providing her with just enough distraction to make tasks go by more quickly. She argues that it was “a notion of spectatorship that was inextricably intertwined with their useful labor at home” (75). The content of early American daytime television, with its

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<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Jackie Stacey works through this idea of “modeling” in addressing British female audiences’ reception of British and American classical Hollywood film stars in her book *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*.

interplay between content and advertisements, worked to train women to be good consumers and household buyers. This idea builds off of the work of Tania Modleski and Nick Browne.

Modleski speaks to the way the rhythms of American soap opera and daytime TV emulate the rhythms of housework. Browne argues that the flow of American commercial television involves a supertext of advertising content that structures narrative content. It comes full circle when viewers purchase the advertised products.

In all of these cases, scholars point to the way that television as an object and as a vehicle for media and advertising content informs the efficiency of housework. While McHugh designates female labor as affective, and Spigel speaks to the way popular discourses of TV built it up as both help and hindrance to child rearing, the focus of this term “women’s work” has been on housework.

Kathi Weeks notes “Feminist theorists have long been interested in immaterial and affective labor, even if the terms themselves are a more recent invention” (233). Building off of definitions of immaterial and affective labor as forms of caring, kin work, and community building, Weeks charts how feminists and feminist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s analyzed these forms of labor through Marxist critiques of capital and alienation.

The 1970s and 1980s were not only a time for feminist Marxist critiques of labor, they were also periods during which major political and juridical battles over equal wages, compensation, and rights were won by women. While my dissertation focuses on the forms of labor that occur in the home (or in media content meant to represent the home) it is important to recognize the important battles that have been won by and for women who work outside of the home, as well as, the ongoing battles and inequalities in women’s ability to advance in careers outside of the home. For example, the Equal Pay for Equal Work act, passed in 1963, and the

Comparable Worth movement have both been integral for continuing to secure labor rights for women in the U.S. (Kessler-Harris). These reforms and the aforementioned theories were advocated by a coalescing group of second wave feminists. As many feminists have since shown, this group was predominantly female, white, and upper-middle class. Jacqueline Jones writes the history of female African American labor in the United States, pointing to the way that the feminist movement and labor battles for women were often divided over race. As white women succeeded to earn more pay for better jobs in the workplace, black women earned unchanging wages for pink-collar jobs as domestic workers. The issue of outsourced domestic work is still a major concern as this form of “women’s work” continues to be devalued and ill-compensated, often performed by economically marginalized women of all races, ethnicities, and class-statuses (Leonard, “Read-Maid Postfeminism”; “I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here”).

In line with these ongoing issues of valuation, Weeks points to the instructive worth of the successes and failures of Feminist Marxist critique. She concludes by valorizing the theories of “Socialist feminists,” who, “for example, built on Marxist political economics to conceive unwaged reproductive labor, particularly household caring labor, both as a locus of exploitation and as a site from which resistant subjects and alternative visions might emerge” (234). In this dissertation I consider the visual culture of performed motherhood as one such site where alternative models of motherhood, women’s work, and female labor become possible.

Spigel, Modleski, and Browne focus on the everyday patterns, distractions, and tasks presented by television to the housewife. Their investigations are built upon a critique of everyday life and an attention towards the possibilities for resistance and revolution.<sup>5</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>5</sup> Much of this work is built upon the critical and spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau—whose work I draw upon in my own scholarship. In particular: the theories introduced in Lefebvre’s book, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, and de Certeau’s book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.



Weeks and other feminist scholars ultimately emphasize everyday spaces as sites for alternative and utopic possibilities. This is especially the case with Feminist Standpoint theory, a movement of feminist theory whose proponents define it as a critical theory that analyzes social order from the perspective of marginalized and disenfranchised groups of people (Harding). Juliet Schor's article "Utopias of Feminist Time" is a call to action that suggests an achievable utopia of feminist time where women's work and household labor is revalued, marking the home and the temporality of the everyday as active sites of change.

I build upon this model by critically assessing popular television and media as everyday forms of culture. Motherhood 2.0 is a new paradigm of relationality, communication, performativity, economics, and labor.

Michael Hardt situates the importance of affective and immaterial labor within the "processes of economic postmodernization" (90). According to Hardt, contemporary models of economics have gone "from the domination of industry to that of services and information, a process of economic *postmodernization*, or rather, *informatization*" (90). He documents the importance of the computer, intellectual training, and immaterial labor in today's economy; noting that the service industry, which is modeled on a type of caring, affective labor, has become one of the largest domestic and international markets. According to Hardt, while affective labor was consigned to female reproductive work in the home, it now dominates the industry and very clearly produces capital gain. This certainly problematizes the historical gendering of affective labor and its relegation to "women's work" and women's reproductive labor in the private sphere. As Hardt and Weeks note, affective labor was traditionally analyzed as being outside of a capitalist system because it did not produce measurable capital. In a society of "informatization," affective labor includes both reproductive labor in the home and the service

industry. Their critique points to the relevancy of a re-evaluation of how affective labor is performed through the identity of motherhood, especially in relationship to new, highly visible, media and television platforms.

Andrew Ross addresses the new economies that have sprung up around digital technologies. In line with Hardt, he considers how the digital and dot-com white-collar industries promoted affective labor by stressing the importance of relationship, community, camaraderie, and lifestyle within the office. He writes that, “By the early 1980s, companies were being encouraged to develop ‘strong cultures’ with the aim of forging emotional bonds among employees...” (26). These bonds would serve in dismantling the boundary between labor and leisure, and work and home, by crafting a work environment and new relationships that would “feel just as meaningful as those encountered outside the workplace, among family or friends” (26). He claims that, “Web-based networking is now more like a domestic appliance than the ‘magical’ application that it once was, but it has had an inexorable impact on the organization of white-collar work” (ix). Part of the major impact of digital culture was the community spirit it ushered into the white-collar, corporate workforce. Although Ross claims that “web-based networking” is now a domestic appliance, I question how the rhetoric and form of web-based networking has always been distinctly affective in nature. For example, how the “networking” of family and community maintenance were already associated with a feminized, and sentimentalized labor of caring. While the industries that Ross discusses, similar to those of Hardt’s “informatization,” were initially cloistered in office buildings and the domain of white-collar work, much of the technology is now readily accessible and more often utilized at home. Technological advances and price-shifts in home computing system are key to making web-based networking the “domestic appliance” of many stay at home mothers (SAHMs).

## **A Visual Culture of Motherhood and Technology**

This dissertation analyzes the performance of reproductive labor, as it is played out across television and Internet platforms by specific mothers, as an economic system. I draw from a large body of media scholarship that critically addresses fictional representations of women at work in the home in reality TV and film (Brunsdon; Haralovich and Rabinovitz; Kaplan; Liebman). Spigel's work on 1960s fantastical sitcoms is influential for my own work on a technologically informed vision of motherhood. Spigel notes how the vernacular of science fiction unites everyday domestic technologies and popular family sitcoms of the period (*Welcome to the Dreamhouse*). In addition, her work on smart-homes—where appliances and digital media are integrated and remotely controlled from a single console—and how they restructure women's work is an essential foundation for my study of how mothers are using new technologies in the home ("Media Homes"). Spigel's research of 1950s and 1960s media, like Lisa Parks's work on satellite technology and "Global TV," is situated in a period of technological ingenuity during which everything, from the mass implementation of television to the international launches of satellite technology, was realized. This dissertation configures motherhood 2.0 within this context because the language of new media, whose vocabularies delimit a new cultural conception of motherhood, and the history of networked technologies, can be traced to this era. Mid-century models of scientific and domestic ingenuity and efficiency provided a nexus through which a fantasy of motherhood developed: she was (and still is!) a white middle-class mother who emerged through the lens of a new sci-fi vernacular and the use of new media technologies. This dissertation builds off of the excellent scholarship on this topic

in order to focus on how new technologies introduce new ways of speaking about culture and societal institutions but are also rooted in more traditional ideological structures (Gitelman).

Anne Friedberg argues that a woman's production of identity comes through her virtual relationship to models of femininity on screen and through the technology of the screen; this is ultimately linked back to models of consumption that developed in response to shop windows at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Window Shopping*). Friedberg's model is useful because it speaks to an intimate relationship between virtual technologies, consumption, and identity formation; this is a relationship that I will tease out in relation to the particular subject of the contemporary U.S., technologically engaged mother. In Friedberg's later work, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, she explicitly links the aesthetic and visual forms of shop windows and the "window screen" of the computer. While early computer graphic user interfaces may have been modeled after "desk-library-machines," the web builds on a system of free-association and memory trails that would organically inspire you to move from one hyperlink to the next (Murray; Bush). Like the mall shopper described by Friedberg and by Margaret Morse, mothers engaging with media, particularly through the blogosphere and television and film watched on web-enabled screens, engage in a version of "flow" that is imbricated with a form of window shopping or browsing. As we scroll through articles, images and videos on the Internet, we are always flanked by advertisements, as if we were walking down a virtual street, or in Morse's case, driving down a virtual highway or walking through a mall, filled with billboards. Like the street, the mall, and the highway, this virtual space hearkens the enclosed space of an arcade (Benjamin). In this enclosed virtual space, consumers seem to move with freewill between media and object consumption although the direction of their attention is a highly orchestrated act.

In conjunction with this model of identity formation, scholarship on reception studies is vital to this work. As Stuart Hall suggests in his seminal essay “Encoding/Decoding,” audiences draw varied readings of the same media, often extrapolating different messages than the ones that are encoded by its producers. Henry Jenkins notes, “within this paradigm, audiences are understood to be active rather than passive, to be engaged in a process of making, rather than simply absorbing, meanings” (2). Jenkins continues, “Reception studies [...] seeks empirical evidence, through historical or ethnographic research, that documents the production and circulation of meaning” (2). By studying different instances of film “decoding,” Jenkins speaks to the way that fans “poach” texts, invoking what Michel de Certeau argues is an empowering form of *bricolage* where audiences pick and choose the elements of a text that matter most to them rather than taking the text as a discreet object. Through this process of poaching, audiences form communities based on mutual interests. Communities form around modes of reception (Jenkins).

This is also precisely the rationale that has been picked up by networks and their marketing departments. In a post-network era, women’s shows have proliferated in addition to a series of women’s networks, along with cross-over content between television, online sites, and print (Lotz, *Redesigning Women*). Unlike the broadcasting era, we watch TV in an era of niche narrowcasting and time-shifting where TV is watchable at any time, and, increasingly, anywhere (Lotz, *Beyond Prime Time*). Amanda Lotz has pointed to the rise of female-centric programming and channels in the 1990s, and in the Oxygen Media Research Project: Constance Penley, Parks, and Everett, have analyzed and critiqued the feminist qualities of the Oxygen network over a sustained period of programming (Lotz; Penley, Parks, and Everett). In this context, Brunson

and Spigel have suggested it is time to re-think the way that daytime television informs the rhythms of housework and the distracted mode of viewing (*Feminist Television Criticism*).

If housewives in the 1950s were conditioned to watch television in a distracted state, while simultaneously doing their housework, then mothers using technology today are mired in a mode of participation where this type of distraction is key. Surfing through the Internet, browsing through blogs, and constantly shifting between different visual technologies is similar to original critiques of television where the distracted glance characterized the daytime TV viewing experience (Mann and Spigel; Modleski).<sup>6</sup> It is a type of “flow” where televisual rhythms are not informing the rhythm of housework, but where the affective, intellectual, and immaterial work of being a mother is about consumption and a consistent flow across different media platforms and a virtual flow between spaces in the home and between public and private space.<sup>7</sup>

Various television and media scholars have also suggested that we must rethink Raymond Williams’s influential idea of televisual “flow.” Watching television on the Internet and within the framework of increasing interactivity might find a viewer moving between two windows on a screen or in between a TV show and the star’s blog (Gillan). As Caldwell suggests, “Instead of the linear textual compositing model inherent in supertext/flow theory, TV/dot-com synergies now must learn to master *textual dispersals* and user navigations that can and will inevitably *migrate* across brand boundaries” (“Second-Shift Media Aesthetics” 136). Shifting the focus from the production of content to the navigation and reception of content, Caldwell argues that,

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<sup>6</sup> Marsha Cassidy presents an important alternative to this model of distracted viewing in her article on audience participation in talk shows of the 1950s. She considers interactivity and how this model structured viewer watching, identification, and participation in this venue (“Sob Stories”).

<sup>7</sup> A flow between private and public space builds off of key works and concepts in television studies like Raymond Williams’s idea of mobile privatisation, Spigel’s argument that TV helped women navigate between home and public space, and Ernest Pascucci’s argument that television allowed suburbanites to virtually project themselves into other public spaces.

“programming strategies have shifted from notions of network *program* ‘flows’ to tactics of *audience/user* ‘flows” (136). Invoking the opposition of the “strategy” versus the “tactic,” described by de Certeau as an orchestrated plan from an outside position of power versus an everyday act, enacted from a position within the structuring agent and using whatever is immediately at hand, Caldwell suggests a shift in the politics of digital viewership wherein “flow” now responds to the whims of the consumer. In this new era of post-televisual, digital culture, network and corporate strategies must anticipate and account for the way an audience might move across media platforms and across consumption opportunities, albeit within a media environment graphically designed to produce revenue through ad sales. And while there may be a suggestion of a shift in the politics of digital viewership, companies have capitalized on new opportunities to harness attention by using “second-shift augmentations [to] ‘flow’ the viewer outside of any televisual or digital text into the material world of consumerism proper” (137). This is the logic that draws viewers from the kitchen set of the *Rachel Ray Show* to the website that sells her appliances, and to her magazine, her page on the Food Network site, and to the Food Network app. This type of flow is manifest in the way that new networks suggest fans move between television shows, websites, and mobile devices, the way that new Internet interfaces allow viewers to watch a television show while simultaneously browsing that network’s store, or the way that new televisual technologies allow viewers to use their TV screen as a television and Internet interface. This virtual model of consumption and flow is a version of what Nick Browne suggested in 1984 and yet it collapses this model into an exponentially proliferating process.

The viewer, and in this case the mother, not only consumes tangible commercial products, but she consumes ideologies about motherhood. This dissertation focuses on the way

that contemporary U.S. visual culture feeds us stories and images about mothers, the way they use new technologies, and the way that mothers speak about themselves, and to other mothers, through these technologies. Like the model of motherhood 2.0 itself, it is about the feedback loop of visual culture and the interactivity of images and ideologies that move between producers and consumers.

## **Images of Mothers**

In this dissertation I look toward different performances of motherhood across Internet, television, and film platforms. These include performances of motherhood that are coded as fictional, in, for example, popular films, and performances of motherhood that are coded as “real,” from reality TV to mommy bloggers. These also include promotional rhetoric and advertisements from popular sources like newspapers and magazines that use the mother as an icon and that are encoded with ideological structures.

In writing specifically about motherhood, this dissertation builds upon an increasing body of media scholarship that analyzes the discursive contexts framing women in U.S. popular visual culture. Much of this media scholarship approaches these images through a feminist methodology, gravitating around critiques of postfeminism.

In *Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels mark the era of “new momism” as emerging in the late 1990s with the “pernicious ideal” that “the sociologist Sharon Hay...labeled ‘intensive mothering’” (5). Douglas and Michaels note that while standards of good motherhood have “gone through the roof,” there has been a simultaneous “real decline in leisure time for most



Americans” (5). Presumably, this would be the time one might have historically devoted to caring for one’s family and community. Douglas and Michaels trace a media history of motherhood pointing to the explosion of media coverage of everyday mothers and celebrity mothers that began in the 1980s and has continued to expand. They suggest that in different decades we were bombarded with different idealized versions of motherhood and that we are currently navigating an era in which there is no time for parents to satisfy the version of motherhood that our culture continues to celebrate.

Time-scarcity is used as a framing device to discuss ideals, shortcomings, and failures of femininity in an era of postfeminism that Michaels and Douglas trace to the 1990s. It serves as a major point of contention in Arlie Hochschild’s book *The Managed Heart* in which she points to the way that work time and a workplace ethos have invaded the space of the home.<sup>8</sup> Time-scarcity also fuels Schor’s utopian vision of a schedule where we have time to be in the home and engage in caring practices. As well, it incites a call-to-arms by Weeks in her analysis of the benefits of a shorter workweek (“Hours for What We Will”).

In her 2009 article, “Easy as Pie: Cooking Shows, Domestic Efficiency, and Postfeminist Temporality,” Elizabeth Nathanson considers how lifestyle television consistently addresses an issue of time-scarcity for women, providing quick-fixes like Ray’s “30 minute meals” to allow women to do it all without addressing actual political, economic, and cultural issues that seem to push and pull women in between the workplace and the home. In *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, Negra looks at the way time-scarcity materializes as a trope in popular media images concerning women’s biological clocks, ageing, and the fantasy of traveling back in time in order to reclaim a better version of one’s self. She

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<sup>8</sup> While this seems to be the opposite of Ross’s assertion, that a more sentimental approach towards relationship-building and leisure time has invaded the workplace, the two scholars point to the same blurring of boundaries between work and leisure and the workplace and the home.

writes, “The postfeminist subject is represented as having lost herself but then (re)achieving stability through romance, de-ageing, a makeover, by giving up paid work, or by ‘coming home’ (Indeed, one of postfeminism’s master narratives is that of ‘retreatism,’ which operates as a powerful device for shepherding women out of the public sphere.)” (5). Retreatism, or “coming home,” can be thought of as both a temporal and spatial trope. While it involves a spatial metaphor of returning to a site of origin, it also involves a temporal metaphor of returning to an ordinary time- either the time of one’s youth, in returning to a parent’s home, or the return of “coming home” after one has spent a period of time in the public sphere. According to Negra, the importance in the postfeminist subject abiding by these rehabilitative practices is that “Popular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact, and achieved self” (5).

In each of these versions of how women have navigated culture, time, and space in the last two decades, we see that television and popular culture seem to offer different management-solutions through a consumption of products and ideologies and an adherence to specific lifestyle and consumerist choices. Building on the ample scholarship on motherhood and the “have-it-all” mentality, I focus on the way that reformations of domestic space through technology collapse the supposed distance between the stay-at-home-mom and the working mother. I agree with Negra, Douglas, and Michaels that mothers are still assigned the impossible task of being everything at once and I argue that this assignment is now reaffirmed through virtual technologies and vocabularies. These technologies would pretend to extend the reach of the mother’s disembodied voice and eye, providing false hope for liberation from the home.

With this task, I focus on spatial relations, veering away from the temporal models that characterize recent scholarship on motherhood and women. I aim to refocus an analysis of

mothers in domestic space within a framework of “virtual presence.” Motherhood is linked to new media technologies through a rhetoric of “presence” and “flexibility.” These technologies not only allow women to virtually occupy two roles or places at once, but they seem to over-extend mothers’ physical and visual capacities in new ways, re-opening the rampant “mommy wars” of the 1990s between stay-at-home-moms and working mothers, and potentially making that binary obsolete or at least making it necessary to consider the ways in which we categorize different versions of mothers. Re-exposing this binary is especially critical in the context of contemporary feminist media studies because it reaffirms the methodological promise that analyzing power structures from marginal positions can lead to a re-imagination of culture (Weeks, “Hours for What We Will”).

In her article, “Feminist Media Studies in a Postfeminist Age,” Elana Levine writes,

Postfeminist culture takes feminism for granted, assuming that the movement’s successes have obviated the need for its continuation. In the process, discourses that seek to change or challenge a still-strong patriarchy get incorporated into a new kind of patriarchal common sense, ultimately sustaining the very structures of dominance they had set out to critique and destroy. (136)

Levine describes the pitfalls of postfeminism as a “commonsense” assessment of where our culture stands in regards to gendered identity politics. In doing so, she joins rank with recent work in anthologies edited by Tasker, Negra, Brunson, and Spigel (*Interrogating Postfeminism; Feminist Television Criticism*).

Recently, there has been an abundance of scholarship on lifestyle television and reality TV programming. Nathanson, Everett, and Joanne Hollows write about lifestyle programming that is geared towards women and the maintenance of the home. Nathanson points out that

cooking shows make the labor of cooking seem pleasurable. Everett speaks to the way that “transformation TV” shows about re-designing the home encourage new modes of consumption and viewership, where the ultimate transaction of the viewer is in becoming a “doer” (“Trading Private and Public Spaces”). Hollows, more so than Nathanson, speaks to the actual pleasures of homemaking and how they are embodied in British figures like Nigella Lawson. Although I do not focus on lifestyle programming *per se*, many of the shows that feature performances of motherhood air on the same networks as lifestyle programming and are part of this “family” of television. Furthermore, these scholars provide models for thinking through the way that traditional topics of inquiry like pleasure, consumption, and labor play out across television narratives.

In her article, “The Family on Reality Television: Who's Shaming Whom?” Galit Ferguson likens family-based reality TV programs to lifestyle television and a type of “transformation TV” that Everett describes in her work on the HGTV network. Ferguson writes, That “family help shows” often “tie together discourses of parenting, transformation, class, expertise, race, gender, the nation, worth, and shame.” These shows link shame and worth to the nation, gender, and class through the “blatant discourse” of “transformation,” which as Everett argues, “has been linked with social class in the context of lifestyle TV” (“Trading Private and Public Spaces” 88).

Reality TV dramas about families expose discourses that structure our cultural expectations of family. Ferguson continues, “Family-help shows perform other functions as well as disciplining and teaching: they can helpfully be regarded as sites where tensions of ideological and psychic reformation are played out” (88). Ferguson’s focus on family-based reality TV

shows in Britain parallels this dissertation's focus on family-based reality TV shows in the U.S. that provide one discursive outlet for images, fantasies, and anxieties about motherhood.

Reality TV draws in audiences in new ways. Scholars like Ferguson, Laurie Ouellette, and James Hay critique reality TV as a form of Michel Foucault's "governmentality," which is "a relation by the State to civil society, defined as the array of social institutions and private forms of association that compromise indispensable networks for exercising power and governing at a distance" (*Better Living Through Reality TV* 10). Reality TV operates as one of these institutions that governs from a distance by invoking the terms of neoliberalism as a "common sense" system which emphasizes values of self-responsibility, self-betterment, and the privatization and corporatization of social goods as they are materialized in shows that aim to teach us how to be better versions of ourselves and therefore better citizens. This especially comes through in family-based shows that teach parents how to better manage their children. The commonsense is that if these shows teach us how to foster better homes and communities then they teach us how to be proper citizens within both a private and public sphere. Berlant argues that being a proper citizen of the United States is continually situated through the lens of parenthood and the workings of the family so that lessons about motherhood become lessons about the nation (*Queen of America*). By diffusing messages of proper citizenship through the lens of the family, reality TV programming approaches Deleuze's "society of control," where, "one is never finished with anything" and varying institutions that might have seemed discrete in a disciplinary society are now permeable and continuous entities (5).

## 2.0 and Interactivity in the Digital Era

Following the dot-com bubble burst, Internet entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly collaborated in a conference where he and his colleagues coined the term "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly). It referred to the popular sites and software applications that were quickly rising from the ashes of Silicon Valley. Website and software builders focused on enabling user-generated content, feedback between the creator and the user, and social networking. While "Web 1.0" was characterized by applications, programs, and interfaces with a one-way flow of information from the producer towards the consumer, the model of "Web 2.0" introduced interactivity as a model. In "Web 2.0" there was a feedback loop of information and content production that privileged relational technology and social networking platforms. Interactivity, as media scholars have suggested, is a cultural paradigm that characterizes how we use technology and continue to relate through media.

Mark Andrejevic's 2007 book *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* considers how the concept of interactivity in new media and reality TV masks the powers of corporate surveillance and consumer data mining with the pleasures of participation, self-publication, and the opportunities for celebrity. He designates the 21<sup>st</sup> century the "iCentury," where the "hip tricky little "i" that appears in front of an increasing variety of popular products...and concepts...is freighted with a timely double meaning" (4). According to Andrejevic, the "i" symbolizes "solipsistic customization and the democratic ability to talk back—to "interact" (5). This lowercase "i," then, marks the power an individual passes on to their technological products, and the corporate networks that produce them, as the price for entertainment, organization, interactivity with the object, and interconnectivity with others.

Andrejevic demonstrates that it is the United States' culture's increasing willingness to submit to technological surveillance that allows for the ease in data mining practices and the exponentially increasing use of this information for targeted marketing. It is also this culture's willingness to submit to surveillance technologies that fosters an understanding of online shopping, blogging, and wifi usage as democratic processes that allow anyone (with the spending power, of course) to participate.

A 2.0 model deeply supports interactivity as a privileged and desirable mode of participation, evolved from an earlier media model that only allowed for top-down communication and an ossified flow of power. However, according to Andrejevic, this model is less of a step towards an equal feedback loop than an elision of the processes of control and surveillance as we continue to exercise our freedom within rigid corporate limits.

Many of Andrejevic's theories in *iSpy* develop in his 2004 book *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. In his analysis of the genre, he reads contemporary culture as one in which celebrity status is no longer dependent on the famous individual but instead relies on a star-producing media machine that offers the possibility of brief fame to anyone who is designated as "marketable." Marketability is the force behind the mothers who turn their mommy blogs into a year's worth of groceries and cleaning supplies.

Andrejevic writes about a contemporary American culture symbolized by people who are as obsessed with celebrities as they are with being a celebrity themselves. In reality TV, the celebrity lottery is democratic. *Blabber*, a blog for parenting, posted on the top 50 celebrity mothers who like to tweet. In response, the blog *Momotics: the politics of parenting* posted on

the top 50 mothers who tweet and should be celebrities.<sup>9</sup> Marketability, one's aptitude for consumption and/or one's ability to affect consumption patterns, is potentially democratic but is only offered to those who mobilize cultural desires and anxieties and who offer narratives that can be subsumed within contemporary American ideologies. The first chapter of this dissertation focuses on patterns and categories of mommy blogging and social networking as processes that enmesh marketability, motherhood labor, surveillance, and self-broadcast. With the second chapter, I shift into an analysis of "celebritized" mothers who have capitalized on self-broadcast as their most viable economic support system for motherhood. These two examples examine versions of motherhood that are intimately connected through a labor ideology wherein they turn their personal opinions and space into public fodder.

Like Andrejevic's surveilled subject, many of these reality TV shows require a willing individual who can be framed as an average person chosen (seemingly) democratically from a pool of average American citizens. Ouellette and Hay, however, shift the focus from this subject to the narrative itself, pinpointing how specific genres of reality TV activate and respond to political ideologies and crises (*Better Living Through Reality TV*). Using both of these politicized models of identity construction through media consumption and broadcast, I focus on the images of "celebrity" mothers, both mothers who owe their fame to their celebrity status and those who owe their celebrity status to their roles as mothers, which are circulated through popular culture.

In their introduction to *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, Ouellette and Susan Murray identify another paradigm of reality TV that characterizes technologies of self-broadcast.

They write,

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<sup>9</sup> The post was written on June 9, 2010 and was accessed in January 2011 at: <http://momotics.com/top-twitter-moms-that-should-be-celebrities/>. Unfortunately, this blog account has since been deleted and there is no digital record of this statement.



While participation in Reality TV doesn't seem to lead to an acting career, it does seem to provide a continuation of observed life, as former participant/players' off-screen ...behavior is tracked by the media even after the show airs. The celebrification of "average" folk further complicates the contours of television fame and the way its star personas have been constructed as existing in a space between the ordinary and the extraordinary. (11)

The "celebrification" of everyday women and the increasing normalization of media stars is crystallized in the image of Kelly Ripa. Ripa is publicly lauded for being a mother and one of the highest paid daytime television stars. She has been a spokesperson for numerous brands of household items and is currently the spokesperson for Electrolux domestic technologies. Corporations increasingly trust and reward mothers for blogging about their products based on the logic that other mothers, still the primary buyers for households, will trust the advice of a mother who seems "real" and "normal." While motherhood, to some extent, is performed on various blogs and social networking sites, these female writers maintain an image of everydayness. This "ordinary" quality is precisely what Ripa capitalizes on in her public image and her ad campaigns for Electrolux. This ordinary quality, along with a savvy marketing team and the maintenance of constant blog and twitter communication, is also what keeps a celebrity mother like Gosselin so connected to her fans. Ripa's Electrolux ad campaigns feature narratives that show Ripa moving from her job at the studio to her job as a mother, suggesting, that like any other working mother, Ripa must navigate the distance between public and home and negotiate her allocation of time.<sup>10</sup>

In the commercial, Ripa moves seamlessly between work and home because she is only moving from one stage set to another. Electrolux suggests, however, that their efficient

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<sup>10</sup> As an interesting addition to this example, see Amelie Hastie's book *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History* in which she explores the negotiation of celebrity status in her chapter on celebrity advice manuals.

technologies will grant mothers this same ease in movement. Virtual, locative, and remote-access technologies that are oriented as domestic devices suggest the same type of movement and hearken back to a rhetoric rooted in a televisual address that allows viewers, translatable into buyers, to transcend domestic boundaries.

## **Chapters**

In the first chapter I analyze representations and performances of motherhood as they circulate within the blogosphere. I focus on how mothers represent themselves through the frameworks of these technologies and narrative possibilities, focusing specifically on high-grossing mommy bloggers Heather Armstrong and Ree Drummond. I consider the ways in which the performance of motherhood is enacted as an economic venture through blogging, which offers its writers tangible salaries, extending the labor possibilities of the mother in the home. Virtual technologies of self-broadcast promote a transformation of the home into a labor-site.

A large part of the success of these mommy bloggers is their ability to maintain the interactive community that promotes their blogs and raises their advertising revenue. In this first chapter, I argue that this affective labor taps into traditional model of women's work while re-introducing it into a field of quantifiable labor. This is a moment to re-address the history of women's work as one that is both invisible and un-quantifiable. This moment is ushered in only in an era of 2.0 interactivity that capitalizes on the more traditional rhetoric of affective labor, associated with motherhood and care-taking, and within the context of the recession in which alternative economies are developing.

The second chapter builds upon this by addressing the celebrities that make their living by performing as archetypes of mothers through different television and media outlets. Some examples include Sarah Palin, Gosselin who was made famous by her reality TV show *Jon & Kate Plus Eight*, and the Octomom, Suleman, made famous by the news media after giving birth to Octuplets.

I contextualize the phenomenon of celebrity mothers within a paradigm shift that fosters a muddling of leisure and labor through the acceptance of the tools of self-broadcast and popular media. While Palin, Gosselin, and Suleman have been everything from celebrated to hated in popular culture, they have continued to successfully capitalize on their performance of motherhood and family as a primary source of income. Their income depends on how they manage their media performances of motherhood.

The labor of these women is not only the maintenance of their family through an adherence to contemporary American ideological models, but it is a maintenance of their star persona through strategic methods of self-broadcast, enmeshing the labor of motherhood and star labor. These women perform as mothers that either adhere to or deviate from our cultural expectations of proper motherhood. This balancing act is intricately entangled with how these women manage their circulation through broadcast media and whether or not their images play into popularly supported models of U.S. citizenship.

In the third chapter of this dissertation I turn to popular films about motherhood produced in the late 2000s. By analyzing themes brought up in earlier chapters, like above-average age pregnancies, work-home life balance, single motherhood, feminist representations, and alternative motherhood, I point to the way that the legacy of the popular film's formal and

narrative conventions restrict the performances and representations of contemporary motherhood.

In my conclusion, I return to actress Tina Fey who often performs the issues attendant with motherhood discussed throughout this dissertation. Fey offers a unifying glimpse at many of these issues through a star discourse that moves between media and performance platforms. By harnessing an ability to move between platforms, Fey emerges as a complex and resilient figure in the performance of motherhood in an era of media convergence.

## **Chapter 1: Reconnecting the Village: Interactivity as “Women’s Work” on the Mommy Blog**

Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels “explore the struggle in the media between intensive mothering and rebellious mothering... that, over the years, evolved into a new “common sense” we were all supposed to share about motherhood, good and bad” (14). In this chapter, I follow their lead by focusing on two mommy bloggers, both unconventionally successful, who seem to epitomize these opposite ends of our culture’s imagined maternal spectrum: the intensive mother and the rebellious mother.

On February 27, 2006, the blog *Dooce.com* celebrated its five-year anniversary. To commemorate this milestone, Heather Armstrong, the mother behind *Dooce.com*, published a post reflecting upon her blog as work and her role as a stay-at-home-mom (SAHM). Armstrong began the blog in 2001.<sup>11</sup> By October of 2005, Armstrong incorporated ad space into her blog—a

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<sup>11</sup> Armstrong was, notoriously among blogging and social media communities, fired from her job as a graphic designer for writing candidly about her co-workers and superiors. This uproar within the blogosphere greatly

decision that proved so lucrative, that she could support her entire, formerly two-income earning, family with the blog's profits.<sup>12</sup> In this post, Armstrong writes:

Never did I imagine that by the age of thirty I would be working my dream job. At the same time I still consider myself first and foremost a stay-at-home-mom. That probably doesn't compute to some people and I'm sure it doesn't fit some people's definition of what a stay-at-home-mom is supposed to be, and that's fine, whatever. I still spend the majority of my time awake with my daughter, I still take her on long, leisurely walks in the morning and sit down at the table with her for every meal. ("Celebrating Five Years")

Armstrong represents a group of mothers who are using their personal mommy blogs as a primary source of income. The term mommy blog refers to the popular trend of parenting blogs that focus on aspects of motherhood. These mommy blogs are often associated with the highest ad revenues (Gonzalez). While Armstrong is an outstanding example, and continues to be in the lead in terms of her popularity and earning-power, there are hundreds of mommy blogs through which women are making money and earning the right to a new title: the stay at home career woman. While stay at home careers for women have appeared in previous decades—often in the form of home-based child or adult daycare centers, telephone operators and reservationists, and mail-order businesses—the accessibility, interactivity, and tendency for e-commerce, attendant to our digital era, offers new opportunities for parents who would like to work at home.

In the 1990s, the media waged a debate over the merits of the SAHM versus the working mother. Douglas and Michaels write,

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contributed to her initial readership when she rebranded her blog as a mommy blog (Armstrong, "Collecting Unemployment" and Blakely).

<sup>12</sup> On her *Facebook.com* page, Heather says: "In October 2005 I began running enough ads on this website that my husband was able to quit his job and become a Stay at Home Father (SAHF) or a Shit Ass Ho Fuckingbadass. He takes both very seriously. This website now supports my family" ("Public Figure Dooce Basic Info").

The “mommy wars” puts mothers into two, mutually exclusive categories—working mother versus stay-at-home mother, and never the twain shall meet. It goes without saying that they allegedly hate each other’s guts. In real life, millions of mothers move between these two categories, have been one and then the other at various different times, creating a mosaic of work and child-rearing practices that bears no resemblance to the supposed ironclad roles suggested by the “mommy wars.” (12)

At stake in this misaligned dichotomy of motherhood is the elision of actual structural, governmental issues. They continue, “Why analyze all the ways in which our country has failed to support families while inflating the work ethic to the size of the Hindenburg when you can, instead, project this paradox onto what the media have come to call, incessantly, ‘the mommy wars’” (12).

Armstrong’s blog post, and the comments that follow, speak to the relevancy of this issue as it comes to be defined in new, less oppositional terms, by mothers themselves. The blog post and comments reveal at least one of the major ways in which this conversation has shifted so significantly: while the mass media continue to debate the merits of one version of motherhood over another, actual mothers are entering into a publicized and highly visual conversation across different and often convergent media platforms. While the media may dichotomize mothers into two different camps, the women responding to Armstrong’s questions clearly recognize a range of ideal motherhoods as well as the fluidity between roles that often marks the changes in a mother’s work status over the course of a child’s life. The voices proliferate as interactivity and the 2.0 model dominates public discourse.

There are approximately 1,545 comments in response to Armstrong’s five year anniversary post, the majority, by mothers, answer the questions Armstrong poses to her readers in closing: “What I want to know in comments is what did your mother do? Did your mother stay at home? Did she work? And how did you feel about what she did? If you could change anything

about what she did what would that be? Also, what do you hope your daughters grow up to do?” (“Celebrating Five Years”). Armstrong turns writing about her own experiences into a public forum on motherhood. While Armstrong’s post still dominates as an authorial text (it’s still her blog, and it’s still the post that draws most people to the page) it is dwarfed in sheer number and space by the chorus of female voices she invites into conversation. For example, the commenter Victoria suggested that by staying home and not working her mother lost a sense of self-esteem and felt isolated. In contrast, the commenter Jill Murray simply wrote that her mother stayed at home and that “it was great.” On the other hand, the commenter Mousey lamented the fact that her mother could not stay home even though she wanted to, because she needed to support their family. This post and these comments open up a conversation about the issues of being a stay at home mother versus a working mother—and the many complexities that accompany these choices.

This forum evokes more traditional (and also, more rebellious) forms of female communication that center around group sharing in a social setting as a means of informally passing along advice and knowledge about women’s issues. This social history includes everything from sewing circles, to book clubs, to the consciousness raising groups of the feminist movement, to present day stitch-and-bitch circles. This social history is currently virtualized through a network of mommy blogs that include individual star blogs like *Dooce.com* alongside portals into an entirely networked system of blogs, like *Blogher.com*.

Armstrong’s post distills several of the issues that I will engage in this chapter: new models of interactivity that drive the knowledge-sharing and affective labor of contemporary motherhood, the economic prospects of self-broadcasting and virtual performance, and the fantasies of motherhood that are projected through these broadcasts. To engage these issues, I

will focus on Armstrong's blog, *Dooce.com*, and Ree Drummond's blog, *Thepioneerwoman.com*.

Through the platform of her website, *Dooce.com*, Armstrong has built a presence that not only earns her family's income, but marks her as one of the most popular women on the Internet. A similar case of a mother, turned veritable celebrity through her parenting and lifestyle blog, is Ree Drummond, also known as The Pioneer Woman. Drummond has blogged at this handle since 2006. While she claims that her family's income still comes from ranching (she lives on one of the largest ranches in Oklahoma), she is most certainly bringing in the proverbial bacon in terms of cultural capital (Lynch). In 2011, the Food Network added Drummond to its list of celebrity chefs. She hosts a cooking show Saturday mornings, introducing viewers to her ranch food and values. The post-network era entails a certain level of fluidity between Internet and television platforms, cycling its navigators through varying and highly mutable levels of celebrity. So that, the jump from mommy blogger to Food Network star becomes naturalized in Drummond's case, given her built-in monthly readership—translate to viewership—of two million people and counting. The generation of cultural and economic status through “readership” and “viewership” is part and parcel of a post-network era that offers new modes of interaction and operates under new ideologies about who can be a celebrity. As Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette point out in their reader *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, “The celebrification of ‘average’ folk further complicates the contours of television fame and the way that its star personas have been constructed as existing in a space between the ordinary and the extraordinary” (11). Indeed, in both Armstrong and Drummond's case, it is precisely their average-ness which makes them relatable to their fans. That they move almost seamlessly between ordinary and extraordinary is indicative of the new paradigm of fame that Murray and



Ouellette mark. The fluidity of fame parallels a multi-platform approach to media promotion, where we see Armstrong and Drummond appearing in self, user, and corporate created images, videos, and print materials—in books, magazines, television, and online video and social media.

There are women making a career out of self-broadcasting motherhood across the Internet, over the television, and through the book industry. Their ability to garner the fans to do so may come from filling a communication gap in the atomization of social communities that promote in-person discussions of women's issues. These women are also hitting upon, drawing from, and propagating collective fantasies of ideal maternity wherein their performance of motherhood through their writing becomes an interactive and discursive site for women's issues. This discourse conveys how women manage the fantasy of maternity in our culture as it shores up against the maternity experienced everyday.

In this chapter, I consider what is at stake when a discourse of mediatized ideal maternity becomes imbricated with new forms of communication and economics. I begin by addressing theoretical approaches to the performance of gendered social roles on the Internet. I then take the blogs *Dooce.com* and *Thepioneerwoman.com* as two examples of shifting economic patterns for women's work. Ample scholarship on the performance of gender on the Internet informs my reading of these posts. While Judith Butler suggests that the performativity of gender ultimately re-stabilizes heteronormative structures, the scholar Sherry Turkle has suggested that the performance of gender on the Internet allows participants to transgress the physical limits of gender in imaginative ways. In her study of MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and role-playing games, Turkle finds that participants often "pass" or perform as another gender. The Internet, as a virtual space, allows for gender to become more malleable. Although, even in this form of "passing," many of Turkle's subjects do work to stabilize cultural norms of the masculine and

the feminine. Similar to Butler's reading of drag, male performances of female, and vice versa, evoke exaggerated performances of cultural gender ideals. In addition to pointing to the way these performances play out across the Internet, Turkle identifies an essential role of virtual space: it is a site for play and imagination but also one where dematerialized discourses of gender ideals are distilled through the creation of archetypal characters. In this chapter, I build off of this idea to point to the way that mommy blogs reinforce specific discourses of femininity and call upon certain histories of women's work, American popular culture, and the rhetoric of new media.

Lori Kido Lopez writes about the radical power of mommy blogs to allow women to critically question and move beyond what she deems to be the pejorative label, "mommy." She takes her cue from a statement that prominent blogger, Alice Bradley of *Finslippy.com*, made at the inaugural Blogger 2.0 conference in 2005. In response to other female bloggers denigrating the propensity with which women discuss their children as opposed to issues of the public sphere, like politics or culture, on their blogs, Bradley said: "Mommy blogging is a radical act" (Lopez). Jumping off of this statement, and the ensuing mass-conversation that resonated through the blogosphere, Lopez considers the way that blogging mothers provide alternative visions of motherhood that contrast with the discursive image channeled through mass media. Lopez writes, "Mommy bloggers are creating a different picture of motherhood to what we see in the mainstream media. Instead of the vision of the loving mother, we see women who are frazzled by the demands of their newborn baby, who have no clue what to do when their child gets sick, who suffer from postpartum depression and whose hormones rage uncontrollably" (736). While these women are "critiqued by outsiders," they are simultaneously "sustained and supported by other women just like them" (736).

While I agree with Bradley, and with Lopez, I would depart from Lopez's analysis of this statement through the lens of autobiography. I am more interested in the issues of feminist time and place at stake in Bradley's statement. Mommy blogging is a radical act not simply because it marks a site for real women to discuss real women's issues, but it is radical because it forces the narrative temporality of the private into the public. Mommy blogging is radical precisely because it validates a time-cycle of everydayness, including acts that are often repetitive, which is part of a mother's household work. In mobilizing the mommy blog in this way, I take direction from Juliet Schor's idea that the domestic space, and the temporality of domesticity, provide resistant spaces for women.

### **The Mommy Blog**

While the term mommy blog is a simplified way of identifying a group of bloggers, it in no way implies the vast number of topics covered by blogging mothers and the many ways in which they choose to approach these topics. Attempting to systematically define the oeuvre of mommy blogs would be a task too large for this chapter. I defer to the various companies that have done so, albeit for marketing, not scholarly, purposes. I demarcate my research sources based on studies done by Nielsen Online Ratings and *Blogher.com* because these are sources that examine and rank blogs based on their popularity, which implies their economic viability. The fiscal success of the mommy blog is at the heart of my interest in the chapter, and so, it seems appropriate to approach this portion of the blogosphere through this lens. From these two sources, I have chosen two blogs to compare more rigorously, as they are indicative of ideals presented by each source. Nielsen Online Ratings rates *Dooce.com* as one of the most popular

mommy blogs on the Internet. Drummond publishes *Thepioneerwoman.com* on the Blogger publishing network, and it is one of the most popular blogs on that network and within the Nielsen ratings.

The studies completed by Nielsen Online Ratings and *Blogger.com* represent just two ways of distilling blog information and statuses. Both approach this task with an economic bias; however, *Blogger.com* collects mommy blogs with a curatorial eye. They manage a portal that culls “quality work: news, information, advice, recommendations, storytelling in words, photos and video” on blogs, on any given day, that have been written by women who are involved with their network (“About *Blogger.com*”). These blogs are re-presented, along with substantial advertising, on their portal homepage. They form a seemingly self-sustaining online community and economic system.

*Blogger.com* produces ad-based revenue for its writers, making money for the network, its contributing bloggers, and the corporations that choose to advertise with *Blogger.com*. Bloggers earn revenue by introducing advertising banners on their blogs and by offering to endorse products for corporations. *Blogger.com* capitalizes on the advertising that can be associated with a given blog by reposting the blog on its *Tumblr.com* style homepage with additional banner advertisements. The website states, “A powerful and unique cross-platform trifecta, BlogHer leads the new women's web as a social publisher, as a research hub and with its in-person events” (“About *Blogger.com*”). *Blogger.com* is one of the most successful portals of its kind. “Since 2009, BlogHer Inc. has paid out \$36 million to 5,700 bloggers and social media influencers who embrace [their] editorial guidelines and produce community content.” Further, as they share in the section exclusively for advertisers, “BlogHer is a community of 100 million - reaching more than 60 million women each month via blogs plus 40 million fans and followers

across our Influencers' social media profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest" ("Leverage the Blogger Influence").

*Blogher.com* caters exclusively to technology-savvy women. This is, in part, because women represent one of the largest and fastest growing markets of Internet users and shoppers. It is, for this same reason, that Nielsen Online Ratings has begun market research of this demographic. According to *Blogher.com*, many of these women are interested in blogging about parenting issues. Mommy bloggers, as a demographic, have often even served as a problematic, and reductive, metonym for the community of female bloggers as a whole (Lopez). *Blogher.com* has been particularly wrought within this issue as their introduction of Blogher Ads, their main source of revenue, was first focused on their community of parenting bloggers. This initiative was introduced in the spring of 2006 among "an initial group of more than two dozen parenting bloggers" (Camahort). The site reports that the number of *Blogher.com* parenting bloggers now surpasses 1,200. The following are a list of statistics taken from the 3,000 participating parenting blog readers in 2006:

- 77% of the Network's readers visit the blogs at least weekly, and two thirds of those visit daily.
- 93% of the Network's readers are "certain to return" to the sites.
- 94% are female.
- 94% have a greater-than-high school education.
- 64% are between the ages of 28 and 40.
- 64% make more than \$50K per year.
- 70% are married, and 50% have children still living at home.
- **53% of BlogHer Parenting Network readers have their own blogs with which to publish and amplify their recommendations and referrals** (Camahort).

The statistics point to the consumption habits of readers of parenting blogs and also begin to define them as a female demographic, of a certain age and with specific levels of education and

success. The study highlights that these women are generally not just consuming information and/or blogs, but they are also the ones producing them. Mommy bloggers represent a looped system where both content and audience are generated simultaneously, with one often informing the other. Studies by Nielsen Online Ratings publish additional demographic information that analyzes media consumption as it correlates with class status and ethnicity.

In Nielsen's report on the "New Digital American Family", they begin, "Ward and June Cleaver have left the building. The white, two-parent, "Leave It to Beaver" family unit of the 1950s has evolved into a multi-layered, multi-cultural construct dominated by older, childless households." Throughout the report, Nielsen Ratings documents the rise of the childless family alongside a decline in marriage rates.

While Nielsen begins the report by honing in on socio-economic patterns, it's of interest to note that they define the contemporary family alongside the foil of the fictional, televised *Leave It to Beaver* household. This recalls the strategy of NBC's focus on digital parenting, in their "Digital Motherhood" segment, wherein they asked the viewer to "say goodbye" to televised families from our collective history. Both examples point to the way that we use popular culture images and narratives of idealized families as a way of communicating through a common discursive lexicon, much like women who look to ideals of motherhood through the performances of mommy bloggers. In regards to classic TV shows that represented the idea of a new, nuclear family, like *Leave it to Beaver*, Stephanie Coontz writes, "People didn't watch those shows to see their own lives reflected back at them." She maintains that audiences were aware that they were only ideals. "They watched them to see how families were supposed to live—and also to get a little reassurance that they were headed in the right direction. The sitcoms

were simultaneously advertisements, etiquette manuals, and how-to lessons for a new way of organizing marriage and child raising” (38).

Remarking on the relevancy of this era as a model for idealized domesticity, especially as promoted by the family values initiative, Coontz writes, “That decade is still close enough that many people derive their political position on the issue [of family values] from personal experience” (32). This could be one explanation for why many people refer to the 1950s as the barometer for what they consider ideal codes of domesticity and gender.

The 1950s also saw the rise of television and many of the satellite technologies that serve as the foundations of the visual and screen technologies that now pervade our everyday life. It seems fitting, then, that the vision of the 1950s family, and I argue, motherhood, be framed through the hazy glow of the television. Platforms, like the family values initiative, and individuals, who look back fondly upon the 1950’s models of family, do so with nostalgia—yearning for a family that never existed, and so constantly trying to fashion contemporary families into an ideal that can never truly be reached.

As Coontz points out, viewers in the 1950s were well aware of the disparities between representations of ideal families on television and their own families.<sup>13</sup> The families of these classic shows acted as aspirational models of domestic bliss. Mothers today are likely just as aware of the differences between their own families and those represented on television. However, in reports on families through both analytic and news sources, the idealized, televised, family becomes a stand-in for the actual family. This results in a slippery foil, wherein contemporary families are eyed in relief against the often unachievable ideals of another era, made to seem real because they are so embedded in our culture’s collective memory of media.

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<sup>13</sup> Coontz’s point echoes Kathleen McHugh’s argument: that in the 1950’s, Hollywood melodramas served as the how-to manuals of homemaking and were the latest iteration in a long line of domestic manuals that began with books published by women in the 1800s.

The mommy blog, however, seems to erode this distance between the idealized, mediated image of the mother and the mother who consumes this image. Despite the fact that these blogs still seem to act as how-to manuals for many mothers, the authors also claim to be as ordinary as any of the readers. In fact, the lack of an auratic distance between these mediated “celebrity” mothers, who blog, and the mothers who read the blogs, is precisely what allows each blogger to achieve success. While mommy blogs distill cultural issues, often seeming to embody a discourse on motherhood rather than a sense of autobiography, they do so by consistently channeling this discourse through an affective performance that gestures at individualism through the pathos of personal crisis and the individualized experience. The crises of motherhood are universal but the methodology of the diary, the posting of personal photos, and the confession of intimate details, highlights each blogging mom as just another friend who is virtually next door.

The blog, and the social network, constitutes a paradigm of interactivity that reformats traditional models of female community and labor. These technologies evolve from a 2.0 platform that stresses feedback between producers and consumers of content. Using new visual, performative, and leisure technologies, mothers weave intricate virtual communities by writing and consuming public narratives, which are often coded as intimate and private. The building of family and community, traditionally part of reproductive labor and the invisible “women’s work” of the private sphere, has, through new modes of self-broadcast, become highly visual (Weeks, “Life Within and Against Work”). In many ways, the labor of networking is imbricated in the labor of motherhood.

If Douglas and Michaels document the era of the 1990s as the moment when the binary between mothers was delineated as the working mother *versus* the stay at home mom, then



Armstrong and Drummond make it clear that the terms of the game have shifted. Both Armstrong and Drummond technically work at home, barring absences necessitated by the television and media appearances that have helped cultivate their presence as media mothers. Despite the fact that these are two of the most successful mommy bloggers in the business, the two could not be more different in the identity that they harness through their writings, publications, and on-air performances.

### **Mommy Bloggers: From Failure to Farm Goddess**

In this section, I compare the media-representation of Armstrong to Drummond to point to the breadth of the imagined maternal ideal that is recapitulated and perpetuated across the blogosphere. As I argue, Armstrong and Drummond represent opposite ends of a spectrum of imagined maternity. Their performances as different types of mothers recall archetypes of motherhood that have come to define the way that we culturally understand what it means to be proper, or improper, when it comes to maternity. In this section, I select blog posts and television performances for each mommy blogger that distill overarching themes in their specific performances of the maternal.

In her book *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers*, Kathleen Karlyn Rowe builds upon the thesis of her first book, *The Unruly Woman*, which “defined female unruliness as a cluster of attributes that challenge patriarchal power by defying norms of femininity intended to keep a woman in her place” (10). In this text, Rowe considers several iterations of “bad” or unruly motherhood that appear in popular cinema. Rowe identifies motherhood as “an increasingly charged site on which unresolved conflicts about ideologies of gender, race, and class collide”

(*Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers* 3). Furthermore, her study of mothers in popular films of the late 1990s, like *Titanic* and *American Beauty*, points to the ideological distance between mothers and daughters that is often conflated with a generational gap. Rowe considers this alongside the ideological, and generational, differences between second and third wave feminists—citing this latter difference as part and parcel of feminist scholarship’s insufficient study of popular culture representations of mothers. As Rowe argues, “...conflicted attitudes toward figures viewed literally and metaphorically as maternal have contributed to the gap between young feminists and those who preceded them” (28). The motherhood of second wave feminism is a different motherhood than that of third wave feminism, and likewise for motherhood in a postfeminist era. Rowe suggests that, “Third Wave feminists have only now begun to think about motherhood not from the position of daughter and to consider how their attitudes toward mothering, motherhood, and their own mothers may reflect the culture’s ambivalences” (28). In line with Rowe, I hope to point to the merits of studying popular culture manifestations of motherhood as a means of understanding the way that our culture continues to simultaneously support and lambast what Michaels and Douglas call a “new momism” of “intensive mothering.” This is particularly important in this neoliberal, recession era in which notions of proper femininity and motherhood are entangled in anxieties over failing economic structures. Rethinking the way that the identity of motherhood is linked to labor and communication is an opportunity to demystify our culture’s complex anxieties towards femininity.

Armstrong and Drummond’s recourse to emotionally charged archetypes is essential to the audience garnering and community-building that define the success of each. By drawing upon these emotional registers, Armstrong and Drummond forge ties to other mothers—they

create a site wherein a forum for conversation begins. Their social networks are solidified through interactivity's capacity for identification. When bloggers specifically appeal to other mothers to respond to their own questions and issues, they eschew a notion of expertise for the crowd-sourced knowledge of a community of mothers. In doing so, mommy bloggers secure an invested audience. In this case, emotional and relational investment translates into economic investment.

### ***DOOCE.COM***

In 2004, during a life-threatening bout of postpartum depression, Armstrong asked her husband Jon to check her into the psychiatric ward of a local hospital. Armstrong had been blogging at *Dooce.com* since 2001, but had, in the past 18 months, transformed her writing into a monograph on the casualties of pregnancy. Her witty, biting, and honest commentary on her changing body, hormones, and the ongoing abject subject of her and her newborn's excrement had earned her an extremely loyal following. She detailed her lifelong struggle with depression that had, with new motherhood, become overwhelming. I know all of this, as many people do, because Armstrong wrote candidly about her depression in her blog and in her popular book *It Sucked and Then I Cried: How I Had a Baby, a Breakdown, and a Much Needed Margarita*. The more she wrote about it, and the more she revealed her pathos publicly, the more people seemed to want. "When Jon visited her in the hospital, she gave him notes scribbled in longhand to type onto her blog. Two thousand readers wrote back. By the time she came home, her Web traffic had quadrupled" (Belkin, "Queen of the Mommy Bloggers"). Armstrong's story demonstrates the way that mommy bloggers form communities of women by sharing deeply personal

experiences. The more personal the experience shared, the more audience support and interaction Armstrong received, resulting in more and more financial success. Armstrong's performance of motherhood, rooted in expressing the pathos of her lonely experience, reveals the way that the economics of the mommy blog are closely tied to the tenets of affective labor: it is sharing, caring, and the sustaining of community that constitutes Armstrong's earning power. This is one example of the way that the language of interactivity, as seen in the work of community formation in Armstrong's writing and personal sharing, can be traced to the patterns of women's work, in which the building and sustaining of the family unit and local communities are codified as a particularly female form of labor. The language of social networking, a rhetoric of 2.0 technology that privileges relational communication, is uniquely in sync with the language historically used to describe women's work.

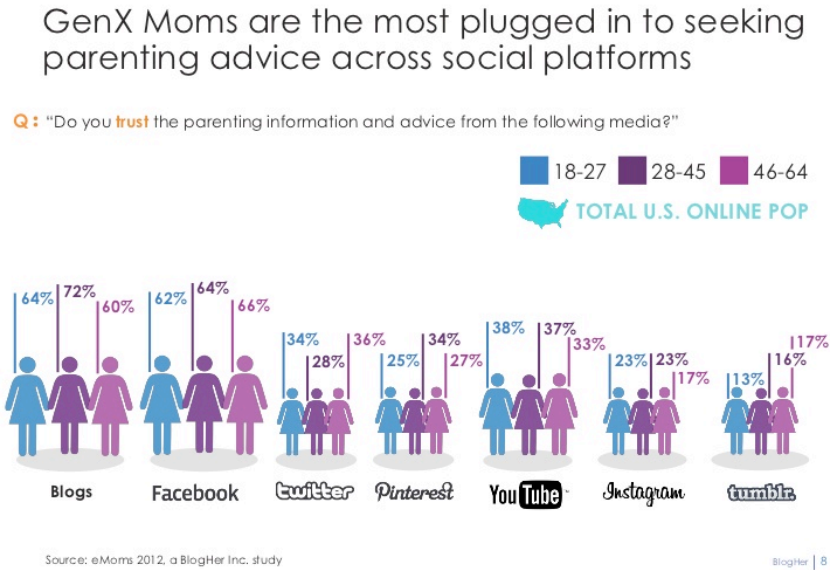
In February of 2011, Lisa Belkin named Armstrong the "Queen of the Mommy Bloggers." Belkin writes the "Motherlode" column for *The New York Times*, one of the many successful mother-oriented blogs that Nielsen Online Ratings includes in their rankings. In her article on Armstrong, Belkin focuses on Armstrong's growing influence on the blogosphere and across other social media platforms like Twitter.

As [Armstrong] points out, a sizable number also follow her on Twitter...She is the only blogger on the latest Forbes list of the Most Influential Women in Media...Her site brings in an estimated \$30,000 to \$50,000 a month or more — and that's not even counting the revenue from her two books, healthy speaking fees and the contracts she signed to promote Verizon and appear on HGTV. She won't confirm her income ("We're a privately held company and don't reveal our financials"). But the sales rep for Federated Media, the agency that sells ads for Dooce, calls Armstrong "one of our most successful bloggers," then notes a few beats later in our conversation that "our most successful bloggers can gross \$1 million".

In an interview on *The Today Show*, Meredith Viera asked Armstrong about *Dooce.com*. On the viability of the mommy blog, Armstrong said: "I think other mothers like me like to blog because we've sort of lost the village that used to help raise children. And we're recreating that village with our readers, and our friends, and our social networks." This virtual village restores a lost social outlet, forming a community that has become an emerging media market. The performative writing, wherein mothers express a sense of self over a series of confessional, but edited, narratives, can be a highly successful source of income for prolific bloggers like Armstrong. This occurs when mothers reap the benefits of advertising banners, product endorsements, and direct sales. Interactivity and community building is enmeshed with capital productivity, commodification, and consumption.

The title of the post concerning Armstrong's post-partum depression is "Unlocked," and Armstrong begins by thanking her readers for their continued support. She says, "Here I am, a scrappy and disgruntled ex-Mormon cusser, thanking you for your prayers. I feel like a crazed kid at a concert who has, in a moment of sheer insanity, jumped off the stage in a grand, sweeping swan dive. And you people caught me. And here I am floating through the crowd on your hands and extended arms. Thank you for catching me, Internet." In her metaphoric invocation of a rock concert, Armstrong aligns herself with an anarchic youth-culture moment that is pitch-perfect with what Nielsen describes as the Gen-X and Gen-Y mothers who grew up with a subculture of Riot Grrrls and Nirvana.

In a recent study on e-Moms, *Blogher.com* published the following graphic:



**Figure 1 An infographic from *Blogher.com* by Jane Collins. “GenX Moms are the most plugged in to seeking parenting advice across social platforms”**

Armstrong's sense of community is not staid and seated like a mother at an afternoon tea. It is a tumultuous, Dionysian moment. Armstrong's post-partum depression, and potentially her *entrée* into motherhood itself, inspires metonymic description that moves as far away from a quiet homestead as possible. If there is a mommy blogger to be the mascot for a commercially-digestible-punk-ethos, then it is certainly Armstrong.

In this post, the concert culture of what would have been her formative youth of the 1990s becomes transmuted into the virtual community of other mothers on the Internet—a medium that is itself historically steeped in counter-culture and the defiance of hierarchy. Hence, Armstrong's identity as a rebel mommy blogger actually engages with a notion of rebellious identity that is linked to the origins of the Internet as an anarchic open space. Armstrong verges

on the unruliness of which Rowe writes, potentially transgressing popular imaginations of proper motherhood. If, for Rowe, the unruliness of personality is often linked to the exhibition or discussion of that which cannot be fully contained by the body—often that which is abject—then Armstrong qualifies in her notorious discussion of her and her children’s excrement. The “need to know” section of PBS online writes, “Readers love her arty pictures, poop-based sense of humor and confessional style” (“Dooce.com’s Heather Armstrong on Social Media”).

Furthermore, Armstrong’s vocal discussion of post-partum depression echoes Rowe’s discussion of the unruly female—Armstrong writes about that which she can no longer contain and what she can no longer control. Her depression surpasses the bounds of normative motherhood. She makes a point of publicly discussing this “unruly” episode and in doing so serves as an example for other mothers who may have felt isolated from the image of the happy new mother, as is evident from the support and gratitude Armstrong received in blog comments.

In “Unlocked,” Armstrong goes on to describe the psychiatric ward and what her time has been like as a patient. She emphasizes the success her doctor has found where all others had previously failed. Finally, she looks to the future when she will be going home: “I’m coming home soon and then I will read your email and comments Jon has been telling me about. We cannot thank you enough for your support. I have found solace in the stories you have sent me, comfort in knowing that I am not alone in this struggle. I may not be able to see your faces, but I can hear your voices.” Again, Armstrong marks her readers as a vocal community.

She brings her readers into her inner circle, identifying them as not just a fan base but as a virtual support group. As much of a service as Armstrong provides them in her candid discussion of her struggle as a mother and her long journey through post-partum depression, she openly admits to relying on her readers for their support. Part of her performance as a mother is

the creation and sustaining of this network. It is precisely the social village that she alludes to in her appearance on the *Today Show* with Meredith Viera. It is also an example of the way that their labor of caring and community formation, affective in nature, comes to define part of the work of motherhood in the digital age.

In her first post from the hospital, Armstrong writes, “When people say that they can't believe I'm being so open about this I want to ask them WHY NOT? Why should there be any shame in getting help for a disease? If there is a stigma to this, let there be one. At least I am alive. At least my baby still has her mother. At least I have a chance at a better life” (“Unlocked”). It is in this final part of the post that Armstrong acknowledges her practice of sharing the most intimate details of her life, and why it matters.

By standing out against social stigma, Armstrong takes up a cause for mothers, acting as a symbol for hope and openness for a larger community. By mobilizing the blogosphere as a voice against the social stigma of post-partum depression, Armstrong primes her very intimate issue for public discourse.

While Armstrong was initially most popular for her vocalization of post-partum depression, she garnered attention for her ability to monetize her blog and personal brand, as did Drummond. I have focused on mommy bloggers' abilities to build community by building discourse around personal narratives and connecting with audiences. While the majority of this community building comes from audience members' positive feedback, both Armstrong and Drummond manage significant amounts of negative feedback and an alter-audience of commenters and bloggers who post hate-messages on each mommy blogger's site and have gone



so far as creating alter-ego blogs for Drummond.<sup>14</sup> For example, Armstrong first received significant criticism when she first chose to monetize her blog in 2005. Since then, she has continued to receive negative criticism regarding various aspects of her writing and the opinions that she voices on the blog. In 2009, Armstrong launched a sub-site at *Dooce.com/hate* called “Monetizing the Hate,” where she posts the vitriolic private messages that people send her. Unlike *Dooce.com*, which only has a banner of advertisements flanking the right side of the text and one advertisement at the top of the text, “Monetizing the Hate” includes advertising banners that flank both sides of the text as well as advertisements between each post.

In “Monetizing the Hate,” advertisements visually dominate the screen. Kate Harding notes, “Whether you think this is a brilliant example of turning lemons into lemonade or a shameless exercise in greed and self-pity will probably depend on your existing opinion of Armstrong. And does anyone *not* have an opinion on Armstrong at this point?”. Harding speculates why so many people send private rants to Armstrong, which include statements such as “I’ll admit it – I only read your blog waiting for inevitable crash and burn. That moment when your readers finally figure out what a vapid waste of time they’re financing. I think you’re getting very close,” “so lame,” and comments composed of a series of expletives. Harding writes, “I can only assume it has to do with the Number 26 factor — Armstrong’s rank on *Forbes*’s recent list of 2009’s ‘most influential women in media.’” While Harding makes this suggestion, I maintain that there is no concrete answer as to why some people seem to love Armstrong while others seem to hate her. Regardless of how people feel about Armstrong, her work as a mommy blogger is to continue to build her community. Her work as a stay-at-home-

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<sup>14</sup> The most popular alter-blog for Drummond is *Themarlborowoman.com*, a play off of Drummond’s nickname for her husband, the Marlboro Man. This blogger writes, “Join us as we reveal what’s really behind the Guru of grease, cow patties, and fairy tales. We offer hope, recovery, and truth.”

career woman is to monetize her ability to maintain this community, which she clearly exhibits acumen for in her blog's response to hate mail.

Armstrong now manages her image with a particular attention towards graphic design and style-savvy. Armstrong worked as a graphic designer prior to devoting her career fulltime to *Dooce.com* and one can still see the influence on the formal elements of her blog, her guest appearances as a style-maker for large companies and networks, and the section of her blog that curates daily finds and fashion-forward inspiration "boards." Armstrong signed major deals as a tastemaker spokeswoman for HGTV, where she blogged about home renovations, and Ikea. If the myth of taste as a marker of place persists, which I will discuss in greater depth in the context of *Thepioneerwoman.com*, then Armstrong resembles the taste demographic associated with the aesthetes of coastal communities.

In their article "Innovating Women's Television in Local and National Networks: Ruth Lyons and Arlene Francis," Marsha Cassidy and Mimi White argue that the top two American female talk show hosts of the 1950s, Arlene Francis and Ruth Lyons, exhibited the conflict between early television's regional and national systems by representing different genres of taste. While Ruth Lyons presented a middle-class, mid-Western sensibility, Arlene Francis aligned herself with the highbrow culture of New York. In this example, taste is intricately tied to the physical site of production and the virtual command of each show's network. While Drummond certainly capitalizes on middle-of-the-country locale as the foundation for her identity, linking place to taste, Armstrong transcends her relocation to Utah and maintains a reactionary attitude towards the taste of her neighbors. In addition to promoting highbrow design, Armstrong consistently denigrates the Mormon culture, which she suggests overwhelms the area, and regularly distances herself from the people who surround her by occupying the outsider status of

the critic. If, as Cassidy and White argue, Francis and Lyons revealed the underlying place-based tension of the early television industry, then the pairing of Internet stars Armstrong and Drummond serves to remind us that the bond between place and taste must be re-addressed for a new virtual paradigm.

### ***Thepioneerwoman.com***

Drummond is famous for her ranch-style recipes, her cowboy husband, and her frontier-like, homesteading lifestyle. In 2011, Drummond scored a cooking show with the Food Network, making her one of the first personal narrative bloggers to transition into this media platform in such a visible way. Unlike Armstrong, Drummond does not focus her blog on psychological issues. Rather, Drummond writes upbeat down-home advice, about getting by without a grocery store within 20 miles while feeding a family of five, and famously shares the kinds of recipes that have been “approved by a cowboy.” In fact, what first made Drummond famous was her use of step-by-step images in her recipes. Visually breaking down her recipes proved wildly popular with other mothers mastering cooking. It earned her a following of two million viewers that the Food Network sought to translate into a television audience.

On the homepage of her website, Drummond describes herself as part “Desperate Housewife,” part “Lucille Ball,” and part “cowgirl.” Drawing upon classic and contemporary models of televised mothers reinforces the performance of motherhood that Drummond provides to her readers. It reveals the way that mothers, like Drummond, may continue to define themselves within mediatized versions of the idealized, or failed, mother. Drummond’s performative writing has a bit of Lucille Ball’s wackiness but also comes close to *Desperate*

*Housewives* Bree Van de Camp's perfectly polished housewife veneer. On her TV show she elaborates, "I'm a writer. I'm a blogger. I'm a photographer. I'm a mother. And I'm an accidental cowgirl. Welcome to my frontier" ("Home on the Ranch"). In this section on Drummond I touch upon several themes raised by her particular brand of motherhood as expressed on her blog and her television show to exemplify the way that notions of ideal maternity are couched in traditional gender and economic codes: her articulation of middle-of-the-country values and the use of the frontier as a metaphor for a lifestyle. While the blog and television show engage different modes of address, with the blog and the online communities that she has developed as offshoots of her cooking section offering a more interactive platform, Drummond appeals to her audience as an engaging and interactive voice in both media because she built her star persona through her efforts in community building. Her televisual voice is based upon her blogging persona. She often turns to the camera and directly addresses the audience with confidential kitchen and cooking tips as well as admissions of her guilty pleasures about eating, cooking, and motherhood.

Drummond, like Armstrong, is one of the most successful mommy bloggers to have tapped into the market of female readership. Indeed, in popular news articles, Armstrong and she are often discussed in tandem as the two most successful mommy bloggers. The most notable example of this is from the same *The New York Times* article where Armstrong was hailed as the "Queen of the Mommy Bloggers." Belkin wrote:

The most screenplay-ready tale, hands down, is that of Ree Drummond, a former L.A. party girl who met a cowboy in an Oklahoma bar on a visit home and became a ranch wife a year and a half later. They now have four children, whom Drummond home-schools while raising cattle and chronicling it all on *The Pioneer Woman*, which she began on a whim in 2006. Among women who blog, Drummond and Armstrong are at the top. There are almost as many ways to measure reader traffic as there are blogs right now, but Nielsen estimates that Dooce sometimes has as many as six million visitors a month, and *Pioneer Woman* is in the same range.

Beyond their successes, and the not-to-be-overlooked fact that they both formerly lived in Los Angeles, the hotbed of the star industry, Drummond and Armstrong could not appear to be more different in the presentations of motherhood that they each offer. If Armstrong regards herself as mentally distressed, just getting by, and independently stylish; Drummond consistently paints herself as happy, performing her mommy lifestyle with ease, and as a “country” mom. Her handle, *The Pioneer Woman*, which is also the title of her successful Food Network show, aptly describes her as a homesteading woman who has embraced life in a geographical and cultural borderlands in our country.

In the first episode of her show, Drummond makes 10-20 “cowboy breakfast sandwiches” to bring to her family, after they've been working on the ranch since five o'clock in the morning. Drummond jokes that these are the favorite sandwiches of her father-in-law, her husband, kings, and the president. She quickly notes that she is joking about the kings and the president because “The president wouldn't even know how to find their ranch.” Drummond says this while she is driving (“Home on the Ranch”). Through the positioning of the camera, we inhabit the passenger seat. And beyond Drummond, we see the vast and empty plains landscape through the driver's window. Indeed, the ranch is “in the middle of nowhere” if the nowhere of the plains is marked by its contrast to the coasts where decisions about politics and television are made. The Food Network consistently reminds us of the access they provide to this no man's

land in the opening credits for this show. As Drummond welcomes us to her frontier, there is a montage of images in the background, including one of a street with a prominent sign that says “Dead End.”

However, as Victoria E. Johnson argues in her book *Heartland TV*, the no man's land of the middle of the U.S. is actually the symbolic heartland of popular American taste. Despite the fact that Drummond lives on a geographic and cultural border of our country, just far enough so that she can distinguish herself as an “accidental country girl” and as living on the frontier of civilization, she actually occupies a central position as a populist tastemaker. She taps into underlying American values of homesteading, thrift, and a certain rugged individualism that surrounds mythic frontier figures as the aura of Americanism. Johnson critically addresses television’s role in binding tastes to place, suggesting that television has always had a more complicated relationship to its expression of “*place*-bound ideals.” She writes:

Though television has been generally theorized as a space-binding medium, uniquely capable of addressing a national audience from a unified, centralized point of transmission (and, by extension, point-of-view), from its inception to the present, TV has been a rather more contentious entity—a site of ongoing struggle over the expression and importance of imagined *place*-bound ideals within this overarching national venue. As television enters the twenty-first century firm in its position as the central medium of information and entertainment in everyday American life, the Midwest imagined as the United States's culturally and ideologically populist “Heartland” remains a remarkably consistent and provocative reference point in national media. (3)

Indeed, the visual rhetoric of *The Pioneer Woman* capitalizes on this position, despite being more middle-of-the-country than the Midwest, offering Drummond's lifestyle as a paragon of ideal American motherhood and domesticity. In the face of a slew of new mother-oriented shows like MTV’s *Pregnant at 16* and its sequel *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, Bravo’s *Pregnant in Heels*, and fictional shows about the failure of mothers to choose their children over their careers like

*Body of Proof* and *Alias*; Drummond's blog and cooking show position motherhood and the affective labor of caring as the bedrock of a happy life. In this way, the show corresponds with Johnson's insight into one of the functions of the Heartland myth:

Energized particularly in times of cultural transition or perceived cultural threat or tension, the Heartland myth provides a short-hand cultural common sense framework for "all-American" identification, redeeming goodness, face-to-face community, sanctity, and emplaced ideals to which a desirous and nostalgic public discourse repeatedly returns. Positively embraced as the locus of solid dependability, cultural populism, and producerist, "plain folks" independence, the Midwest as Heartland, in this iteration, symbolizes the ideal nation (in other words, "We the People" are, ideally midwesterners). (5)

Drummond engages the taste-making potential of the middle-of-the-country and is often painted as a corrective to the fast-paced and career-focused lifestyle of the working mother. The fact that Drummond is one of the highest grossing mommy bloggers, who must perform a sufficient amount of work to earn that career title, does not often enter the dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

To drive home her identity as a re-born ranch woman, Drummond vocally distances herself from her past lifestyle as a city girl. Drummond's second season episode titled "Rise and Shine" centers around a "tale of three breakfasts." Drummond begins by saying:

You know, I didn't always live in the country. Before I got married I lived in civilization. And my morning routine was always the same. I'd get up, get in the car, drive straight to a coffee shop, stand in line, and get a big cappuccino or iced coffee—a couple of scones—it was so nice. But you know, my life in the country really isn't all that different. Well, except there's no city, there are no people, and there's no coffee shop. Fortunately, I don't have to dream about coffee and scones. I can just make 'em myself at home.

Drummond jokes about being cut off from civilization as she addresses her viewer from the driver's seat of her car, again navigating an open road through an empty field. Unlike Armstrong,

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<sup>15</sup> Another important factor that does not often enter public dialogue is her husband Ladd's equal participation in childcare.

who distances herself from her local culture, Drummond proves that city taste can be mimicked in the country with an attitude of self-sufficiency and the know-how that she will provide. While the first breakfast is her recreation of a Starbucks' petite vanilla bean scone, the second breakfast in the tale is for her father-in-law's breakfast. She makes him eggs benedict, which is a bit "country club" but dressed down for the ranch with "cowboy potatoes." Finally, Drummond makes breakfast burritos for her husband, children, and ranch hands who are filmed wrangling cattle all morning. The progression of the tale of three breakfasts moves its viewers temporally and symbolically through Drummond's journey from single city girl to married country mother. While taking us through breakfast steps for the single lady, to the wife and daughter in law, to the matriarch who oversees the nourishment of children and a home(stead), Drummond also devises recipes that are less and less sophisticated. The structure of her story, and this episode in particular, consistently reflects a teleological progression from tastes associated with the urbane to tastes associated with the middle-of-the-country ranch and an adult lifestyle. Again, Drummond seems to serve as a corrective model, in particular, to the mommy-oriented programming of networks like MTV and Bravo which target a more youth-focused and urbane demographic.

In addition to focusing on hearty ranch recipes designed to please her husband and family, Drummond also home-schools her children. Much of her website has morphed into a curricular guide for building a self-sustainable lifestyle. This includes her cowboy-approved recipes and her daily school lessons for children. It is through these resources that Drummond's ability to build a community is most effective. In 2009, Drummond started an offshoot of her blog called *Tastykitchen.com* with a tagline: "Favorite Recipes from *Real Kitchens Everywhere!*". This website, also published through the Blogger Network publishing portal, is a



community forum built upon recipe sharing. Like Armstrong, part of Drummond's appeal is her seemingly fluid ability to empower her audience to contribute to her lifestyle brand. Not only do many women contribute to her forum, and to this discourse on motherhood, but they boost their blogging career by publishing under the auspices of *Thepioneerwoman.com* domain.

Drummond's blog promotes the sharing and community building that are markers of affective labor but also sponsors the economic development of her community.

### **Conclusion: Rhetorical Overlaps**

Both Armstrong and Drummond invoke various identity-markers for their particular brands of motherhood. While Armstrong is consistently anti-Mormon (and anti-religious), urbane, and prone to independent-rock references; Drummond continually constructs herself as a self-sufficient woman, living on the frontier, who is happy to pass on the values of her lifestyle. Both build a "virtual community," but Drummond, especially, plugs into a rhetoric closely associated with the development of early online communities.

In 1994, Howard Rheingold published his nationally best-selling book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Rheingold is one of the early proponents and theorists of online social communities. He made enormous contributions to the Well community, which was developed as the first social community for the Whole Earth community—the Internet pioneers of Northern California and the Pacific Northwest who are credited with many of the early hardware, software, and platform innovations in personal computing. Rheingold's book, as one of the first and most influential books on social networks, defined the language through which people first talked about and thought about online

communities. In this book he describes his interactions with other participants, continually reinforcing the emotional impact and popularity of the forum on parenting. For Rheingold, this online community certainly seemed to hold the most emotional value and it is this community that he chooses as a frame for all online communities in his book's introduction. Rheingold shares stories of familial trauma, expressed via the web, that served as rallying points for the entire online community and prompted known and unknown sources to contribute comfort, knowledge, and real life (RL) support.

Social networks and communities centered on parenting are often the earliest iterations of new Internet innovations. Just as Rheingold suggested that the parenting forum was the first community with real emotional ties that translated from virtual life to real life—a trend that is now common among social networking sites where events are planned and friends are made via screen technology for the later purpose of RL materialization—the Blogger publishing network initiated advertising campaigns through a sampling of parenting blogs, using the community as an early-adopter barometer for other types of blogs and the blog reading community at-large. As such, one could consider the way that the community of parenting bloggers often function as the frontier for online communities and initiatives, paving the way and sometimes defining the discourse of online media.

Drummond earned her fame for being one of the first parenting bloggers to include step-by-step photographs for her recipes, making it easier for novice cooks, housewives, and mothers to learn how to make her family-style dishes. Her discursive position on the frontier of blogging methodology qualifies her as a writer in sync with the parenting communities that are so often at the forefront of innovation. Her geographic position in the middle of the country and on the “frontier” of taste-making culture taps into the model of American innovator as iconoclast and

maverick, which I will return to in chapter 2 when discussing Sarah Palin's TV show of this period, *Sarah Palin's Alaska*.

The rhetoric of motherhood—of the caring and affective labor so often associated with this biological, cultural, and political identity—bears significant overlap with the language of new media technologies and platforms. Early social communities developed out of initiatives to build community, share advice, and garner support. The economics of the blogging industry and social networks were developed from and tested upon mothers who spearheaded these parenting communities. The economics of this industry rely on the propensity of bloggers and readers to establish and sustain a “community” that encourages website and brand loyalty. As mothers blog, they perform this type of labor. Despite the fact that mommy bloggers are often denigrated for the way they focus on issues of the private sphere rather than on those of the public sphere, an issue addressed and popularized by influential blogger Alice Bradley, they are some of the most remunerated writers on the Internet. As Armstrong says, “Well, I am a mom and I blog ... I think what people take offense to is the ‘mommy’ part. I think people think it diminishes what we do. But for me, I feel like if you come to my website, and you see what I do it speaks for itself” (“Dooce.com’s Heather Armstrong on Social Media”). Why is it that the labor of mommy blogging, like the “women’s work” of motherhood and housewifery is so often passed off as unquantifiable second-class labor? I keep this question in mind in the next chapter, which looks to mothers in reality TV.

## **Chapter 2: Reality TV Mothers in the 2.0 Era: When the Affective Labor of Caring Extends from the Family, to the State, to the Audience**

Television has a rich history of portraying mothers and targeting them as a market. Television studies, along with feminist and gender studies, flourished through articles and books charting the relationship between women and television. The relationship encompassed the way that women related to the object of the television itself, how the cadence of television programming synced with a housewife's daily rhythms, how television advertising was devised to draw women in, and how television shows often featured female roles to model motherhood and housewifery.

As Charlotte Brunson and Lynn Spigel note in their introduction to their edited collection, *Feminist Television Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, "Feminist critics returned repeatedly to questions of everyday life, the home, and the repetitive structure of time in both the housewife's daily tasks and in television narratives aimed at her" (1). Part of this field of study was the development of a methodology that privileged everyday culture as an archive of artifacts that might speak volumes about ideologies and structuring value systems. This methodology, which welcomes the study of "low-culture" media like television, tabloids, magazines, and commercials, is one that I continue to employ in the legacy of feminist studies of popular culture. Brunson and Spigel continue, "... these kinds of feminist television histories are interested in finding women's voices, or the conditions under which femininity is produced, and this means either looking places that are not conventionally regarded as 'legitimate' or revisiting and re-visioning traditional sites and sources" (1). Included in these non-conventional and non-

legitimized sources are the everyday television shows, blogs, and the infotainment that caters to and showcases mothers.

New broadcast platforms have shifted the possibilities and politics of representation for contemporary mothers. Alongside an increase in mommy blogs, reality TV shows about mothers and families have proliferated in the last decade. Major networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC have aired countless shows that in some way revolve around mother figures and questions of the normative family. Of course, mothers as a theme or narrative storyline on television are not new. We might also question how a proliferation in mommy blogs and reality TV programming are versions of other modes of representation and community which catered to mothers and women like broadcast television and radio programming and social communities based on reading groups (Radway). If we trace the history of television we might point to some of the earliest programs as vehicles for stories about this archetypal figure. However, in the 2000s there was a resurgence of reality and narrative programming that focused on motherhood and many shows that articulated either idealized or failed versions of motherhood. Alongside broadcast and network television shows are webisodes, *YouTube.com* videos, and the expansive visual culture of gossip-oriented news shows that widen the star discourse of the women who perform as these mothers. Popular channels like Bravo and MTV have developed shows like *Pregnant in Heels* and *Teen Mom*. And, in the last decade, TLC has re-focused much of its reality programming on mothers, birth, and the contemporary American phenomenon of the oversized family.<sup>16</sup> In 2012, TLC's recent roster of shows included: *Kate Plus Eight*, *United Bates of America*, *19 Kids and Counting*, *Quints By Surprise*, *Sextuplets Take New York*, *Table For Twelve*, *I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant*, and *Sarah Palin's Alaska*. As of this season, (2013- 2014) the current roster of

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<sup>16</sup> The contemporary American "oversized" family is indeed a modern phenomenon that emerged in a post-war culture when the nuclear family became mythologized as the ideal (May). These shows work in tandem with that mythology, accentuating the oversized, or larger than nuclear, family as non-normative

shows is less reflective of a moment where representations of motherhood and large families dominated media landscapes. Current shows include: *19 Kids and Counting* and *Quints by Surprise*, but these types of shows are far outweighed by an increasing number of reality TV shows that focus on sex (*SEX sent me to the ER*, *Strange Sex*, and *Virgin Diaries*), marriage and weddings (*Sister Wives*, *Something Borrowed Something New*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Say Yes to the Dress Bridesmaids*, *Say Yes to the Dress Atlanta*, *My Five Wives*, *Friday Bride Day*, and *I Found the Gown*), and psychological, emotional, or physical issues that are pathologized for entertainment purposes (*Hoarding: Buried Alive*, *My Strange Addiction*, *My Crazy Obsession*, and *My 600-lb Life*).

These shows are part of a post-network era that included the development of series targeted toward niche markets, like the women between the ages of 18- 34 who are the primary watchers of the above-mentioned shows (Lotz). A recent example of this is *Sarah Palin's Alaska* (2010- 2011), which focuses on the politician as a mother more than as a political candidate.

Notes *Variety.com*:

This just in from TLC: The premiere of “Sarah Palin's Alaska” on Sunday night averaged 4.96 million viewers -- making it the No. 1 program launch in TLC history. Premiere bested the 2003 series launch of “What Not to Wear,” which previously held the record. “Sarah Palin's Alaska” also brought in 1.6 million viewers among adults 18-49, but mostly skewed old, with the majority of the audience (3.9 million) over 35. (Schneider; Ward; Seidman)

These types of television shows, which are primarily being watched by women who hover around the age of 35, are also featuring television stars of this demographic who have developed public personas grounded in their identities as middle-aged women, and often mothers. For example, consider Tina Fey: while Fey began her career as a female comedic performer, writer and cast-member of the iconic *Saturday Night Live* show on NBC, (where she appeared as a

Sarah Palin look-alike) she is now associated with her identity as a working mother like in her best-selling book *Bossy Pants*, her film with co-star Amy Poehler, *Baby Mama*, where she plays an adoptive mother, her recent film with Paul Rudd, *Admission* where she imagines playing a mother post-adoption, and of course, her final season on her hit NBC show *30 Rock*, that revolves around her pregnancy and how she manages a work and home-life balance.

Television is witnessing a heyday of motherhood in its series, its stars, and in the tabloid media industry which invites fans to “know” stars through a new level of intimacy. This intimacy comes from stars whose performances move back and forth between those that are coded as “real” and those coded as “constructed,” as well as new marketing strategies that invite the viewer into a participatory relationship with the star through social media.<sup>17</sup>

In his 1986 book, *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer wrote that, “The complex way in which we produce and reproduce the world in technologically developed societies involves the way in which we separate ourselves into public and private persons, producing and consuming persons and so on...” (2). As a culture we turn to celebrities because they teach us how to “cope” with those types of “divisions.” Dyer notes that, “Stars are about all of that, and are one of the most significant ways we have for making sense of it all” (2).

Stars embody an identity cobbled together from what the audience imagines to be private and public performance. The tabloid industry has reinforced this imagined notion, bolstering Dyer’s claim that “stars matter” because they teach us about the process of building identities that must navigate the boundary between public and private. In actuality, what is represented as a star’s “private” world is increasingly public and circulatable in an era dominated by social media technology. In contrast to other, early studies of stardom, that spoke to the way fans idealized

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<sup>17</sup> Gaylyn Studlar’s work “The Perils of Pleasure? Fan Magazine Discourse as Women’s Commodified Culture in the 1920s,” and Maria Elena Buszek’s chapter on early star-centric magazines and tabloids further point to the way that these texts generate intimacy between the star and the audience consumer.

stars, we now have a culture that revels in increasingly intimate relationships with stars established through agency provided by manipulating and producing fan content (Jenkins; Lewis). While in 1994, Jackie Stacey could argue that, “femininity is conventionally reproduced within dominant culture through the circulation of idealized images, constructed as desirable and yet unattainable,” we now see a femininity that is a complex negotiation between emulating the actions of stars and alternatively denigrating stars as less-than, rather than more-than, the average female’s performance of femininity. As Julie Ann Wilson writes,

Melding the tabloid’s fondness for moralizing and bringing the stars down to earth with the fan magazine’s spectacularization of the personal lives and consumer habits of Hollywood inhabitants...Celebrity magazines invite readers to engage in processes that I call “star testing” and, in doing so, double as a dispersed and distinctly postfeminist technology of governing women in the context of neoliberalism. (26)

I agree with Wilson, but would re-contextualize the practice of “star testing” in celebrity gossip magazines within the broader 2.0 culture that positions fan’s opinions and feedback as the counterpoint to the image projected by the star itself. It is the interrelation between the two, the feedback itself, that marks a new formula for celebrity in which performer, audience, and media system interact to produce a rich and complex star discourse. The circulation of these magazines and e-zines reinforces the discursive web of fame that accompanies the contemporary star.

Viewers spend more time with television characters—stretching out a relationship over the course of several seasons, rather than the few hours of a film—helping to develop the intimacy of the star-fan relationship. As I suggested in my last chapter, this is even more the case in the personal blogosphere, where fans can spend years building an intimate relationship with a blogger, so that they may feel like a close friend or confidante. Television mothers have become a go-to source for identificatory and lambastic discourses on motherhood. They have come to



represent the very best and the very worst of the spectrum of idealized contemporary motherhood in the U.S., distilling narratives that range from the scientific, to the economic, to the socio-political issues that define contemporary understanding of the proper family. In this chapter, I turn to representations of televised mothers who articulate a cultural consensus or a latent cultural tension over ideas of reproductive technology, class and ethnicity as it relates to U.S. citizenship and new definitions of the family.

### **The Crisis Over the Changing American Family**

In September 2008, the leading online political journal *Politico* reported: “The culture wars are making a sudden and unexpected encore in American politics, turning more ferocious virtually by the hour as activists on both sides of the ideological divide react to the addition of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin to the Republican ticket” (Vandehei and Kuhn). Sarah Palin reignited these so-called “wars” through her embodiment of several highly-charged political debates circulating during the 2008 Presidential race between Senators Barack Obama and John McCain. These included marriage, abortion, gun control, and issues of environmentalism. At the crux of Palin’s political identity was her position as a woman and a mother. Palin was the Governor of Alaska and was a highly visible role model for American mothers. As *Politico.com* claimed, she was a polarizing figure and alternatively provided a target for celebration and derision—both for her politics and for her cultural ideologies. In an article for *City Journal*, Kay Hymowitz, author of *Liberation’s Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age* and *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, wrote that, “Whatever Palin’s political impact, her cultural significance is profound. For better and for worse, she introduces a

new and likely long-running cultural type to the national stage—the red-state feminist.” Palin’s “red-state feminism” was a mix of conservative beliefs regarding abortion, gun control, environmentalism, and gay marriage; coupled with a commitment to progressive women’s issues such as equality in the workplace and equality in parenting responsibilities.

For example, Palin notoriously returned to office a few days after giving birth to her youngest child, demonstrating her dedication to her political career. Following this, she made motherhood highly visible in her office. She often breastfed her child in the office, brought her children to work with her, and enlisted an equal amount of parenting help from her husband Todd Palin, making it clear that the labor of childcare was a shared responsibility. While these actions are considered progressive, liberal, and feminist, Palin also staunchly abided by the culturally conservative right wing Republican stance on issues that spoke to feminism on a national and juridical level, like abortion. For example, Palin insisted that her teenage daughter Bristol marry her high school sweetheart and give birth to their unexpected child when the two became pregnant in 2008, rather than aborting the fetus. Hymowitz noted:

Yes, Palin can boast political success, activism, authority, and self-confidence in front of an audience of 37 million, and, though less widely discussed (perhaps because so profoundly envied), an egalitarian marriage of the sort that has become the foundational principle of feminist utopia. But in most other respects, especially her position on abortion, she has struck female media types as something more like the Anti-Feminist. She is a “humiliation for America’s women” (Judith Warner for the *New York Times*) and a tool of the “patriarchs” (Gloria Steinem for the *Los Angeles Times*).

As celebrated feminists like Steinem rallied against the image of feminism that Palin presented, journalists utilized her as a figure through which to discuss motherhood. In the article “Fusing Politics and Motherhood in a New Way,” Jodi Kantor reported:

But with Trig [her new baby] in her arms, Ms. Palin has risen higher than ever. Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee for president, says he selected her as his running mate because of her image as a reformer, but she is also making motherhood an explicit part of her appeal, running as a self-proclaimed hockey mom.

Palin not only served as a site of controversy for feminists during this period, but she became a foil against which to measure the femininity and potential motherliness of first, her Democratic female counterpart, Hillary Clinton, and then, First Lady Michelle Obama. Clinton was consistently derided for being un-feminine. Whereas fashion blogs reported on Palin's trendsetting shoes, Hillary was assaulted by the moniker, "Cankles," an insult directed at women with larger ankles and a generally derogatory term often used to denigrate women who do not meet the terms of an idealized female figure.

During the election, the weekly comedy variety show, *Saturday Night Live*, aired a spoof of a Town Hall meeting between the two figures. The skit, titled "A Nonpartisan message from Governor Sarah Palin and Senator Hillary Clinton," starred Fey as Palin and Poehler as Clinton (the same team that went on to make the film *Baby Mama*, discussed in chapter 3 and the epilogue). The skit stages a town-hall style press video where the two candidates address the issue of sexism during the 2008 election. This issue, along with maternity, came to the forefront alongside the first female candidates for the position of Vice-President and the first female candidate in the Presidential primary, in this country. This satire, written by Fey, Poehler, and head writer Seth Meyers, marked Fey's ongoing role as Palin's comedic doppelganger. The writers poignantly highlight the differences between the two characters:

POEHLER: But Sarah, one thing we can agree on is that sexism can never be allowed to permeate an American election.

FEY: So please, stop photo-shopping my head on sexy bikini pictures.

POEHLER: Stop saying I have cankles.

FEY: Don't refer to me as a MILF.

POEHLER: And don't refer to me as a Flurge. I googled what it stands for and I do not like it.

FEY: Reporters and commentators, stop using words that diminish us like pretty, attractive, beautiful...

POEHLER: Harpy, shrew, boner-shrinker.

FEY: While our politics may differ, my friend and I are both very tough ladies. (Palin/Hillary Open in Episode One)

This extremely popular live video includes almost constant laughter from the *Saturday Night Live* audience.<sup>18</sup> Fey and Poehler's comedic affectations transform what read as serious accusations, accusations by women against our popular media, into subversively funny material. Palin's character asks the media to stop over-sexualizing her image and to stop pigeonholing her as a dismissible sex symbol rather than a viable candidate. Clinton's character asks the media to stop under-sexualizing her and framing her as something akin to a crone—an older woman whose voice has been dismissed from rational public discourse. If this skit captured the spirit of sexism during the race, then it would seem that there was no middle ground for a rational female voice to emerge until Michelle Obama became First Lady, a female political role long sanctified by American politics.

The role of First Lady is often defined by symbolically important but codified political labors regarding a motherly attitude towards the care of the state of children in America. Significantly, it is also a non-elected role and therefore entertains a different relationship to political power. In 1996, First Lady Clinton famously published her book on children in America titled, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. In 2012, Obama published her first book, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*. Obama has not only invigorated White House domesticity through her extensive food

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<sup>18</sup> On *YouTube.com*, the unofficial video has close to 13 million views and the video continues to air on both *YouTube.com* and *Hulu.com*.

garden and her focus on family dinners, but she has made childhood obesity a landmark issue with her “Let’s Move!” campaign. Obama has made vocal and important contributions to our country since she entered the office alongside Barack Obama. However, unlike Palin and Clinton who provoked troubling versions of feminine power, Obama has served to bolster a traditional model of the American nuclear family. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker note the symbolic shift at the beginning of Obama’s time as First Lady as they write about the “...refashioning of First Lady Michelle Obama, who quelled fears about her potentially unruly black femininity (symbolized in responses of consternation to a famous fist bump with her husband on the campaign trail) by declaring that she only aspired to be ‘mom in chief’ (23). In her article “The Obamas’ Marriage,” published in 2009, Kantor wrote:

The centrality of the Obama marriage to the president’s political brand opens a new chapter in the debate that has run through, even helped define, their union...Along the way, they revised some of the standards for how a politician and spouse are supposed to behave. They have spoken more frankly about marriage than most intact couples, especially those running for office, usually do.

Much of this conversation revolves around the importance of partnership in marriage and in sustaining relationship rituals like “date night” and family rituals like dinners and bedtime reading. Kantor continues, “In many ways, the Obamas have made the White House into a cocoon of sorts, with weekends full of movie-watching (‘Where the Wild Things Are’), Scrabble games and children’s talent shows.” While the Obamas are known for discussing “partnership” in marriage, this gesture at equal caretaking seems trumped by the amount of domestic, children-first activities Kantor reports on. These children-first activities that assume the participation of a family as a unit, shift the focus of the conversation away from the question of who is facilitating these evenings at home. The media’s interest in this marriage and this family seemed to be

unprecedented shortly after Obama began his first round in office in January of, 2009. *The New York Observer* reported:

*New York Times* Washington correspondent Jodi Kantor has secured a stunning seven-figure book deal this week with Little, Brown to write a volume on the Obamas...It comes on the heels of the 34-year-old reporter's *New York Times Magazine* cover story on the Obamas' marriage, which argued that "the Obamas mix politics and romance in a way that no first couple quite have before." (Neyfakh)

If both Palin and Clinton represented a moment where gender roles, as they relate to the oft divided labors of childcare and work outside of the home, were malleable and questionable; the Obama union provided an antidote to the cultural anxiety that this questioning may have caused. As both Palin and Clinton relinquished the political stage to Barack Obama, the spotlight on femininity turned towards Michelle, a female figure who may be equally progressive but is also defined by her position as a political matriarch. Following the election, Hillary receded from this particular sphere of cultural discourse as she began her role as the Secretary of State. Palin continued to appear as a political news source but became an even more pronounced mother figure in her star-vehicle show *Sarah Palin's Alaska* that began airing on TLC in 2010. In between 2008 and 2010, the limits of motherhood continued to be tested across popular culture platforms like Hollywood films and tabloid magazines. In some ways, these iterations of questionable motherhood seemed to be riding the wave of politically-charged women. This is certainly the case with the Octomom phenomenon of 2009 and the re-emergence of Palin on a national channel.

Images of motherhood that not only symbolically challenge the normativity of proper motherhood, but also the physical and scientific limitations of the overextended pregnant body and the overextended mother, began to circulate at this time. Images of proliferate families and

the overextended pregnant body are specific to this era in their engagement of and reliance upon the pregnancy technologies of the digital era. As I will show later in this chapter and then in chapter 3, Assistive Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) become increasingly prevalent in the 2000s, empowering new modes of pregnancy and family at the same time that network rosters signal a new interest in shows about over-sized families and popular Hollywood films articulate a trend of single women in their late 30s and early 40s managing their pregnancies with the aid of technology more so than the aid of a partner or a normative family structure. Television saw the rise of the family show focused on the overextended mother with the exceptionally large family: *Jon & Kate Plus Eight*, the Duggar family of the current *19 Kids and Counting*, *Quints by Surprise*, or one of the many large-family shows that populates TLC's late 2000s roster of television. Shows like *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* and *Quints by Surprise* become possible in an era where pregnancies using ARTs like hormone injections and In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) are increasingly common, resulting in sets of multiples. In contrast, the vocally Christian Duggar family, whose parents abstain from birth control as part of their religious practice, might be read as a traditionalist large family counterpoint to other technologically-enabled families on TV, further revealing the cultural undertones of anxiety about these overextended families that occur in tandem with fascination and popularity. The images of Octomom circulated within popular media culture among several other examples of fictional and non-fictional non-normative pregnancies. These visions of non-normative pregnancy and IVF families all either directly or indirectly reference technological enhancements that are part of a digital era, which emerges alongside a culturally-dominant neoliberal ideology of self-help. In this case, technology is used in service of this ethos, in many cases revealing cultural and gender anxieties over the dystopian possibilities whereby technology over-extends the capabilities of the (usually female) body and

negates the necessity of and the value of the father and the family structure. In this way, images of technologically-enabled pregnancies, mothers, and families enter into dialogue with political discourses that reflect changes in the traditional American family.

### **Octomom: The Politics of the Over-Extended Mother**

In addressing the symbolic and literal idea of the overextended mother, I consider women like Palin whose performative identities are stretched between motherhood and political maven, overextended bellies that bulge during high-number pregnancies, and mothers caring for high-volume families. All of these iterations of the over-extended mother complement the image of the mother who is “spread too thin.” This mother is most closely associated with women who wrangle a balance between a career and work as the primary caretaker in the home.

In Kathleen Karlyn Rowe’s book, *The Unruly Woman*, she argues that traditional representations of femininity are often challenged precisely by those women who seem to be uncontainable by their bodies. The Octomom, Nadya Suleman, had a distended stomach, ripe with blue and red striated veins, which implied a pregnancy set to bust her body open.



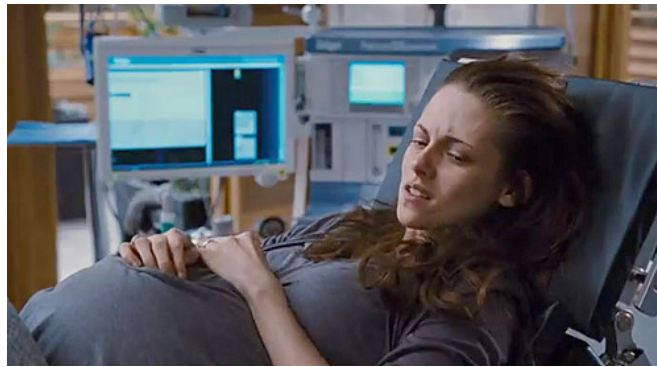


**Illustration 2.1 Octomom's Pregnancy from *TMZ.com***

Elizabeth Grosz defines the freak as that which crosses the boundaries and binaries that “normal” people use to define normative humanity. She notes, “He or she is not an object of *simple* admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening” (56). The pregnant images of Suleman were freakish, starting a media trend that has continued up to, and will likely surpass, the moment in which I am writing. Not only did Suleman capitalize on her outlandish pregnancy by pursuing multiple television deals, but she started her own *YouTube.com* web series and also starred in a pornographic film focused on her status as a single mother.

In the above photo, Suleman falls into Grosz's category of boundary-crosser by seeming to be in between life and death. While a normal pregnancy is celebrated for the health and glow that it brings to a woman's face, by comparison, Suleman looks wan and thin-skinned. Her distended belly makes her vulnerable venous system *too* visible.

In considering the visual culture that attended the media frenzy over the Octomom, it's important to point to other provocative images of motherhood circulating among news stories, blogs, and the tabloid media at that time. If there was any popular contemporary image of motherhood that came close to replicating the horror and “freakery” of Suleman’s 2009 image, it would have been the character Bella Swan’s body from the popular *Twilight Saga* film series.



**Illustration 2.2 Bella Swan pregnant with a half-vampire child from Bitchmagazine.org**

*Bitch Magazine* summarizes her condition in a pithy synopsis,

Bella finds herself pregnant with a half-vampire that sucks her blood from the inside and renders her a malnourished skeleton. She refuses to have an abortion despite the pleadings of Edward, insisting that she’ll die for her baby—and then she does, because her spine breaks when she goes into labor [and] her baby starts eating its way out of her stomach...(Don)

But unlike Suleman, Bella’s exaggerated stomach is a combination of contemporary U.S. teen fiction and ancient mythologies; mythologies that attend to the study of monsters and, perhaps, the study of monstrosities, or Teratology, that forms the basis for Grosz’s work. Suleman’s distended stomach was real, positioning it more precipitously on that boundary between life and

death, ordinary and extraordinary. Both the fictional and non-fictional images mobilize the issue of the mother's health sublimated by an "unnatural" baby's (or in Suleman's case, babies') survival. Both characters refused to abort either an unnatural fetus or to participate in the increasingly widely-known practice of fetus reduction, made common during our contemporary era where IVF is a pregnancy technology (Antonia; Macrae; Mundy).

In terms of images that provoke the boundaries of the body and the real, Suleman's true rivals in the late 2000s were the photographs of Thomas Beattie in *People* magazine.



### **Illustration 2.3 Thomas Beattie's pregnant belly from *People* magazine**

Beattie, popularly known as the "pregnant man," was "born a woman, underwent a sex-change operation but kept his reproductive organs. He made headlines in 2007 after pictures of his pregnant belly became public" (Meadows). Beattie was the first legally transgender man to give birth to children. Like Suleman, Beattie challenged our culture's accepted understanding of the

capacity of the human body to reproduce, making him an object of attention, awe, and in many cases, discomfort. Beattie's pregnancy was biologically normal but socially unconventional. This disconnect was possible because of advances in the hormone therapies and rehabilitative programs that support more successful sex-change operations.

Suleman's body was made possible through another channel of advances in hormone-based medical technology: IVF. IVF technologies have become popular in a culture where the average age of childbirth for a woman has increased to 25 years. According to the latest Center for Disease Control (CDC) statistics from 2008, "The average age of first-time mothers increased by 3.6 years, from 21.4 years in 1970 to 25.0 years in 2006" (T.J. Mathews, M.S., and Brady E. Hamilton, Ph.D.). In addition, trends show that more and more older women are continuing to have children. In 2008, an article from *Psychologytoday.com* titled, "Forty (or Close) is the New 20 for Having Babies" stated that "the number of women having babies after age 40 has quadrupled," and that "In 2006 one in every twelve first babies was born to a woman over 35" (Newman). A recent article from the *Los Angeles Times* stated, "Federal data show that women in their 40s are more likely to have babies now than at any time in more than four decades. Among American women ages 40 to 44, birthrates have hit their highest point since 1967, data recently released by the National Center for Health Statistics reveal. Births have also become increasingly common among women in their late 30s" (Alpert).

A common side effect of IVF technologies is the preponderance of twins and triplets. The practice of reducing "extra" and "unwanted" babies has ushered in another facet of an abortion debate that continues to dominate conversations about contemporary American motherhood. IVF technologies have now resulted in over 4 million pregnancies, many of which have been fraught with the decision to reduce the number of fetuses. This technology "produced a sharp rise in

high-risk multiple pregnancies” (Mundy). According to a 2007 article in *The Washington Post*, “There is no way to know how many pregnancies achieved by fertility treatment start out as triplets or quadruplets and are quietly reduced to something more manageable. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which publishes an annual report on fertility clinic outcomes, does not include selective-reduction figures because of the reluctance to report them” (Mundy). Articles from other major publications like *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic* echoed the paradoxes of this technology (Garber) and Ruth Padawer writes:

For all its successes, reproductive medicine has produced a paradox: in creating life where none seemed possible, doctors often generate more fetuses than they intend. In the mid-1980s, they devised an escape hatch to deal with these megapregnancies, terminating all but two or three fetuses to lower the risks to women and the babies they took home. But what began as an intervention for extreme medical circumstances has quietly become an option for women carrying twins.

Rather than spark controversy in a choice to reduce babies, Suleman captivated attention by doing just the opposite. Injected with twelve eggs, three times more than the average IVF patient in 2009, Suleman brought all eight embryos to term. Suleman’s grotesquely distended stomach marked her as an “over extended” mother that moved beyond the traditional definition of the mother stretched between home life and, out of the home, work life. However, it also qualified her as a symbol of contemporary motherhood, and the issues circulating around this identity, as much as Palin’s mixing of work and motherhood qualified her, and Kate Gosselin’s oversized family qualified her. Even if it is Suleman’s stomach that visually challenges the constraints of the female body, it was actually her lifestyle and her motherly choices that provided the most acute affront to a cultural understanding of proper motherhood and femininity.

The labor of women like Suleman is not only the maintenance of their family through an adherence to contemporary American ideological models, but it is a maintenance of their star persona through strategic methods of self-broadcast, enmeshing the labor of motherhood and star labor. These women perform as mothers that either adhere to or deviate from our cultural expectations of proper motherhood, in nationally publicized media venues, and this balance is intricately entangled with how they maintain a balance between exposure to and distance from broadcast media; as well as whether or not they play into popularly supported models of U.S. citizenship. Suleman entertains a relationship with broadcast media that transgresses the codes of the maternal. In the tabloid media, in the fan discourse that comes from 2.0 media, and in entertainment news sources, she is accused of exposing, rather than protecting her family.

While the root of the problem arises in the over-exposure to and capitalization of media, the accusatory fingers that label a mother like Suleman as “improper” or “bad,” circle around key issues of race, class, and the nuclear family that dominate contemporary conversations about the family and politics.

### **Failures of Motherhood as Failures of Citizenship**

In the star discourse of the Octomom, the fantasy of the idealized mother breaks down along lines of ethnicity, class and citizenship. Part of this breakdown of the veneer of the ideal mother is linked to the way that the neoliberal underpinnings of reality TV encourage us to scapegoat certain mothers as an act of self-governing and self-surveillance. Part and parcel of Ouellette and Hay’s use of Foucault’s theory of governmentality is that reality TV engages cultural paradigms as teaching methodologies that extend and bolster the reach of actual political

discourse. One of the particular ways in which reality TV functions is to promote a culture of self-surveillance that teaches audiences to watch themselves with an eye towards self-correction and self-betterment. Television functions as a cultural teaching institution alongside federally structured institutions like the government and school. It functions alongside other culturally embedded institutions like the family. The neoliberal era in which reality TV emerges is marked by a cultural consensus that supports self-responsibility, self-betterment, and proper citizenship through the alignment of these institutions. As Ouellette and Hay show, reality TV functions in dialogue with broader understandings of citizenship, visually communicating how our culture's efforts in working on the self might be rewarded through various iterations of success, often financial. Scholars point to shows like *Big Brother* where contestants are watched and judged, *Survivor*, where contestants are watched and judged by their peers before being "eliminated," and even shows like *What not to Wear*, where contestants are placed inside a glass cube and judged by the general public before reforming their personal clothing and style choices. Reality TV is grounded in self-betterment, the judgment of others, and the judgment of oneself. This cultural legacy falls in line with neoliberal politics as well as the capitalist ethos of self-improvement.

As referenced in my introduction, several notable scholars have examined the genre of reality TV as one that emerges in the political context of neoliberal politics. Part of this mindset champions the responsibility of the individual in their own self-betterment and citizenship. Reality TV molds citizens through a reception of cultural ideologies that seem distinct from political motives. Reality TV trains Americans to be better versions of themselves and to pick up the slack of declining welfare and uplift programs in the current government.

In the same vein, Toby Miller argues that reality TV not only trains people to be better actors within a political structure, but better performers of gender norms, a cultural aspect of citizenship that certainly comes to play in the crisis of the changing American family in 2008. In his article “A Metrosexual Eye on Queer Guy,” which references the Bravo TV hit, *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy*, Miller suggests that part of the role of the queer figure is to help develop, codify, and sustain the heteronormativity of American masculinity. “...the professionalization of queerness as a form of management consultancy for conventional masculinity, [is] something that can be brought in to improve efficiency and effectiveness, like time-and-motion expertise, total-quality management, and just-in-time techniques; and an endorsement of the spread of self-fashioning as a requirement of personal and professional achievement through the U.S. middle-class labor force” (112). By bringing the queer professional in as a consultant for gender normativity, the performance of sexuality is mobilized in the spirit of personal reform. Similarly, Galit Ferguson argues that British reality TV shows about “family help,” where an outside authority like a nanny steps in to right the perceivable wrongs of the family model, shows how “consultants” who are in some way othered from the identity of the primary character (and caretaker) can serve as an authoritative training model. Ferguson writes, “Reality television’s family-help shows, with their contradictory discourses of help, good parenting, and shame, have a discursive relationship with policy efforts to ‘enable’ a governable populace” (87). Nannies and queer consultants, disguised as a non-threatening entity by their marginalized sexuality, labor and class status, work to reform and refashion cultural normativity as expressed through the ideals of a neoliberal governmental culture.

In the case of reality TV shows like *Sarah Palin’s Alaska* and *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*, we find mothers who are not being “made over” by these types of consultants but are themselves



providing performative examples of how to be American citizens and mothers, and incidentally, women. They are not always examples of how to be “proper” mothers, but they present a discursive structure against which consumers reflect their own ideologies of gender and the work-life balance that challenges contemporary debates about women’s work.

These performative examples are often negative in nature as if to show mothers what not to do and who not to be by example. In a landmark article on this very aspect of reality TV, Ouellette articulated these thoughts through the example of the show *Judge Judy*. Ouellette wrote,

*Judge Judy* and programs like it supplant institutions of the state (for instance, social work, law and order, and welfare offices), and using real people caught in the drama of ordinary life as raw material, train TV viewers to function without state assistance or supervision as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals. (“Take Responsibility for Yourself” 140)

As Ouellette notes, part of this work comes from the visual juxtaposition of Judge Judy with icons of the American nation and symbols of power like the American flag and a judge’s gavel.

In March of 2009, as the digital mother was buzzing through daytime television, Larry King interviewed Judge Judy on the popular culture phenomenon of the Octomom. Pictures of Suleman first started circulating in 2009 as her pregnancy progressed and she first became popular for the outrageous and grotesque images of her over-extended belly. However, when the circumstances around her pregnancy were made public, she became an even more pervasive media icon as a symbol of irresponsible motherhood in the age of reproductive technologies. Suleman was a single woman who already had six children with the help of IVF technologies and a sperm donor. She had had eggs frozen and was injected with all of them resulting in a pregnancy of eight more children. Perhaps most importantly for the Judge Judy segment,

Suleman gave birth to octuplets while participating in a welfare program. During her pregnancy Suleman was out of work and living at her mother's home, which was set for foreclosure.

Her story of motherhood touched upon multiple politicized issues in the United States at that time: she was aligned with the "welfare mothers" of the 1990s and she was part and parcel of the economic collapse of the housing market which was couched in a story of corporate greed and a cultural weakness for credit and overspending. While entangled in these political issues, she was excessively investing in controversial and expensive pregnancy technologies. Suleman was also a first generation Iraqi during an ongoing war against terrorism that had become imbricated with Iraq and Afghanistan. Judge Judy said,

Her actions were so reckless and irresponsible that the taxpayer is going to have to pay probably between eight and ten million dollars in their money to get these children out of the hospital and through their first year of life and then probably a lot more after that. But I think two things: I think any money that this lady receives by virtue of television, radio, print, anything that feeds money into her from whatever source, has to be attached by the government who was supporting her. I mean in that way she's really no different than AIG, only in a little microcosm. Her actions were reckless, irresponsible, and she's using taxpayer money. She has no medical insurance that's paying for these children so we are paying for her medical care. (Judith Sheindlin, "Big Business Stars")

Judge Judy chastises Suleman not only for being a reckless mother, but for being a reckless citizen. She contextualizes her emotional decisions as a mother trying to reproduce as those with significant financial and political ramifications for the rest of the country. At some point in the media frenzy over Octomom, the personal choices she made become translated as public, financial and political issues. Her status as a mother became a slippery moment through which public discourse centered upon the mother's body. Judge Judy blames the media attention Suleman receives, likely this broadcast included, for conditioning the government support that Suleman will garner; she suggests an intimate and tangible feedback between government and

media, in this case monetary, that Ouellette and Hay consider in their reading of reality TV as a paradigm of neoliberal politics.

In the introduction to their 2011 book, *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, Su Holmes and Negra suggest that motherhood has become a reinvigorated lens through which our culture articulates national and federal issues. In response to the year 2008, to which the beginning of the economic crisis might be dated, and in which tabloids began to excessively point to the follies of mothers, they write, "...the scapegoating of female celebrities...was indicative of a range of energetic efforts to hold at bay the dawning of revelations of vast white-collar crime. In this way, the imminent collapse of the financial industries is interlinked with the positioning of female celebrity as itself an overvalued and depreciating asset" (5). In a more focused study on Britney Spears, Anna Watkins Fisher argued that this scapegoating was presented as "infotainment" in between news stories: "...media representations of female celebrity, so often treated as apolitical 'filler' slotted in between 'real news' stories, [came] to do profoundly important political work under the guise of seeming triviality" (306). Like *Judge Judy*, which acts out political and judicial lessons as moments of drama, the inclusion of infotainment within news cycles serves to both dramatize and aestheticize the news while also legitimizing infotainment as a vehicle through which one might tell political allegories.

Since this initial accusation of "welfare mother," which activated debates of the 1990s, one of the last cycles of national debt crisis prior to the foreclosure crisis, Suleman has continued to serve as a symbol for the irresponsible mother. She has been accused of drug use, her house was foreclosed on, she has been derided for her career as a porn star, and she is currently undergoing multiple accusations of major welfare fraud. Regardless of the verity of these

accusations, what we see is a hyper-developed media machine that most often passes judgments on her capabilities as a mother through conversations about her status as a financially upstanding citizen—whether it is about her entanglement within the discourse of the foreclosure crisis, her status in relation to the welfare program, or her non-normative career choices.

The veneer of motherhood, its performance, breaks down most often along issues of not only politics, but of race and class. In addition to being caught up in conversations about the welfare and the housing foreclosure crisis, Suleman was often framed through conversations about her ethnicity and national origin. During Suleman's rise to fame, the United States was embroiled in an ongoing war on terrorism articulated primarily by the invasion of Iraq. In her 2011 chapter on the fall of Britney Spears, and the way our popular culture loved hating her in 2007, Fisher argued that we might re-read Britney Spears as a scapegoat for President Bush's failures in the Iraq War. She wrote, "If entertainment news can be understood as functioning as a kind of cultural release valve for the political...how has the media's unprecedented scapegoating of Spears functioned to relieve Bush of political pressure he might otherwise have faced for the Iraq war?" (307). She bolstered this argument with statistics about the current failure of this war, as evidenced by deaths accrued and the waning support of American citizens. In 2009, the discontent with this war was just as, if not more, pervasive. In line with Fisher's argument, Suleman herself may have functioned as a pressure release for not only this war but for the growing economic concerns over the housing foreclosure crisis and the overall depressed economy. Suleman's overextended pregnant body, and her "irresponsible" behavior as a mother, manifested cultural doubts about our country's ability to govern itself and to perform as a model of power and control. Suleman's Iraqi descent made her a particularly vulnerable scapegoat given the xenophobic climate engendered by the war on Iraq and the war on terror, vaguely

focused on Middle Eastern countries and people of Middle Eastern ethnicities. This is an example of how the mother's body becomes a discursive body for complex political narratives.

### **Proper Politicking as Motherhood Labor: *Sarah Palin's Alaska***

By 2010, when *Sarah Palin's Alaska* first aired, TLC's roster of reality TV programming included a majority of shows that focused on the dynamics of large families. Considering that the history of reality TV is often traced back to PBS's landmark 1970s show, *This American Family*, it is no surprise that family drama sells. From 2009 to 2012, TLC featured a slew of family and motherhood-centric reality programming that focused on several different standby reality TV themes: extraordinary circumstances (like the multiple sets of children or the size of families), weight-loss and body makeover, and shocking medical cases.<sup>19</sup>

In 2009 the channel hosted *Jon and Kate Plus Eight* as well as *17 Kids and Counting*, featuring the Duggar family. By 2010 they had added *One Big Happy Family*, *Table for 12*, and *I Didn't Know I was Pregnant*: all shows that present different spin-offs of the family reality TV show. While *One Big Happy Family* focused on the transformation of an obese family struggling to lose weight, *I Didn't Know I was Pregnant* featured mothers that neglected the pregnancy of their own bodies. *Table for 12*, like *Jon and Kate Plus Eight* and the then *18 Kids and Counting*, capitalized on the trend of large families featuring multiple births. In 2011, the channel added the

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<sup>19</sup> A precursor to this type of programming might be the Dionne quintuplets from Canada, who rose to fame in the 1930s or Ricky Leacock's direct cinema documentary *Happy Mother's Day*, which showcases the birth of quintuplets in South Dakota, and their subsequent media exploitation, in the mid-1960s. Of course, both sets of quints were born well before the technology of IVF overshadowed the births of multiples. However, it is an early example of the cultural interest and curiosity in the extraordinariness of the large family and extreme birth situations. The Dionne quintuplets' parents were deemed unfit by the state, and quite quickly, the girls were made wards of the state. A facility called "Quintland" was built to both house the girls and to display them as a tourist attraction. The parents re-won custody when the girls were 9, after the girls had become a landmark tourist attraction, participated in major ad campaigns, and starred in two Hollywood films.

shows *Quints by Surprise*, *Sister Wives*, and *A Conception Story*. *A Conception Story* focused on the trials and tribulations of mothers trying to conceive, *Sister Wives* featured a polygamist family of 17 children, and *Quints by Surprise* focused on a family raising a set of multiples. TLC was not the only channel to capitalize on a new trend of reality TV family and mother-focused shows during this period. MTV aired its ongoing series *Teen Mom*, whose stars often dominate tabloid magazine stories with stories about broken relationships and issues with money. In 2011, Bravo aired *Pregnant in Heels*, which is a show that focuses on a New York City, Upper East Side “maternity concierge” who trains wealthy but unprepared mothers-to-be. In 2011, Lifetime aired *Dance Moms*, which likely rode the trend of the “pageant mom” or “show business mother” that gained new currency with TLC’s 2009 show *Toddlers and Tiaras* and its current spinoff, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Many of these shows tackle larger issues of class (*Teen Mom* and *Pregnant in Heels*) and a sense of neoliberal competition and training of the body (*Dance Moms* and *Toddlers in Tiaras*). They all present fraught and complicated images of mothers as the vehicles for these conversations about the cultural, political, and economic state of the United States.

Situated in this cultural landscape, *Sarah Palin’s Alaska* first aired in 2010 featuring a combination of a show about a large, multi-generational family, and a political figure who had become a national celebrity in the short span between her Vice Presidential nomination and the election of her running mate’s opponent, Barack Obama. The show featured Palin, then Governor of Alaska, in her role as a mother, following her family through various adventures in the Alaskan wilderness.

One might read the opening of the show as a tourism commercial for the state of Alaska, but also as a reiteration of the political values that Palin backed during her Vice Presidential

campaign. The show opens upon varying majestic and sublime long-shots of Alaskan scenery: sometimes we begin with a beautiful golden sunrise over mountains, shots of mountains covered in snow and evergreen trees, or pictures of schools of Alaskan salmon or grizzly bears fighting. As we watch the landscape roll by, we hear Palin say in voiceover, “Alaska. I love this state like I love my family” (“Mama Grizzly”). In this initial phrase, Palin sets us up for how she will swiftly imbricate her devotion to her state with her devotion to her family, suggesting that her ability to care for her state as a Governor is an extension of her ability to perform reproductive labor in caring for her family as a mother.

In the first episode of Season 1, “Mama Grizzly,” Palin opens the show with the same phrase, set against images of Alaskan nature. After the opening scenes, we cut to Palin in a trademark Republican red suit, sitting in an official-looking office. In voiceover she says, “People know me from the political stage or from my book, perhaps. But, I’m the mother of five and it’s important to me that my kids see everything that Alaska has to offer.” We then see various shots of Palin and her family exploring Alaska: fishing, logging, shooting guns, dog-sledding across vast and snowy landscapes, canoeing, and even rock-climbing. As we course through these images, Palin tells us in voiceover, “This summer, we’re setting aside time with family and friends, doing what we love to do. And that’s exploring Alaska. And meet the hardworking Alaskans who call this state their home. I want all Americans to experience the things that make me so proud to be an Alaskan. Alaska, America’s last frontier.” Palin cues us to the goal of the show, which is twofold: to show her and her family experiencing Alaska and to show her interest in and ability to connect with her local constituents. Hannah Hamad notes that “...even as scandal frequently undercuts the reliability of experts, whether in politics, finance, or the markets, reality TV continues to look to the figure of the celebrity lifestyle expert to tutor

citizens in selfhood” (225). This seems particularly apt in Palin’s case: this show serves to further entangle her career as a politician with her career as the leader of a family, providing one clear example of the way that reality TV can become a platform for motherhood and family to serve as a structuring agent for everyday political issues. This show also illuminates how crossing between political and entertainment platforms has become the stalwart of Palin’s career and a way to build her personal brand. As Ouellette notes in her recent article on Palin:

Like other Reality TV stars, Palin trades the "private" performance of self and personal relations for the affective consumer connections that sell commercial television programs, websites, DVDs, and books. Indeed, her political celebrity has no economic value in the formal political system; only in the broader domain of media and consumer culture can its profit-making capacities be realized. (“Branding the Right” 189)

Both her political appearances and her entertainment oriented roles work to mutually support each other by building her media presence and by supplying her with the funding that allows her to do this affective labor.

The reality TV show functions as a star vehicle for Palin and as her moneymaker: she made a reported \$250,000 per episode, but it also gave her the opportunity to diffuse the radical statements and gaffes of her campaign through a more relatable image of her as a mother (“Palin’s Alaska Pay Day”). For example, in one episode, Palin addresses her famous mis-spelling of the word repudiate. In 2010, in the *Abcnews.com* article “Congratulations Sarah Palin: “Refudiate” Named Word of the Year,” Mary Bruce reports on the *New Oxford English Dictionary* naming “refudiate” the “official 2010 word of the year.” Bruce wrote, “Palin’s use of “refudiate,” launched critics into a frenzy when she first posted the made up verb on her Twitter page over the summer.” On an episode of the show, we see Palin’s reaction to this “frenzy.” The shot shows us Palin and her husband Todd in a car on the way to a family outing. We see Palin



as she is flipping through her phone and she comes across a communication about her spelling mis-step. She tells Todd and her daughter the story about how she pressed a wrong button and people are “freaking out.” She makes light of the situation through her body language and tone and then smugly tells her family about the success of her word in Google trends before saying, “Make lemonade out of lemons,” resolving political conflicts and mistakes with her trademark vernacular aphorisms.

Beyond diffusing this situation through tone and body language, she takes the important step of re-contextualizing this situation. Producing immediate and unedited content as a politician is a different beast than doing so as a harried mother. By re-telling this story she performs it through the lens of motherhood, offering her fans and potentially larger audiences a different perspective, one that strategically works in her favor. However, Palin opens up a question that remains unanswered: how does reviewing and revising this mistake as a mother on reality TV change her accountability as a citizen who can competently participate in public discourse and dialogue?

As viewers, we do not know if this reaction is of-the-moment or staged. Regardless, shots like this are edited into the show and serve as Palin’s performative voice responding to what the media has said about her. In addition to this particular political diffusion, we also see Palin consistently joke about the media’s uproar over her statement that she could “see Russia” from her home in Alaska. Again, by re-contextualizing this moment, and repeating it over and over again in her role as an everyday mother, Palin empties the initial political gaffe of its meaning.

*Sarah Palin’s Alaska* entered the televisual landscape of reality TV seamlessly, precisely because it is a media framework that supports governmentality. It is a television show that issues lessons on politics and strongly debated national issues through the anaesthetizing lens of

motherhood and family—topics that are part of the “Culture Wars” that Palin was credited with reintroducing as a politician.

For example, much of the show follows the Palin family as they traverse the state of Alaska, meeting local constituents and partaking in the different leisure and work activities the state offers. These include mining for gold, fishing salmon, logging, practicing shooting, dogsledding, camping, and hiking. While scenes of Palin, and so the Palin family, are highly political, they are, in the show, painted as “leisure,” “naturally American,” and what “normal” Alaskans do. Mining, fishing, logging, and of course oil, were a major part of the conversations about sustainability and environmentalism that posed some of the most vitriolic debates between the Republican and Democratic candidates during the 2008 election. Here, with her family, Palin sheds new light on what these tasks means for native Alaskans. In the same way that she diffuses her political gaffes by tackling them while performing as a mother, and not a politician, Palin diffuses these issues by approaching them as a vacationing Alaskan, rather than as someone who might potentially be rewriting national policy and directing environmental standards. Focused through motherhood, and through television, the drama circulating through these issues is familial rather than political.

In the Season One episode, “Logging,” we see Palin and her family visiting a local logging site. Harvesting forests in Alaska was a major debate in the 2008 elections. In fact, Alaska’s pristine landscape and its value as an untapped resource often served as a symbolic focus for environmental debates across platforms of logging, oil, and fishing. In this episode, Palin and her family are less focused on the politics of the situation and more attuned to the labor of the people who are cutting the logs. They head over for the day to learn from these men and Palin herself picks up the chainsaw to cut down a tree and to try and “rough it” like her

constituents. The narrative drama of this episode takes a complete turn away from the political discourse that normally attends the topic of Alaskan logging. Instead, what we see is a gendered debate about whether or not Palin can hack it with a chainsaw. In the arena of drama on TLC, gender politics trump political debate. The female body, and in this case the mother's body, becomes a discursive landscape upon which political debate re-forms.

In addition to engaging motherhood as a way to restructure the language around political issues and moments, the show also engages motherhood in governmentality. Palin is framed through her motherhood rather than solely through her career. This mediation superimposes her care for her children with her care for her state. By showing America how she properly cares for her family she also shows America how she might properly care for them.

She infuses American politics with a sense of motherliness. This is an example of how a sense of ideal motherhood is utilized as a political agent. The performance of motherhood serves as a mediating force through which to tell narratives about highly discursive subjects. These are often public sphere subjects that exclude the voices of women. But in this moment of reality TV, motherhood's model of relationality, community, and networking becomes a new way for women to enter these debates.

Palin's audience, her networks, and her communities of support were central to the re-formation of Palin's public persona as an active mother rather than an active politician. Earlier in this dissertation I spoke of the way that the rhetorical language of motherhood has come to inform the new digital model of 2.0 social media communication. This is key to the success of a show like this in re-modeling Palin's political veneer. In fact, it is Palin's engagement with her fans and audience, her utilization of a 2.0 model of celebrity, which in many ways defined what was innovative about her political career. In 2010, as Republicans geared up for the 2012

primaries, Shushannah Walshe wrote, “everyone’s ‘friending’ Palin.” Palin notoriously took over her own social media voice, something that celebrities often pay ghostwriters to do, and in doing so, formed and promoted an unprecedented personal bond with her constituents. Walshe continued:

In a short time, she has become a model of how to use social media among politicians. For Jordan Raynor, president of Direct Media Strategies, a Republican online communications consulting firm, who uses Palin as an example to other clients, “She shifted the thinking of politicians in the way they think about media consumption and the way they think about communicating directly with constituents and voters.

Palin’s innovation may have been more in the field of communication than in the field of politics. This particular innovation speaks directly to the type of affective labor of relationship building that is so closely associated with motherliness.

In an article from 2013 titled “Why Sarah Palin Should be a Content Marketing Role Model,” a writer for *Socialmediatoday.com* was impressed, “that even after 4 years without holding or running for office, Palin is still able to make headlines – even just because of a single tweet or Facebook post.” In recommending Palin as a role model for marketing brands in a new era of communication, Amie Marse noted:

While Palin uses social media to endorse candidates or offer political statements, she’s surprisingly personal as well. “Out for a jog in Central Park. Beautiful,” she tweeted one morning. Remember, social media was founded on the premise of being personable and allowing humans to connect with one another. By making your brand more human, you’re making it relatable, developing a deeper bond with existing followers, and playing to the strengths of social media.

What Marse articulates as a model for brand marketing and audience engagement goes beyond Palin. It is a reminder that the foundation of social media is making the political personal.

Beyond an ironic reversal of the slogan of second wave feminism, Palin's personalizing of the political has actually served to raise awareness (even if there is no resolution on the side of liberal politics and regardless of which side of each argument Palin sides with) of the very personal issues of childcare, sexual health and freedom, and developmental disabilities in children. Palin's engagement with social media models the language of personal community building and constructs an outlet for her outlook as a politician.

Palin is just one example of how new social media platforms and an increasingly multi-platform approach for a star brand has fostered the performance of motherhood that increasingly troubles historical divisions between the affective labor in the home and work done outside of the home. In my introduction, I quoted Gosselin as she thanked her fans on the *Rachel Ray Show* for allowing her to pursue a "stay at home career." Like the mommy bloggers that were the focus of chapter 1, women like Palin, Suleman, and Gosselin have staked their careers on performing motherhood across media platforms. Much of their success comes from the way that each of these women has touched upon or articulated cultural issues surrounding contemporary mothers, be it in relation to national political issues, feminism, work and home-life balance, birthing technologies, or the management of large families. Much of the work that they do is affective in nature. It is the labor of maintaining the fan bases and communities that love them or love to hate them. This work occurs across multiple social media platforms and is evidence of how our contemporary media climate sponsors feedback and cross-promotion.

## Television in the 2.0 Era: TLC Cross-Promotion Shows Sarah Palin and Kate Gosselin as Rival Mothers

For channels, a boon of the niche programming that defines the post-network era is the cross-promotion of television shows and characters. Creating blocks of programming to reach similar demographics means that there is opportunity for stars to work together in advertisements or in guest appearances, bridging audiences and driving sales for both parties. TLC took advantage of this opportunity, and in a special crossover between *Sarah Palin's Alaska* and *Kate Plus Eight*, the Gosselins took a trip to Alaska to visit the Palin family. This crossover event aired on *Sarah Palin's Alaska*.<sup>20</sup> Both *Sarah Palin's Alaska* and *Kate Plus Eight* targeted towards the same demographic, women between the ages of 18 and 35.

However, during that time, Palin's show was just taking off with record-breaking numbers of viewers while Gosselin's *Jon and Kate Plus Eight* enterprise was failing after a media frenzy over the Gosselin divorce and negative publicity about Gosselin's competency as a mother. A major difference between Palin and Gosselin is that Palin entered her role as a reality TV mother after already garnering fame at a national level. In contrast, Gosselin became famous because of her performance of motherhood. While Palin's performance of motherhood often served as a corrective for her performance as a politician and as an agent in diffusing political messages through the narrative of motherhood and family, Gosselin's success came in performing as a mother who managed motherhood under extraordinary circumstances, while still remaining relatable to a wide audience of women. As Gosselin's divorce ensued, and her tabloid representation as an actual single and "bad mother" moved further and further away from her performance of motherhood on TV, her popularity began to wane.

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<sup>20</sup> While the Gosselins visited Alaska in a special episode of *Kate Plus Eight*, all of the cross-over occurred on *Sarah Palin's Alaska*.

In this special episode we see Palin and Gosselin positioned as two very different maternal figures. While the narrative of the show supports Palin's resourceful and enthusiastic attitude, it uses Gosselin's failures as a mother as a "teachable moment." In addition to functioning as yet another example of the cultural governance reality TV provides for contemporary motherhood, the show also serves as a system of symbolic reasoning for TLC's dismissal of the Gosselin enterprise. By showing Gosselin's failures alongside Palin's successes, this episode symbolically justifies the negative feedback and publicity that had already marked Gosselin as a bad mother. This example suggests the power of social media in the contemporary era and the important role it plays in these mothers' careers. If the work of motherhood stars in the 2.0 era is the affective labor of maintaining their community and their image, then we see in this episode the way that a failure to do so ultimately colors one's ability to perform as a proper mother and maintain the role of a symbolic mother.

Like Suleman, one might think of Gosselin as an overextended mother. Following the birth of the Gosselin twins, Mady and Cara, the Gosselins conceived and gave birth to sextuplets using fertility treatments (Mundy, "Jon and Kate Plus Health Care"). They were first televised by a special on Discovery Health, which focused on surviving normal life with two sets of multiples.<sup>21</sup> The Discovery Health Media Enterprises released the following statement in 2010:

A follow-up series to the Discovery Health original specials SURVIVING TWINS & SEXTUPLETS and SEXTUPLETS AND TWINS: ONE YEAR LATER, JON & KATE PLUS 8 sheds light on different aspects of family life, from how to give each child as much individual attention as possible to how to create family traditions that will last a lifetime...Watching Kate manage her super-sized household will provide inspiration for all the other CFOs [(Chief Family Officers who run the household full-time)] dealing with the same family issues-albeit on a slightly different scale. ("The Gosselins Return to Discovery Health with JON & KATE PLUS 8 - a New Series Celebrating Life with Two Sets of Multiples")

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<sup>21</sup> TLC is part of the Discovery company.

From the beginning, this show was pitched as one that would not only showcase this family, but would use it as an example for how people might be “inspired” to manage their own unruly homes. Perhaps the operating ethos for this logic might be that if Gosselin could be a CFO for eight children under the age of seven, then other mothers could too. This ethos would have capitalized on a framework of reality TV that sponsors competition and training.

Even in its promotional material, Gosselin’s work as a mother was highlighted as such. Gosselin’s self-made position of CFO provokes the qualification of women’s work in the home, and the affective labor of caring, as less-than the work someone might do for a large company. Gosselin’s moniker is reminiscent of the idea of being the CEO of your family, a popular phrase for SAHMs. This type of language refigures motherhood labor as company management, suggesting the way that affective labor morphs when it moves from inside the home to the corporate world. Gosselin’s work as a mother extended well beyond the home, as she and Jon began to manage their identities as performers and as role models for American parents dealing with large family situations.

*Jon and Kate Plus Eight* experienced tremendous success until the highly publicized dissolution of the Gosselin’s marriage in 2009. Following this, the show was re-titled *Kate Plus Eight*. While neither Kate, nor Jon, nor the children participate frequently in reality TV specials, the family continues to be under the gaze of public media. In August of 2013, Gosselin and the children were on the cover of *People* magazine discussing their post-reality TV lives in a title article called, “Life After Reality TV: No Help, No Man, No Big Paycheck.”





**Illustration 2.4** The Gosselin family on the cover of *People* magazine

While the media maelstrom has died down, the Gosselin family reached the nadir of this onslaught in 2010, following the divorce, uncertainty about the Gosselins’ stability as parents, and uncertainty about the future of a family show that then featured a single-mother family. It was in this climate that *Kate Plus Eight* crossed paths with *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, as the former Alaskan Governor promoted family values and a return to nature, despite her family’s equal prevalence in the media.

In the episode “Alaskan Hospitality,” the Gosselin family visits the Palin brood while purportedly already visiting Alaska on their own. Gosselin and Palin at first find moments of overlap when they commiserate over the issue of paparazzi photographing their families. In a confessional moment Kate notes, “There’s not a whole lot of people that I run into that can understand the scrutiny, the media, and beyond.” However, as the storyline unfolds, and we follow the families on a camping trip in a national park, their similarities quickly dissipate.

As the Palins arrive first to set up the campsite, we hear Palin in voiceover, “I’m thankful that we have the family being able to enjoy the great outdoors together despite the rain...It’s beautiful out here! This is amazing! You know we are in the middle of nowhere but we get to focus on family and kind of...,” at this point in Sarah’s voiceover, which juxtaposed shots of nature and of the family working together, the camera shifts to a confessional shot of Sarah, highlighting the personal conviction behind the rest of her monologue: “...get back to some roots and back to things that are traditional for us that mean a lot.” Camping in nature is both family time and time to disconnect from the larger media structures, like the paparazzi discussed in the beginning of this episode, which might disrupt the normalcy and traditional values of the family.

While Palin welcomes the Gosselin family, she and her family continue to productively set up the campsite with tents and food. They welcome the Gosselins as part of these activities, when Palin’s father teaches them impromptu science lessons about salmon jaws, her brother gives them a lesson about Alaskan geography by making a map out of stones, and her husband Todd teaches them how to fish. It is notable that in this part of the narrative, men step in to care for the children, suggesting the importance of a male figure that is now noticeably lacking in *Kate Plus Eight*. What the viewer begins to see edited into these familial scenes are shots of Gosselin underneath a tent complaining about various elements of the trip. For example, she says, “I can honestly say I have never camped for real. I wish it wasn’t so cold and rainy,” “Yes I’ve been bitten about 200 times already. It’s horrible,” and “Sorry I’m miserable, but I mean, somebody’s gotta be.” The tension between the pleasure Palin takes in this family camping trip and the obvious discomfort of Gosselin reaches its apex when Gosselin has a breakdown over feeding her children. She is visibly distressed and seems on the verge of tears when she says:

Huhhh we are not camping people. I'll scream it from mountaintops. Huhhh (sniffle and grumble) this is just ridiculous. Why would you pretend to be homeless? I don't get it! I just don't get the concept. There's no paper towels! Like how do you make sandwiches for eight kids on your arm? Guhhh I don't see a table, I don't see utensils, I don't see hand-cleansing materials! Huhhhh this is not ideal conditions. I am freezing to the bone, I have nineteen layers on, my hands are freez- frigid. I held it together, as long as I could, and I'm done now. (Whimpering) I'm hungry! ("Alaskan Hospitality")

During this monologue, the camera cuts to Todd grimacing at Gosselin, as if to suggest how distasteful her outburst is to another man. As she whimpers that she is hungry, she slams down a sandwich and the camera cuts to Palin who is also grimacing and rolling her eyes at Gosselin. Meanwhile, aside from Todd and Palin's disdainful looks and the shots of Gosselin stomping around in her tent during this voiceover, we cut back and forth between other cast members smiling, laughing, and playfully running through the campsite, which works effectively to highlight Gosselin's status as an outsider and the only camper acting like a diva.

In a confessional moment, Palin counters, "Kate, she's never felt more out of her element than out there camping. But, you know deep inside I think, 'Come on...it wasn't that bad! Jeez, we had a tent over our head!'" As if to say, come on Kate, tough it out. Gosselin then asks the kids if they want to stay and when they say that they do, she says "Ok, goodbye! You're now a Palin and not a Gosselin. We're deciding who's a Palin and who's a Gosselin." At this, the kids reluctantly leave with their mother.

This extended exchange between Gosselin and Palin does not occur in dialogue but is carefully crafted through sharp visual edits that suggest that an expression or an eye roll is in response to a statement, voiceover, and key moments of confessional interludes inserted to heighten drama. What this "conversation" effectively achieves is a rivalry between the two mothers that showcases Palin as down to earth and Gosselin as a diva.

This portrayal of Gosselin, which was most exploited through what seems like countless tabloid articles of this time period, constructed her as the mother “in the wrong” and Palin as the mother “in the right.” While the episode demonstrated Palin’s relate-ability as a down to earth mom, the cross-promotion seemed to provide TLC’s approval of Gosselin’s rebranding as an unfit mother rather than as a CFO taking charge of her family. The *Kate Plus Eight* show slipped somewhat quietly into its end, with Gosselin herself ratcheting negatively publicized performances on a host of secondary-celebrity TV shows like *Dancing with the Stars*.<sup>22</sup> While the portrayal and competition of motherhood in this episode warrants discussion, what is most striking is the way that we see feedback from infotainment, fan bases, and the media, entering the narrative arc and the performative moments of a television show. The 2.0 era is marked by a convergence culture where star discourse moves more and more fluidly between sources. Both sanctioned and unsanctioned voices contribute to a star’s identity, calling into question how a star might regulate her performative identity. If the 2.0 era demands an affective labor of managing relationships, communities, and virtual networks between the star and her fans, then we see the equivocation of a failure to mother as a failure to manage these, and *vice versa*. While this failure to manage this type of discursive feedback in this case meant that Gosselin began to fail as a television mother, what we see in this era is the way that popular versions of mothers, like Palin, Drummond, and Armstrong, also depend on convergent media to build a career based on the performance of motherhood. In the following chapter, I consider the way that less convergent media, like traditional Hollywood films, have become immobilized texts for performances of contemporary motherhood.

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<sup>22</sup> At the time of writing this dissertation, *Kate Plus Eight* is slated to return, after a multi-season hiatus, for a 2-part special on TLC.

### **Chapter 3: Motherhood 2.0 in Popular Contemporary Cinema: Failures in Digital Form**

In the 2.0 era, mothers have increasingly performed, with great success, across domesticated interactive media. At the same time, films about motherhood have repeatedly failed to reach a large market and serve as a performative platform. Star vehicle films that feature mother characters dealing with similar issues to those dealt with in earlier chapters: IVF technologies, managing work/life balance, single mothers, and surrogate motherhood, have in this era, failed as a mediating voice for these types of conversations whereas reality TV and the blogosphere have seen major cultural and economic breakthroughs as platforms that champion these performances.

This is not to say that films have never served as the popular culture platform for addressing these issues, but in this media era, where convergence culture and multi-platform viewing have become the norm, conversations about a complicated contemporary mother have found a new home in interactive, domestic media platforms like television and the blogosphere. Representations of motherhood delivered through these technologies entertain an intimacy and engage community in new and different ways as compared to popular Hollywood films. While the production and distribution of film is embedded in a history of public-ness, in which a film is consumed in a public venue among the anonymity of a large audience, new platforms inherent in Internet, television, and smartphone screens prompt intimacy and interactivity that offer new ground for modes of representation as well as progressive possibilities for new modes of consumption and engagement. In contrast to the history of film, television's history accounts for both its public and private consumption, offering insights into the way that the domesticated screen invites new relationships between media and consumer (McCarthy; Spigel).

In this chapter, I point to the way that film's historical modes of consumption as well as its formal histories of representation limit its ability to effectively tell new stories about motherhood.

Scholars of film history have argued that historically in romance films, marriage is the calling card for a film's narrative closure. Screwball comedies end at marriage or re-marriage, perhaps with motherhood on the horizon. Romantic comedies build upon the groundwork of screwball comedies, introducing strong women characters who, however, remain contained within narrative structures and genre motifs that are delimited by the harbinger of marriage or remarriage.

In and around 2010, several films which featured A-list celebrities, and might be considered star-vehicle films, were devoted exclusively to stories about the trials of motherhood, as told by female characters. These films addressed work/life balance, IVF technologies and implantation procedures, and the cultural throes of singledom in the lives of women over 30. All of these narratives have appeared earlier in this dissertation through the voice of Armstrong on *Dooce.com*, Drummond on *Thepioneerwoman.com*, the Octomom, and Gosselin of *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*. However, part of the extraordinariness of these seemingly ordinary stories was the way that these women were captivating American attention and dollars. Whereas these women succeeded as entrepreneurs, managing a new type of "stay at home career" through domestic performance, film stars telling the same stories have consistently proven unsuccessful. Mommy bloggers and mothers who become popular through reality TV and Internet performances mobilize a domestic position: their performances are often consumed privately within the home of their viewers whereas film stars maintain a status of "public" figures.

Considering early film scholarship on screwball comedies and romantic comedies, which suggest that narrative structures concerning domestic elements such as marriage serve as closure for a film even without the promise of marital success, I consider the way stories of progressive motherhood are no longer sustained by these types of stories and formats. Unlike interactive media, which continue to become an expanding platform for narratives about and performances of motherhood, the more traditional format of film, as well as the type of viewership involved, are no longer viable as a vehicle for these voices and stories. If the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s revealed marriage as a seal for narrative closure, what we see now is the inability of films to engage in discourses of motherhood that move beyond a model of retreatism popular in this postfeminist era. For example, as Pamela Thoma notes, “recession-era Hollywood draws on the postfeminist archetype of the conflicted working woman and revives psychological retreatism in narratives that rearticulate career ambition to bourgeois domesticity and a traditionalist gender division of labor” (119). However, as Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker point out in their introduction to *Gendering the Recession*, “Female domesticity is attributed a more functionalist character in digital domains such as the...growing Pioneer Woman franchise... indicative of the repositioning of the retreatist woman in a recession context of pragmatism and functionality” (7). While retreatist narratives of motherhood in film reveal mothers cutting back on hours at work to raise families, and, significantly, retreating from active positions of feminism by alienating them from the protagonist mother, domesticated and interactive media frame the retreatism of the postfeminist era in a new way. While Drummond’s character suggests the retreatism of a stay at home mom, I argue, in agreement with Negra and Tasker, that Drummond’s retreatism is actually in service of a new model of functionality. If Drummond retreated from a professional career, the effect has been her new ability to reformulate models of

women's work with a stay at home career, a progressive iteration of female labor. As a counterpoint, at the end of the chapter, I will look at a pregnancy comedy that breaks out of the failures of the genre and might offer a new voice for the medium through its star, Tina Fey, who mobilizes this contemporary era's media-convergence by moving across platforms and engaging with interactive modes of address.

### **Domesticity as Narrative Structure in Hollywood Cinema: Marriage, Remarriage, and Motherhood**

In his 1981 book *The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Stanley Cavell considers the comedies of "re-marriage" that emerge during the 1930s, coincident with the advent of Talkies, in which cinematic technology ushers in the voices of its long-silent characters and stars. Cavell suggests several reasons for the theme of re-marriage in this era, most notably that it is a cultural and filmic response to the state of marriage in America and the "new consciousness" of women that unfolds as their voices are heard through cinema. He claims that, "this phase of the history of cinema is bound up with a phase in the history of the consciousness of women" (16).

While Cavell proceeds to explore this idea of female consciousness through a philosophical query that ultimately leaves his idea of "female consciousness" undefined, he suggests that new forms of technology might articulate new waves of thought and new types of voices. I align more with Lisa Gitelman's claim that "media represent and delimit representing, so that new media provide new sites for the ongoing and vernacular experience of representation as such" (4). In this particular chapter, I consider how film, in opposition to newer and more interactive media discussed in earlier chapters, limits some of the new possibilities for



representations of motherhood. As Cavell moves through his own argument for a new female consciousness, he notes that many of the female film stars of this era (1930s- 1940s) were, in fact, in their 30s, and potentially primed to play characters in between loves or marriages. If the films of this era, and their female characters, reveal for Cavell new forms of consciousness, then he positions them as having the ability to convey information about the state of marriage and female singledom.

In response to this book, David Shumway notes in his article “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage” that, “Where Cavell goes wrong—and it is hardly a peripheral place—is his position that the screwball comedies he discusses succeed in enlightening us about marriage itself. My argument is that they do just the opposite: they mystify marriage by portraying it as the goal—but not the end—of romance” (7). Marriage, a teleological pull of the romcom, is actually always just out of the reach. It is the goal that we, the audience, imagine at the close of the film. Shumway notes:

The specific illusion that the screwball comedy constructs is that one can have both complete desire and complete satisfaction, and that the name for this state of affairs is marriage. But the other side of the romantic economy is that satisfaction is the death of desire... Marriage must be the death of romance between the members of the couple, who, if they are to continue to participate in romance, must find other partners. Hence, for the project of the screwball comedy to work, romance must occur outside of marriage and marriage must be the end of the movie. (11)

While both Shumway and Cavell draw different meanings from the way that marriage functions within the screwball comedy, both scholars point to the way that it serves as an end goal for the film itself. Even, if in Shumway’s words, marriage is ultimately mystified and beyond the narrative scope of the film, it is the plot point that continues to advance the film’s narrative; it is the drive towards coupling off. Screwball comedies and the romantic comedies

that emerge in later decades often feature single women and single men as part of this equation. In her 2012 book *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down: Images of Pregnancy in Hollywood Films*, Kelly Oliver writes, “From the earliest romantic comedies in Hollywood through contemporary romcoms, the standard formula for the genre remains the same: boy meets girl (or now girl meets boy), tensions run high, opposites attract, and sparks fly, until through some type of transformation, the two individuals become properly coupled” (56). Oliver relies on a reading of the genre’s history made by Tamar Jeffries McDonald in her 2007 book *Romantic comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. In this text McDonald “traces the evolution of the genre through four main periods: screwball comedies, the sex comedy, the radical romantic comedy, and the neo-traditional romantic comedy” (Oliver quoting McDonald 60). What Oliver focuses on, is the way that contemporary romantic comedies, like screwball comedies, invoke a metaphoric “vehicle” which brings about romance, and like sex comedies, involves a series of playful mishaps and banter between the female and male protagonists that ultimately provides the sexual tension that in the end makes them inseparable and passionate about their union. Unlike the romcoms of the past, Oliver introduces a new term that, I agree, marks the period of Hollywood cinema about which I write: the momcom. In the momcom, “pregnant bodies have become the media for this [romantic] transformation and also the source of romance and comedy” (56). She continues, “In this new subgenre, both the female and male characters are transformed into suitable romantic partners through the process of pregnancy. The physical transformations in the woman’s pregnant body represent emotional and character transformations in both male and female characters” (56). And later she further articulates that, “pregnancy becomes the vehicle through which romance, love, and marriage are delivered” (78). However, whereas Oliver points to the generation of momcoms that take pregnancy and motherhood as both the subject of the romantic

comedy and the actual vehicle of romance, Rowe claims that romantic comedies traditionally elide the mother and sever the mother-child relationship. Rowe writes,

...for if romantic comedy maims the father, it kills the mother. Romantic comedy allows its heroine to participate in its utopian, symbolic rebirth only by abdicating her literal connections with maternity—her bond to her mother and eventually to her own daughters...Noting that the maternal missing from romantic comedy surfaces in melodrama, Stanley Cavell asks: “What is it that makes the absence of the mother a comedy, and her presence a melodrama? (*The Unruly Woman* 111)

While I will return to both Rowe’s idea of the contemporary generic relationship between melodrama and romantic comedy, using it to bolster my own study of the failures and success of films that address motherhood, first it is important to convey how Rowe’s theories of romantic comedy might be used to understand how the momcoms Oliver points to might contain the seeds of transgressive female characters.

In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter* Rowe “investigates the power of female grotesques and female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place” (3). Rowe’s unruly woman is one who is closest to the grotesque, to the liminal space between acceptable and unacceptable. As I mentioned in regard to the grotesque bellies of over-extended mothers in chapter 2, the pregnant body is a classic example of a body between the normal and the abnormal, the acceptable and the abject (Grosz; Kristeva). While Rowe specifically addresses the single woman of these movies, noting the way that the genre of the romantic comedy may offer the possibility of emancipation from patriarchal structures through the act of female laughter and transgression, she also claims that in order for the romantic comedy to succeed, there must be a happy ending, which in this case entails the coupling off of the woman with the man, necessitating that she sever any relationship she maintains with her mother. The female protagonist of the romantic comedy must exist in a

relationship vacuum in order for her to successfully enter the romantic relationship that drives the story of the film. For Rowe, the genre of romantic comedy empowers the female laughter that is a stand-in for female agency, but it is one that calls for the female to abstain from motherhood.<sup>23</sup>

Rowe's unruly women are those that defy traditional roles of motherhood, pregnancy, and femininity. The women I identify as unruly are perhaps more complex. Their bodies are the leaky, unruly, bodies of pregnancy, they are the liminal and grotesque spaces Rowe describes. However, they are unruly precisely because they desire to be mothers. The women of Oliver's so-called momcoms are unruly in their initial choices to be mothers who buck the traditional narrative of marriage prior to pregnancy, however, they are re-incorporated into narratives of traditional romantic comedy by the end of the film when they find their man, and as I will show, are also reincorporated into narratives that distance them from emancipated images of women.

They are unruly in that they are humorous, and that humor extends from their bodies. However, one must question whether in these cases their unruly humor is either empowering or transgressive of generic, societal, and symbolic systems that are still in place both for women and for motherhood. Are there opportunities for transgression in films like Jennifer Lopez's film *The Back-Up Plan* (2010), Jennifer Aniston's film *The Switch* (2010), and Fey and Amy Poehler's film *Baby Mama* (2008)? These are all films that feature highly successful career women in the recession era who turn from their careers to their families. Negra and Tasker claim that "...the recession era chick-flick, often considered a throwaway genre, urges women to accommodate their wage labor to domestic and emotional labor in order to mitigate the economic

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<sup>23</sup> As mentioned in earlier chapters, Kathleen Karlyn Rowe continues to consider the role of motherhood within the context of unruliness in her book *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*. While this second book is integral to my work on this topic, in this chapter, it is specifically Rowe's theories on romantic comedy and melodrama that are most *apropos* to my argument.

crisis” (7). In the midst of an economic crisis we find momcoms offering narratives of retreatism for a specific group of high-earning women. This message is most evident in these films’ narratives but it is also complexly woven into the format of contemporary Hollywood cinema, an industry in which men are the primary producers of content and one that targets different audiences than mommy blogs and reality TV. For example, the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film reports that, “Women comprised 16% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors working on the top 250 (domestic) grossing films of 2013” (“The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2013”). When it comes to characters’ agency within popular cinema, Cara Buckley reports, “Women accounted for less than a third of all speaking roles in the year’s 100 top-grossing domestic films. And just 15 percent of those films had women in leading roles.” While, according to Nielsen, “The demographic makeup of the moviegoing audience has remained relatively consistent over the last couple of years,” which is split evenly between male and female movie-goers, “...the proportion of younger moviegoers (12-24) and oldest moviegoers (65-74) has grown gradually at the expense of middle-aged moviegoers (25-54)” (“Popcorn People: Profiles of the U.S. Moviegoer Audience”). This is quite different than the demographics and content of mommy blogs and reality TV in which the 25-54 demographic is only growing. Furthermore, both mommy blogs and reality TV feature more female leads and sponsor more female producers. With highly charged representations of mothers circulating across various media platforms, it is imperative to note how they are linked to production and to consumption.

In contrast to these three romantic comedies, I also look to two of the least successful, in terms of overall gross profit and audience reach, films about motherhood which qualify as

melodrama rather than romantic comedy: Uma Thurman's *Motherhood* (2009) and Sarah Jessica Parker's *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011). In line with Rowe, I structure this study as a comparison between motherhood melodramas and romantic comedies. Rowe writes,

Because genres exist not as discrete formal categories but in relation to each other and to the social formations that produce them, my discussion of romantic comedy cannot take place without considering melodrama as well. The two forms are linked by common ideologies about femininity and the limited plots they allow for narrative representations of female desire. (96)

Part of why Rowe makes this comparison is to show that while “melodrama explores the victimization of the desiring woman, who triumphs mainly in her suffering, ...it remains a potent means of curbing the feminist potential of the unruly woman” (96). On the other hand, romantic comedy allows women to be more desirous, active agents, opening up space for a potential female resistance.

I question whether moments of transgression, as Rowe suggests, are now more available in different platforms like television and interactive media than in the genre of romantic comedy. Are romantic comedies and genres of Hollywood cinema too codified by traditional modes of narrative and production to offer us the types of stories about motherhood that are both transgressive and successful at reaching an audience?

### **Metaphors of Motherhood in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema**

In the 2010 momcom, *The Back-Up Plan*, Lopez stars as a 30-something successful, corporate business woman turned small-business owner. We know that before being a small-business owner, Lopez's character Zoe left a successful job where she was able to make and save money to keep her living self-sufficiently enough to start a small business that would be more

personally fulfilling, and plan for a baby as a single mother. After adopting a sick puppy from a puppy mill, Lopez decided to open the small dog shop, Hudson Mutts, which is central to framing her character as one who is primed for the caring, affective labor of motherhood despite her status as a single woman. The opening of this film is particularly articulate in animating the way that motherhood has leaked into culturally discursive conversations about technology, media, and gender politics and economics. Zoe's new career is framed as a choice that brings her closer to self-fulfillment but is one contextualized within codes of affective labor and a retreat from the corporate world, activating the retreatist narrative that "rearticulate[s] career ambition to bourgeois domesticity and a traditionalist gender division of labor," which Thoma claims is how "recession-era Hollywood" images the postfeminist "working woman" (119). Thoma continues, "Further, the racialized gender division of labor is nearly invisible in these films, which is in keeping with the postfeminist disregard for social inequities and hierarchies among women that would otherwise reveal social constraints on individual choice" (119). While Lopez is a Latina star, there are no markers of racial or ethnic identity in Zoe's character, aside from her body, which I turn to later in this chapter. Isabel Molina-Guzmán writes,

...representations of Latinas within mainstream media serve the ideological interest of a neoliberal state that economically benefits from the feminization of labor and transnational migration even as it erases that labor from popular fictional narratives. Unlike the many Latina immigrants that work in the domestic service industry, Latinas in the popular media function as glamorous and commodifiable racially ambiguous and hypersexualized ethnic women. (65)

Zoe, a "glamorous" and also a "racially ambiguous" character is a far cry from one of Lopez's first early film career roles in 1997, Selena Quintanilla, in the biopic of the eponymous singer. Zoe's lack of ethnic and racial markers taps into what Thoma identifies as "...the postfeminist fixation on heterosexual white women" (112). As Mary Beltrán notes in her book *Latino/a Stars*

*in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom*, "...Lopez's introduction to mainstream audiences in the late 1990s in particular demonstrates an unchanging paradigm of racialization through body-focused discourses that have long been associated with Hollywood Latinidad" (152). However, while Lopez and the media have accentuated her and their pleasure in her body, her role choices have complicated her presentation as a racialized Latina body. Beltrán writes that, "...Lopez's publicity has been joined in recent years by new promotional approaches that foreground class privilege as a mediating element..." (152). This complex repositioning of Lopez poses an interesting addition to Molina-Guzmán's assessment of recession era portrayals of ethnicity which feature glamorous, racially ambiguous, overtly sexual Latina characters.

The opening credits of the film feature animated illustrations of a girl walking through New York City. We know it to be New York City from the architectural and cultural icons that we see. We also know certain things about the girl from the drawing style that the design company Shine decided to use. The drawing features elongated curvy lines reminiscent of fashion sketches and it seems to match the fun freehand script created for the film. The girl featured in the animation, as a result, appears thin, stylish, and modern; capitalizing on one of the many issues Oliver notes with contemporary filmic representations of motherhood when she asks, "In just a couple of decades, how did we go from the abject pregnancy to pregnant glam, from pregnancy as shameful to pregnancy as sexy?" (2). Whereas pregnancy had been hidden from the screen during former Hollywood codes of censorship, it now seems normal to see pregnant bodies on screen. While the caricature of Lopez is not yet pregnant, the pregnancy bump is transferred to the caricature's exaggerated behind. It serves as a reminder of both the film's focus on the body of motherhood as well as on the body of the star of this star-vehicle



film. Lopez, from the very beginning of her career, has been known for her captivating rear-end, which not only started the trend of surgical buttocks implants, but continues to feature prominently within the narrative of this film as well as the title (“Jennifer Lopez’s Butt: Star’s Behind Takes a Backseat,” “Biggest Celebrity Bootilicious Butts in Hollywood,” and “Bringing up the Rear”).



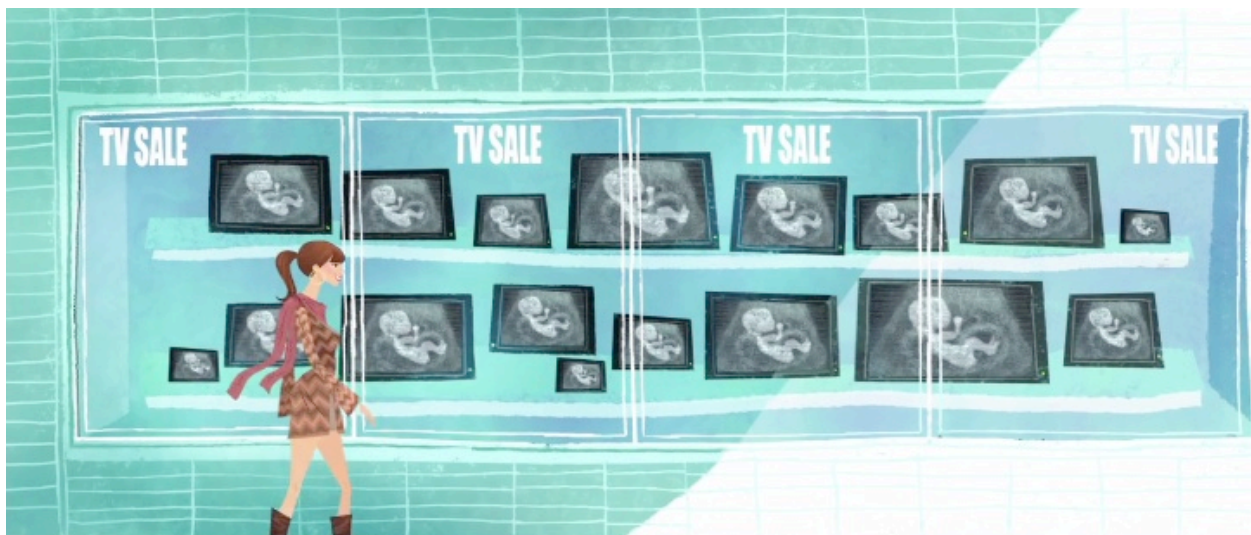
**Illustration 3.1** Title sequence image from *The Back-Up Plan*, from *Watchthetitles.com*

As this caricature walks through the city she sees signs of a baby “implanted” within the very technological architecture of the city. First, the “walk sign,” that signals she can cross the street, is an image of a baby crawling.



**Illustration 3.2** Title sequence image from *The Back-Up Plan*, from *Watchthetitles.com*

Next, televisions on sale in a window are all transformed into ultrasound monitors showing a well-developed fetus.



**Illustration 3.3** Title sequence image from *The Back-Up Plan*, from *Watchthetitles.com*

In these two vignettes, we start to see how the idea of a baby has infused the technological and media landscape of the city. The baby is not only a stand in for the pared down symbol of “human” at the crosswalk, but its pre-birth sonogram replaces any media or news entertainment that might generally occupy televisual space. Just as the baby is technologically implanted into these fantastical, fun, and playful scenes, we will later see how the science and technology of implantation is consistently used, but downplayed, made comical, and de-complicated in romantic comedies about women trying to get pregnant. The opening animation of this film serves as a structuring metaphor for the overarching narrative of “implanting a baby” but it also reminds us that how these scenes are formally portrayed goes a long way in our cultural understanding of the trials and tribulations of, now increasingly common, Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs).

We also see yellow taxis that have become giant, rolling, yellow ducky bath toys; a hotdog vendor is cooking on a grill made out of a baby carriage; and a magazine rack where every magazine expresses an image and headline concerning babies and motherhood. Whereas another woman might be overwhelmed or inundated by the seeming tricks of her mind, Lopez’s character smiles with contentment when, according to the design firm’s director, “New York icons graphically morph into baby iconography” (Michael Riley, ed. Remco Vlaanderen).

When Lopez’s caricature gets on the subway, she is followed by a group of men. When she stops short at the base of the station’s stairs, they fall in domino-effect behind her, pointing to her obliviousness to their presence as well as their inability to break into her world, and most importantly, function properly in her presence. This detail sets us up for a romantic comedy narrative that will eventually reconcile Lopez’s character’s relationship with men when one

finally proves worthy of being the father to her children, and in doing so, a proper partner for her.

Finally, when Lopez's character emerges from the subway, she enters Times Square, transformed in all its lights and gaudiness into an oversized baby's toy pile.



**Illustration 3.4** Title sequence image from *The Back-Up Plan*, from *Watchthetitles.com*

The buildings are made of alphabet blocks and signs feature kids' drawings, pictures of baby accessories, a sign that says "LIVE!," and a sign that says "DADDY," as if the city itself has become a vision-board for Lopez's character, where she projects her hopes and dreams for a baby and for a father for this child-to-be.

While in *The Back-Up Plan* we see metaphors for implantation, in other momcoms, we find babies and fertility expressed through economic metaphors that fall in line with neoliberal ethics that structure representations of motherhood on reality TV.

In an opening scene of the 2010 momcom *The Switch*, Aniston's character Cassie begins to explain to her friend Wally (played by Jason Bateman) how her fertility is in a downward spiral. Knowing that Wally is an equities analyst, Cassie asks him to explain the meaning of a graph from *The New York Times* business section of a rising economic market. When he does, Cassie turns the graph on its side to express the dwindling opportunities of her fertility, a moment where a woman's viability in motherhood success is expressly linked to economic success.



**Illustration 3.5** In *The Switch*, Aniston's character, Cassie, relates her opportunities for pregnancy to a failing economic market, from *Screencrave.com*

By framing her fertility in this economic image, Cassie is able to explain her predicament to her friend. Cassie says: "I'm tired of thinking how this is supposed to go. I'm ready to do it now. Life is in session." This presents Cassie taking charge of her life, as an independent and completely self-reliant woman. Aligning herself with values of self-responsibility, reliance, and independence, she decides to intervene into her own "failing market" to buy her way to pregnancy through science. Cassie's pregnancy is no longer about honoring a romantic myth of a

“naturalized” cycle of coupling off, falling in love, getting married, and then having a baby. In a recession era in which there is a “...conversation circulating in female popular culture, which laments the loss of marriageable men for ambitious women who want husbands,” Cassie points out the inverse relationship between a woman’s economic success and her success in pregnancy (Leonard 46).

When Wally tells her that her plan isn’t “natural,” Cassie exclaims her frustration with this mythology when she says “This wasn’t my plan!”. What she might have said, is that this isn’t the plan that’s often presented to women through idealized classical Hollywood cinema and popular Hollywood cinema today, but that it is the plan for the modern woman who, armed with economic success, can take matters into her own hands. Cassie takes responsibility for herself and for her “motherhood drive” by breaching the normative order of love, marriage, and pregnancy. Like *The Switch*, *The Back-Up Plan*’s tagline is, “Fall in Love\*. Get Married. Have a Baby. \*Not necessarily in that order.”

Cassie continues, “I want to have a kid and I’m in the market for some semen,” which closes the conversation with her friend. As soon as Cassie counters Wally’s concerns about the “naturalness” of her choices, Cassie retorts by acknowledging that in today’s market, semen, and also the real estate of the womb in surrogacy, have become exchangeable commodities.

What we see in Wally’s concern over Cassie’s departure from the “natural order” is perhaps a male fear over the commodification of his body. While women have historically been sanctioned as exchangeable property through the institution of marriage, which trades women from father to spouse, men have most often acted as the more powerful agents in this equation. As women step outside of this social order, like Cassie, we see the commodification and marketability of men in a more pronounced and socially acceptable way. In bucking the

normative system, Cassie pinpoints a deep-seated fear, beyond that men might become unneeded sexually as ARTs become more technologically advanced, men have now been abstracted and objectified into servicing parts.

*Baby Mama* (2008) invokes similar metaphors and relays the same cultural anxieties. It opens with a voiceover monologue by Fey who plays the character Kate. She says, “Is it fair that to be the youngest VP in my company I will be the oldest mom at preschool? Not really. But that’s part of the deal. I made a choice. Some women got pregnant, I got promotions. And I still aspire to meet someone and fall in love and get married, but that is a very high-risk scenario and I want a baby now. I’m 37.” Like Cassie, Kate has done the math. Kate is a successful corporate business woman (like Lopez’s character, Zoe, prior to the start of the film narrative) and frames her odds at pregnancy within financial rhetoric: it is a high-risk situation. And while Kate hopes for the mythology of romantic love to still come and find her, she prepares to take matters into her own hands. Unlike Cassie, who explains this to her best friend, what we see at the end of Kate’s monologue is that she has just said all of this on a first date. Kate is at the butt of the joke when her date ditches her. While he doesn’t go so far as to say that her feelings are “unnatural,” he fearfully flees her presence, overwhelmed by a woman who perhaps over shares or perhaps plans to make him sexually obsolete. While Kate’s date leaves her in this opening scene, what we see by the end of the film is, as Suzanne Leonard notes, “...though it may initially look like the family serves as the male’s punishment, it is, in fact, decisively presented as his reward. With their initial polymorphous inclinations neutered and subdued, confirmed bachelors and wannabe wayward husbands capitulate to convention, learning, predictably, either how good they will have it when they marry, or, If they are married, how good they have had it all along” (46).

Like Lopez's caricature, Kate sees "baby" wherever she goes. Her eyes zoom to them in public places, and when she is making a boardroom presentation to a table of male colleagues, they all transform into gurgling babies. Kate begins her pregnancy journey by visiting a sperm bank. When Kate makes it to the fertility clinic we again see how the process of ARTs suggests an abstraction of men that is traditionally reserved for women. Kate watches a monitor flash with disembodied heads of potential sperm donors. When a baby picture of one donor melds with her own baby picture to form the perfect baby, she knows that he is the one. This perfect baby, of course, is the Gerber Baby, our American idealized stand-in for the cuteness of childhood.

While these films raise the same discursive issues as those discussed in chapters 1 and 2: idealized motherhood, IVF and assistive reproductive technologies, and the contemporary (and) economic prospects of motherhood, none of these films were major successes for their starring actresses except, perhaps, *Baby Mama*, which I will return to later in the epilogue. While these films do an adequate job of raising issues of contemporary motherhood, they fail to effectively communicate these issues by not reaching the audience size expected of films with large budgets and A-list celebrities. Before elaborating on the case of the above-mentioned momcoms, I turn to two extraordinarily unsuccessful movies (both in their lack of financial success and their ultimate inability to advocate for progressive representations of motherhood) about motherhood that do an excellent job of pointing to women's issues but were ultimately failures in theaters.

### **Failed Films of Motherhood: Melodrama versus the Romcom**

In the introduction to this chapter I presented Rowe's idea that in the context of films about women, melodrama and romantic comedies must always be discussed in tandem. This is



because, as Rowe claims, "...melodrama and comedy—in particular, romantic comedy—are linked by common ideologies that limit the plots available for narrative representations of female desire and the proximity of these forms offers much fruitful ground for feminist cultural production" (*The Unruly Woman* 14). While narratives of motherhood may be a common topic within the genre of melodrama, they offer up a complex site of study. Christine Gledhill writes, "The figure of woman, which has served so long as a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, is also a generator of female discourses drawn from the social realities of women's lives—discourses which negotiate a space within and sometimes resist patriarchal domination" (37). Melodrama, when seen as "woman's film" operates with the contradiction of presenting representations of women that generate discourses about women's issues despite their characters' representations through formal and narrative codes of patriarchy. Linda Williams builds upon this by noting that these female characters of melodrama not only generate discourses related to women's issues, but they do so through a genre of "woman's film" whose reception invites a specific mode of female viewing. It is precisely the mode of viewing that invites potential for resistance. Williams writes, "...that these melodramas also have reading positions structured into their texts that demand a female reading competence. This competence derives from the different way women take on their identities under patriarchy and is a direct result of the social fact of mothering" (8). Williams explains that this "female reading competence" is akin to the mode of viewing common in soap opera, which "...encourages identification with multiple points of view," through a plot that is stitched together by interweaving character narratives. This way of watching depends on "empathy," a characteristic that, through a retracing of feminist theory, Williams suggests is built into the way that women might identify with multiple character perspectives. Williams offers an insightful point of resistance within this female genre, but it is

specifically for the female audience rather than the performance of femininity or the maternal. While melodrama valorizes a woman's trials and tribulations, and exalts her as a martyr, Rowe argues that romantic comedy leaves more leeway for "emancipatory" female performances, where, through unruly emotions like laughter and anger, a woman might break out of traditionally feminized narratives that are symbolically coded and sanctified by a patriarchal system, namely: love, marriage, motherhood. In the five films that I compare, all released in or near 2010, all performed poorly with audiences, but two in particular failed to garner attention or serve as moments of resistance for female characters' performances of motherhood.

### **Melodrama: *Motherhood* (2009) and *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011)**

The two melodramatic films that failed as box office releases, *Motherhood* (2009) and *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011), were low-earners for their respective stars, Uma Thurman and Sarah Jessica Parker (Hill). With *I Don't Know How She Does It* grossing 9.6 million dollars, it ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> (out of 28) for Parker's films.<sup>24</sup> With *Motherhood* grossing close to \$100,000 dollars, it came in as the 29<sup>th</sup> (out of 31) most lucrative films for Thurman.<sup>25</sup> In fact, *Motherhood* almost broke records for the lowest earning film during its opening weekend in Britain. Only one ticket was sold for the film on the opening day (it was specially promoted as opening in only one theater) and the film grossed under \$150 dollars during the opening weekend. As Sharon Knolle reports, "Even films that pull in \$100 million can still be considered

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<sup>24</sup> Information courtesy of Box Office Mojo. Used with permission. Accessible at: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Actor&id=sarahjessicaparker.htm&sort=rank&order=ASC&p=.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Information courtesy of Box Office Mojo. Used with permission. Accessible at: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Actor&id=umathurman.htm>

flops, but no one needs any fancy cost analysis on this one: Uma Thurman's latest movie is making news for earning an embarrassingly paltry \$131 in its opening weekend in London."

We will never truly know whether *Motherhood*'s paltry earnings were the result of a marketing failure, as rumored, or of the movie and its message. However, we can consider the story the movie tells and the way in which it tries to tell it. *Motherhood* is a semi-autobiographical film based on the director, Katherine Dieckmann's, life. The film was shot in the same building where Dieckmann lives and was based on the West Village, New York City cultural-elite class of which Dieckmann is a part. In fact, all of the major players who worked on this film are women with kids. As Lisa Belkin reports in *The New York Times*, even though *Motherhood* came out during a season where mothers seemed to be overly present in television and film, exploring a variety of themes related to the role,

"Motherhood" explores all those themes and then some. It is a film that perhaps only a mother could make. "Men can write great women's movies, but I don't think a man could write this movie," said Ms. Dieckmann, 48, whose son is 7 and daughter 15. "I don't think any man can understand what it's like to face the day to day the way a woman can, what it means for a woman to be compromised by domesticity." ("Mommy Tracks On and Off")

*Motherhood* has two main plot lines. The A-plot concerns Eliza, played by Thurman, trying to pull together her daughter Clara's 6<sup>th</sup> birthday party by the end of the day. As the film opens, we see a tired Eliza slowly waking up in bed. As she stares at the ceiling a "list" appears out of the ether, scrawled across her vision. This is a list of all of the tasks she needs to complete for the day before the main event in the evening. We next see Eliza in her office. She sits down at her computer to try to work. We learn then that Eliza is a mommy blogger at the handle the Bjorn Identity. She scrawls out a two-line post about not having the time, energy, and mental space to write as she would want and is immediately bombarded by a deluge of negative comments. As

she skims through the computer she comes across an ad from “Lunchbox” magazine. They are looking for a new commenter, who will earn \$3,000 a month, to write about motherhood. The deadline to submit a piece answering “What Motherhood Means to You,” just happens to be that evening. And so, right from the beginning of the film, Eliza’s fight to pursue her writing and earn a wage as a stay-at-home mother with a stay-at-home career is pitted against her actual ability to “successfully” be a SAHM by taking care of her two kids, husband, dog, and apartment; and then throwing her daughter’s birthday party.

Having these two drives face off against each other further splits the divide between the already culturally divided working mothers and SAHMs. Even the women who make the film, clearly women who are successful in their work lives, tell Belkin, “They work, the creators agree, because they fear becoming their lead character, who has metaphorically lost her voice and is struggling to figure out what to say about the choice she has made.” Already, the makers of the film view their lead character as an outsider from their circle. They highlight that she has made a different choice than them rather than that she is a mother like them. Belkin continues, “Some of their annoyance with such women threads its way through the film, as Eliza tries, in fits and starts, to move back into the world of what she considers ‘real’ writing. Too many women, Ms. Dieckmann said, use the complexities of a mother’s life as an excuse.” Eliza, is indeed, a frustrating character. She is difficult to watch because as the day goes on she becomes mired in her birthday party-planning tasks while also hardly moving forward with her writing. Her story is not told sympathetically, and a viewer might feel the “annoyance” that the women begrudge their lead character. Although Dieckmann had said that she didn’t think a “man could write this movie,” I wonder whether a non-working woman would have portrayed this story differently. For example, in chapter 1, we looked to Armstrong and Drummond, who

consistently write about time-saving tips and how they manage their days as women who were primarily SAHMs and are now moms with stay-at-home careers. While they have their hosts of nay-sayers, as we've seen, their stories and their words are also extremely popular and lucrative, unlike the story of mommy blogger, Eliza. Armstrong and Drummond garner popularity not only because they are part of the community that they document, but they earn the participation of their community by inviting them into the conversation. The interactive nature of the mommy blog doesn't necessarily tell a different story than that of Eliza, but it contextualizes this story through a multiplicity of voices rather than a singular narrative. If *Motherhood* seems to gesture at Anna Everett's digitextuality, incorporating the representation of multiple levels of media within a single media text, it does so while negating an imperative element of digitextuality in the blog: the incorporation of and fluid movement across texts within a single media text that highlights multiple voices and lends itself to community formation.

There are also several major differences in the narrative of Eliza versus those of Armstrong, who, more so than Drummond, relays her every day struggles. I will touch upon them briefly here before revisiting this argument later in this section. Eliza's story is told by women who are not in the same financial or career position as she. Eliza is a character who was an emerging, but possibly critically-acclaimed, fiction writer before having children and re-shifting her writing to a blogging platform. Her storytellers, the film writers and makers, are women who tell stories on an international level with budgets of millions of dollars and hosts of workers on their teams. Armstrong's story is always told by her, and while she now has a team in place to help her manage the financial and ad-based aspects of her blog, she is still the authorial voice of her story.

Eliza's story is highly structured by time. We start at the beginning of a morning and know that we only have until the evening to spend with this character as she rushes to meet a 5pm and then 12am deadline, for the party and then the writing contest, respectively. The film itself is only an hour and a half long and so the time we spend with Eliza leaves us very little opportunity to be captivated by her struggle or to be endeared to her on a personal level. This is almost the opposite of the type of mommy blogger that Eliza portrays. Like Armstrong, a mommy blogger's fans might have years of daily posts to begin to know the writer, empathize with their position, and make more complex realizations about the struggle of their character. Telling a story about warring drives to have a career and be an adequate SAHM necessarily simplifies and generalizes an issue that has been complex enough to hold the attention of our country's "culture wars" for decades.

Finally, we must consider distribution and format. Eliza's story is told on screen and was created and released as a film to be seen in theaters. As a medium, film has a long tradition of generically, formally, and narratively controlling women and subjugating them to un-empowered positions. This is not to say that all films do this. There have been many breakthroughs in feminist cinema.. However, as Rowe notes, in the 1950s and in the 1990s, television became a more hospitable format for challenging female characters that played roles in and told stories that pushed up against the boundaries of what was acceptable for women. I argue that the blogosphere builds upon this. While Eliza's struggle comes across as a bland and frustrating rehearsal of postfeminism, where she has the choice to do what she wants but still can't seem to be satisfied, the same story told across a television show or the blogosphere, might "read" quite differently. In addition to each of these formats' ability to tell layered and complex stories over time, they maintain a status as domestic objects that prompt intimacy. The screens that we watch

television on and read blogs on are increasingly holdable and inseparable from the daily elements of our lives (Cooley). We view these stories differently, often privately, and we spend more time with them. Whereas film is still often viewed communally, these other media are most often viewed one-on-one, so that the relationship may become more personal.

For all of the above reasons, Eliza's story does not reach a very large audience. However, we must also consider the type of narrative through which this story is told: melodrama. There is no major girl-meets-boy narrative to this film. Eliza has met her man and is, despite a slight show of boredom, settled in her marriage. There is very little humor in this film aside from brief moments of comic relief. Eliza's trials and tribulations are valorized as the major plot points of the film and we follow her on her emotional ups and downs. Motherhood told through melodrama focuses the viewer on the hardships of the story, relentlessly asking the viewer to sympathize with the main character. With the character as the object of attention, there seems to be little room for her to break into an active role.

In the penultimate scene of the film, Eliza's lack of agency becomes clear. Eliza has pulled off the birthday party but must leave in the middle to finish her writing. She is sitting on the stairwell, typing on her laptop, when her daughter comes to get her and tell her that everyone is ready for birthday cake.

ELIZA: There's this thing. It has to be done by midnight and it's kind of important. It means Mommy might get a real job.

CLARA: But I don't want you to get a real job!

ELIZA: Why not? It's good when mommies work. It keeps mommies happy. It keeps them from being mean, nasty, yelling mommies. What about daddies? Should daddies not work too? Why moms and not dads, hmm? Enlighten me.

CLARA: 'Cause moms do everything. Dads only do some things. It's different.

In saying that she might get a “real job,” Eliza negates and nullifies the significant work that she already does as a SAHM and a mommy blogger. She contributes to the system that continues to debase that work because it is not monetarily quantifiable. By doing so, she limits her agency as someone who already is working as hard and for as long as someone with a “real job.” Eliza says that working “keeps mommies happy.” Unfortunately, Eliza’s tone and choice of words show very little empathy and understanding for her own position and for the other women who do what she does, which is partly why this same conversation, as relayed by an actual mommy blogger, might have been voiced differently.

Finally, in a last blow to her female power, Eliza has the most important, and the most personally revealing and self-reflective conversation of the film, with her six-year-old daughter. She does not say these things to another adult, she does not try to engage other women in her position or women outside of her position in some type of fruitful dialogue, and she does not say these things to her husband. She says them in baby talk and asks her six-year-old daughter to “enlighten her.” By doing so, Eliza effectively relegates important conversations about female labor to a place where they will never resurface as political discourse. Instead of making the personal political, she makes the political an overly personal matter that will not move beyond the conversation with her daughter. The film ends shortly after this scene, with no resolution about Eliza’s writing contest and status as a working mother. This scene not only stifles Eliza’s voice, but it closes down the possibility of a progressive representation of motherhood.

In Parker’s *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, we find another melodrama exploring the issue of work-life balance. Parker’s character Kate is a successful banking executive who travels often for work and frequently misses her children’s life and school events. Several times throughout the movie, we see Kate laying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, where out of the



ether, a to-do list appears. Like, *Motherhood*, this list signifies the impossible, relentless, and seemingly never-ending tasks that Kate takes on by juggling multiple roles. Whereas in films about pregnancy, metaphors for babies abound, turning landscapes and co-workers into a benign and idealized version of baby-scapes or babies themselves, the imaginative metaphor for these two films about motherhood materialize in an omnipresent and seemingly omniscient to-do list, as if the day and landscape were no longer constructed by the desire for a child or the pleasure of that imagination, but the dread of managing life. This list is emblematic of how films about motherhood move out of the genre of romantic comedy and into the genre of melodrama, where an operating metaphor moves from orchestrating economies of desire to valorizing and dramatizing those of struggle. This structuring metaphor also gestures at the potential for technologies of motherhood to be framed in dystopian terms. The amorphous, virtual to-do list calls up imagery of the ubiquitous blackberry that is the underbelly to technologies that are more and more mobile and to the pressures of corporate jobs that require workers to be on-call at all hours of the day.

Like *Motherhood*, *I Don't Know How She Does It* features a relatively happily married mother with two children under 10 years old. While both female protagonists find minor love interests throughout the movie, in Eliza's case a delivery boy who looks at her as desirable and helps her set up Clara's party, and in Kate's case, a supervisor who appreciates her creativity in her work, the love interests only serve to redirect the women's attention back to their marriages and families. Like *Motherhood*, *I Don't Know How She Does It* reverts to melodrama, with only minor comic relief. However, it differs in that it shows us a successful career woman, more similar to the successful, corporate business women of the momcoms. Kate made the choice to be a career woman and a mother and now she is working through the juggling act of this

lifestyle. As Leonard notes, “Through its sidelining of Kate’s milquetoast and under-employed husband (Greg Kinnear), and a limp possibility of a workplace affair with an otherwise rather neutered Pierce Brosnan, the film did, however, comply with other recession-era portrayals that centralize women as the figures on whom the financial future of the family rests” (“Escaping the Recession” 51).

Kate learns that she can earn a significant promotion but must travel more at the same time that her architect husband, after a period of working on small projects, lands a big account. When her husband expresses concern about her taking the opportunity, although it is never questioned whether or not he should take his big opportunity, Kate promises that she will “handle it all.” Not only does the recession era portrayal centralize Kate as the breadwinner, as it does with Zoe in *The Back-Up Plan*, but the responsibility to be the primary manager of work/life balance also falls upon her. As we watch Kate struggle with this, we know that she is working towards failure. From the very beginning of the film we have been introduced to her narrative through confessional moments by her best friend, compatriot working mother, Allison. Allison begins Kate’s story by relaying how successful she is, how “together” she is, and how good of a job she normally does. She tells us that “it all started” at the beginning of Kate’s narrative, just before she earns her promotion. When we finally do see Kate fail, she misses phone calls and messages that her son is in the emergency room as she celebrates a business *coup* with her supervisor. Kate makes the decision to cut back on her work hours overshadowing an important narrative twist: we learn that her husband is now also making a list. If the list signifies taking on the responsibility of managing work/life balance then by the end of the film, Kate’s husband becomes her partner in this. This would signify an emancipatory moment for Kate and offer an equitable solution for both characters. However, the moment is eclipsed by a

second narrative resolution: Kate cuts back her hours and drops her work day to make it home in time to build a snow man with her daughter. As Negra and Tasker note in the introduction to *Gendering the Recession*, “Under new conditions of financial exigency, women now face enhanced pressure to manage their own (and often their family’s) economic survival without threatening patriarchal norms” (26). Kate’s success at work must flourish in order to support the family but must ultimately not cross a boundary that would threaten the illusory position of her husband as the head of the household. In the postfeminism of the recession era, successful career women manage the finances of the home as well as a symbolic structure of gender normativity whose foundation is no longer grounded in the economic structure of the male breadwinner in which it emerged.

Resolving the narrative in this way, falling back upon melodrama’s narrative conventions of celebrating the sacrifice of women, neatly ties the story off as one about the struggle of motherhood rather than one that provides the feminist solution that is the penultimate story of this film. By falling back upon generic film conventions, the film loses its feminist voice. If melodrama still seems unable to offer emancipatory moments for women, how does romantic comedy fare with the same task?

**Romantic comedy: *The Back-Up Plan* (2010), *The Switch* (2010), *Baby Mama* (2008)**

Like *Motherhood* and *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, both *The Back-Up Plan* and *The Switch* were relatively unsuccessful films for their respective stars, Jennifer Lopez and Jennifer Aniston, however, both films cleared a certain level of success. *The Back-Up Plan* grossed 91.6 million dollars but still ranks at the low end of the middle in terms of earnings for Lopez’s overall body of film-work. *The Switch* grossed just over 28.1 million dollars and is also at the

low-end of the middle of Aniston's overall earnings for films. These mid-level movies are not necessarily failures but were still considered flops by the media. In the "J-Lo Implosion," Peter Lauria writes, "*The Back-Up Plan*, Jennifer Lopez's latest romantic comedy, opened this past weekend and grossed a lousy \$12.3 million—and ably described what Lopez desperately needs right now, career-wise. This latest bomb cements a professional plummet that threatens to make one of the biggest stars of movies and music over the past decade little more than Mrs. Marc Anthony." Even Lopez's un-success is framed within the context of marriage. As un-success threatened her career, Lopez was no longer viewed as a savvy, but single, business woman who had control over her life and image, but, instead, within the context of a wife.

As Rowe suggests, romantic comedy shares similar narratives with melodramatic films about women in that it offers stories where women share the stories that structure their lives. However, laughter in romantic comedies, and the opportunity to provoke laughter at the stories about men, provides women with an agency-enhanced tool that may offer them moments of emancipation from the narrative structures that generally confine them. In *The Switch* and in *The Back-Up Plan* we do indeed see women taking control over their lives and we also see unruly women making us laugh. However, in most of today's momcoms, the unruliness of women comes through the way their pregnant body reacts against them. The humor of the film is more about body humor and less about a humor that women wrangle in the service of a female voice. Whereas there are moments of the storyline that celebrate women taking their bodies, lives, and cycles into their own hands, the pregnancy humor seems to dissipate any power they have. Not only do these films perform poorly in the box office, but they may no longer offer the same opportunities for female power that feminist supporters of the genre once hoped for.

## **The Unruly Body in *The Switch* (2010) and *The Back-Up Plan* (2010)**

While the unruly body positions the pregnant woman within the liminal position of the grotesque, can it act as a feminist tool when a woman cannot harness the subversive power it offers? In *The Back-Up Plan* and in *The Switch*, the respective female protagonists, Zoe and Cassie, are continually at the mercy of their bodies resulting in the main comedic moments of the films. Romantic comedy's emancipatory laughter primarily comes from moments when women can laugh at men and at the system, not at themselves.

The comedic highlight of *The Back-Up Plan* comes in the impromptu birthing scene that occurs in the home of the group leader of Zoe's former single-mother support group. Zoe was exiled from the group when she asked for relationship advice about a man. One of the group members is in labor and calls Zoe to be a part of it. Zoe shows up with her new partner, Stan, played by Alex O'Loughlin. Stan is quickly exiled from the main room of women, while Zoe is ushered in to witness a woman give an alt-home-birth in a kiddie pool set up in the living room, complete with a drum circle and chanting.

As the tension builds, the birthmother begins screaming and leaking. She uses Zoe as a focal point to distract her from birth pains. Zoe, fixed in this woman's gaze, is immobilized and forced to stand and watch the birth, cringing and writhing in disgust as the birthmother first loses control of her bowels and then gets on all fours to birth the baby in an animalistic posture. The audience's laughter is invited through Zoe's reaction. By empathizing with the position she is in, we laugh at the grotesqueness of the birth mother's leaking, uncontrollable female body. The humor of the film is not directed at men, nor at a symbolic social order of heteronormativity. In fact, through Zoe's eyes, it is redirected towards alternative modes of active feminism.

The birth mother is the female in this scene who verges on becoming the powerful unruly woman that Rowe describes. She is the center of the narrative, driving it forward, and she is given the power of the gaze, which in classical Hollywood cinema is normally reserved for men (Mulvey). This birthmother is making the decision to birth her child and raise it among an alternative community structure of all female friends. She is the woman who embraces her unruly body, disregarding the disgust, shame, and repulsion that it inspires in others. However, by seeing her through Zoe and then Stan's eyes, we see her as a trivialized character. By empathizing with the protagonists of the film, our gaze is re-directed to this powerful female character, in turn objectifying her and the spoof of a Lilith-fair gathering that accompanies her moment of birth. Zoe is not a female character that has or offers us agency. Although she takes her pregnancy into her own hands, at the moment she couples with Stan, she becomes distanced from alternative modes of femininity and re-secures her place in the normative symbolic order by becoming the lens through which we objectify what could have been her life.

In *The Switch*, the major narrative moment, which also offers us the most laughs, comes during Cassie's "pregnancy party." We first learn of this party when Wally receives his bright pink and blue invitation, featuring a champagne bottle and pink and blue sperm confetti. Cassie is hosting a party, doctor included, where she will both celebrate and be inseminated by her donor's sperm. Her best girlfriend is throwing her this party. Earlier in the film, she celebrated her own 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, marking both her and Cassie as part of the women over 30 demographic that contemporary momcoms often highlight. When Wally arrives at this party, this friend jokingly tells him that they'll be using a turkey baster to inseminate Cassie. Wally is so mystified by the female body and pregnancy, and cautious about this other friend's intelligence, that he seems to momentarily believe her. This friend then gathers everyone together to make a toast and

says, “We’re doing it! We’re doing it for ourselves!” Cassie taking pregnancy and her body into her own hands serves as a symbol for women in their 30s seeking agency and control. Similar to the gathering in *The Back-Up Plan*, the gathering in *The Switch* evokes culturally significant moments of feminism and then trivializes them by aligning us with the perspective of a figure who views these moments as an outsider “who knows better.” The pregnancy party of *The Switch* features flower crowns, flowing dresses, and flower necklaces. There is drinking and there are signs of communal love. The only moment where we see the doctor who will inseminate Cassie is on the couch, where we are directed to his long hair and beard and the joint he is smoking. We see all of this as humorous and preposterous because we see it through Wally’s eyes. Wally, against Cassie’s idea from the get-go, shows us Cassie’s party as a spoof on the values of free love and women’s power that emerged during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. The audience is actually pitted against Cassie and her friend’s values, as our gaze is formally aligned with Wally’s. Although Cassie chooses to take a non-normative route, and align herself with alternate feminist communities and values, the film reifies this moment by making it humorous and nonsensical and by framing it in the afterglow of an outdated time of free love and freedom for women.

While both of these romantic comedies offer us visions of female power, they are only offered to us through a perspective that trivializes them. While there are moments here where females may laugh and become powerful, they are hindered by the narrative and formal conventions of cinema.

The most popular of the momcoms was, by far, *Baby Mama*, starring Fey and Poehler in a film about implantation and surrogacy. *Baby Mama* differs from *The Switch* and *The Back-Up Plan* in several ways: the romantic comedy’s lead is a star well-known for her comedic acting

and writing, the two main characters are not a man and a woman but are two women navigating ARTs and pregnancy together, and, perhaps most importantly, the film is activated by Fey's larger star discourse in which she often deals with the struggles of balancing her work and her ability to be a mother. *Baby Mama* opened with great success, and although it may not compare favorably against the major successes of Fey's comedic career, it is an important moment to consider why Fey's portrayal of motherhood proves popular where others have faltered, and how Fey as a star functions in a new era of media convergence.

In the concluding section of the dissertation, I begin by analyzing the successes of *Baby Mama* within Fey's larger oeuvre. Rather than only considering how television and the blogosphere offer platforms for female voices that move beyond the narrative, formal, and genre conventions of cinema, I also account for the way that Fey's successes come from her ability to fluidly move across media platforms and embody a multi-convergence platform indicative of our contemporary media era's prevailing idea of performance.

### **Epilogue: Tina Fey's Vision of Motherhood: Activating the Possibilities of Media Convergence and Digitextuality**

Performances of motherhood are played out across a variety of platforms, revealing the interactivity built into mediated platforms like the blogosphere and the inherent popularity in the figure of the mother as a performative agent. This newly garnered economic success, by mothers writing about and making visible their every day lives and daily tasks, is in and of itself a prescient moment to reconsider how our culture has historicized and continues to label the affective labor of women's work, of community or family care.



Mommy bloggers like Heather Armstrong and Ree Drummond are nurturing the interactivity of the 2.0 era to build an audience whose participation they can monetize. By focusing on building and maintaining community through feedback and crowdsourcing, they mobilize the affective nature of “woman’s work” for a digital era. In doing so, they create stay-at-home-careers and suggest a platform for moving beyond the mythologized binary of the working mother vs. the stay at home mom. In doing so, they harness the blog as a media for progressive representations of motherhood, and specifically, female labor.

While Armstrong and Drummond’s performances of motherhood point to the rhetorical overlap between the affective nature of “woman’s work” and the language of new media that arose in the 2.0 era of the early 2000s, performances of motherhood in reality TV during this period act as a discursive site for the cultural anxieties of the recession era. The popularity of multiples came at a time when pregnancy technologies were on the rise, reintroducing the oversized family as a model of family on the cusp of ordinary and the extraordinary. Reality TV and media stars like Octomom, Nadya Suleman, and Kate Gosselin emerge as new figures of motherhood only to undergo scrutiny for their ability to properly perform as mothers. However, the judgments leveled at their performances of motherhood fall back upon cultural anxieties at play in this era such as the changing image of the American family and the financial crisis. In contrast, the political figure Sarah Palin, whose political and economic views defined her polarizing campaign as Vice President, engaged in performances of motherhood to the effect of re-contextualizing her public persona. These three cases suggest that performances of the American maternal distill broader cultural issues. The platform of reality TV and related media coverage offers opportunities for women to establish careers through their performances of

motherhood, to craft public personas through these performances, and to provoke the limits of proper motherhood.

In the last chapter, I pointed to the narrative and formal conventions of cinema, which in contrast to more interactive, domestic, and convergent media like the blogosphere and reality TV, seem to limit the voices of motherhood, positioning the stories they tell within gender and social codes that seem dated, given the conversations around these issues happening in the popular media. As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker ask in the introduction to their text *Gendering the Recession*, “Framed by what commentators have dubbed the Great Recession, this book asks whether and to what extent the conceptual and theoretical accounts of gender developed in an earlier and distinctly different economic era still apply” (1). They note that while a complete, “...mapping of the complex media ecology of the recession is of course impossible...it is clear that across media forms as diverse as reality television, financial journalism, lifestyle blogs, popular cinema, and advertising some tropes recur as meaningful responses to the global financial crisis” (13). Across all media, images of mothers vary widely and the “mommy wars” between working mothers and SAHMs persist within this new context, even with the rise of what I propose to be a newly thriving category of the recession era: the stay at home career.

Through and despite all of this performative clutter, there are figures that seem to emerge to tell distinct and compelling stories about motherhood. In this epilogue, I return to Tina Fey, discussed in the last chapter for having one of the few successful films that addressed issues of motherhood.

In her chapter “Jennifer Aniston and Tina Fey: Girls with Glasses,” Victoria E. Johnson notes that a star’s power in this media era comes in the “rare ability to coherently, if

paradoxically, cut through the ‘clutter’ and ‘noise,’ of the ‘media landscape.’” She writes that, “Fey and Aniston effectively unify an otherwise disparate media environment” (55). Thus, the success of stardom might be measured in the way one emerges from an over-saturated media environment, unifying an image of their personal brand that develops across media platforms.

Not only does Fey cut through the media clutter, delivering successful and provocative visions of motherhood, but Fey also acts as a unifying agent for some of the major issues attendant with motherhood in the early to late 2000s. Fey candidly addresses her work-life balance through film and television performances and in her autobiography. Fey plays characters that use humor to address issues of contemporary sexism and feminism. And, Fey also plays characters that address the generation gap between second wave feminists and their postfeminist children, which Kathleen Karlyn Rowe claims is one of the major divisions in feminist discourse leading to scholarly neglect in the analysis of popular culture representations of motherhood. In Fey’s varied oeuvre, she takes on roles that provoke and work through the polarizing “mommy wars” potentially presenting our culture with a performance that moves beyond this binary to a more complex understanding of the issues that all mothers grapple with, despite their career and child-caring choices. Part of Fey’s success in doing this is not only in her character and project choices, but in her agency as a writer of many of her own parts and her ability to navigate a multi-platform and media-convergent landscape. By performing and writing across a variety of platforms, Fey establishes herself as a brand of fresh motherhood and humor-armed feminism that supersedes generic conventions. Fey’s persona creates what Claude Lévi-Strauss might call *bricolage*. Like Frederic Jameson’s definition of post-modern pastiche, she glosses across different media, constructing an identity that is no longer tied to the generic conventions of one but wholly in work towards her personal brand, based on the many texts that she has participated

in, written, and directed. While both Lévi-Strauss and Jameson foregrounded this practice of collage as part of the postmodern, Fey's practices and her development as a star in the digital age seem most in line with what Anna Everett terms digitextuality: her icon as a media figure accrues meaning through the scaffolding and transformation of her various roles and cross-platform projects.

Fey actively constructs her identity, mobilizing media performances and authorizing texts. This active engagement has reached a level where her personal brand and star-power has moved far beyond the power of the genre she is engaging. Whereas Armstrong and Drummond are still defined by their blogs (although the success of Drummond's Food Network TV show is certainly expanding her brand) and Gosselin is defined as a reality TV star, Fey is just a star—similar to Palin who seems on the cusp of moving beyond the category of political star to that of general stardom. In this case, Jennifer Aniston, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Jennifer Lopez have all reached a similar level excepting their lack of authorship. Where Fey differs is in her writing and production credits.

By actively engaging with her own play of formal *bricolage*, Fey ensures that her voice is her agent, actively constructing a vision of motherhood that is honest about its complexities. In closing, I present four of Fey's projects where she addresses landmark issues of contemporary postfeminism within the recession era period: the work-life balance of motherhood, the (hetero)normative standards of childbirth, women over 40 giving birth, and the generation gap between second wave feminist mothers and postfeminist daughters.

In *Baby Mama*, Fey's character, Kate, grapples with a career track that has launched her up the ladder of corporate success but has left her without partner and without child. In the opening of the film, we follow Kate in montage as she moves through the workday. As with Zoe,

Lopez's character in *The Back-up Plan*, Kate clearly has babies on the brain. The film illuminates this by revealing Kate's baby-centric hallucinations, such as when a boardroom full of male colleagues turns into a table full of bobbling baby heads. In visualizing the desire to have babies in this hallucinatory manner, both films paint Zoe and Kate as subjects of a hallucinatory, out-of-control mind. This stands in stark contrast to the business image that Kate projects of herself. The opening of *Baby Mama* sets the supposed rationality of the career track against the choice of motherhood. As Kate embarks on the process of making this baby, she touches upon the struggle of women who wait to have children and undergo ARTs later in life, as well as how to raise a child outside of the vestiges of heteronormative coupling which still dominates as the fantasy of the nuclear family. Like Cassie and Zoe, Kate takes motherhood into her own hands, despite a certain lack of encouragement from those around her. At a family lunch with her mother, her sister, her sister's husband, and her sister's two children, Kate's mother says:

MOTHER: You know, Kate, not everyone is as tolerant of your alternative lifestyle as we are.

KATE: Being single is not an alternative lifestyle.

MOTHER: It is when you're 37.

As Kate embraces her alternative lifestyle of an older woman having a child, she reaches out to a surrogacy agency headed by Sigourney Weaver.<sup>26</sup> Through this agency she connects with Angie, played by oft co-star and longtime real life friend, Amy Poehler. As the pregnancy progresses we learn that Angie is leaving her boyfriend and needs to move in with Kate. While we soon learn that Angie thinks she is faking the pregnancy for the surrogacy payment, though unbeknownst to her, she truly is pregnant with her boyfriend's child, Kate and Angie start to co-habitate, going

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<sup>26</sup> The casting choice is prescient given Weaver's star discourse in her role as an executive in *Working Girl* (1988) and her unnatural motherhood in *Alien 3* (1992). Fey's character Kate both marvels and is repelled by Weaver's ability to continue to give birth at an age older than herself. What is only alluded to is Weaver's already unnatural status as one who could give birth to even a predatory being in *Alien 3*.

through the motions of what a heteronormative couple might go through as they prepare for childhood. Many of the comedic scenes come from the actresses provoking the perceived strangeness of this coupling, and yet by the end of the film, we see the success of this relationship in that they have become best friends and each other's family, as evidenced in the final scene when they celebrate the then growing baby's first birthday.

An example of Fey and Poehler's provocation of their non-normative coupling is evident in the insemination scene. The camera slows, the mood lighting appears, clearly softened from a more realistic representation of a hospital's lighting scheme, the song *Endless Love* plays in the background as the two women dance with each other and fawn over each other, jesting and gesturing at the codes of sexuality that might occur on the night of inception. Similar to the tactics they engaged in the episode of *Saturday Night Live*, in which they respectively played Palin and Hillary Clinton, as mentioned in chapter 2 of this dissertation, they use humor to point to the sexism of our culture. In the *Saturday Night Live* skit they use humor to show that opposite types of sexism were being handed out to both female political figures in the 2008 election. In this scene with Kate and Angie, they use humor to test the structure of heteronormative baby making. Contrary to the scientific procedure happening after the business transaction of surrogacy, we see a homoerotic scene. When coupling-off fails for the type of woman represented by Kate, the romance of the situation becomes embedded in the formal qualities of the media rather than in the relationship between her and her partner.

In her article "Recruiting Wombs: Surrogates as the New Security Moms," Bree Kessler addresses the class structure of surrogacy as well as the methods of surveillance inherent in the process. She writes "Although it has been in existence since biblical times, surrogacy, as described by *Newsweek*, is one of these new social practices because of the multitude of

technologies associated with it... Technologies of reproduction are the simplest, or most literal, in that these technologies, such as in vitro fertilization, are necessary for surrogacy to exist” (170). These technologies comprise a social practice embedded with class hierarchies between the mother and the surrogate. In addition, Kessler notes that access to surrogacy itself is “connected with hierarchies that highlight race and class” (170). As we see in *Baby Mama*, Kate, the successful businesswoman, reaches out to a surrogate from a lower class status. Angie agrees to surrogacy because she and her boyfriend need the money. When Kate tells her African American doorman about her plans, he informs Kate that in his culture, Angie is simply a “baby mama,” a word used for a single woman who has a baby but is supported by the single man who fertilized her. In Kate’s culture, which is evidently distanced from her doorman’s, in terms of race, class, and culture, Angie’s role takes on a medical and technological terminology that highlights its discursive structure. Interestingly, Fey takes on the position of the absent father: if Poehler becomes her “baby mama” by acting as a surrogate then Fey takes on the position of the father who is elided through the use of ARTs. This subtle elision is reminiscent of the scene in *The Switch*, in which Aniston’s character Cassie troubles her friend Wally, played by Jason Bateman, with her “unnatural” plan to have a child via a sperm donor, not only negating the necessity of a father figure but calling into question the necessity of the leading male character’s purpose in the narrative.

As Kate undergoes the process of surrogacy, she also receives a business promotion. For the first time, she will be managing the building and opening of a high-end health food grocery store. Through this work, she meets a local business owner named Rob who runs a juice bar called Superfruity, played by Greg Kinnear. While his status as a small business owner of a

health-food establishment sets him in opposition to Kate as she opens a more corporate healthfood store, the two begin to date. On the first date:

ROB: So listen, there's something that I haven't told you and it may be a dealbreaker.

KATE: Ohhhh you are superfruity, aren't you!

ROB: No, but I do have a daughter. She's 12 years old and she lives with me every other weekend. So-

KATE: I think that's great.

ROB: Yeah? Ok. You have any kids?

KATE: I've never been married.

ROB: Oh, well Kate, you don't have to be married to have a kid.

Just after Rob confirms that he is a single father, and confirms that non-normative childbirth is perfectly acceptable, the two share their first romantic kiss. As the movie develops, Kate continues to keep her surrogate pregnancy a secret from Rob. In the end, after learning of Kate's betrayal, Rob distances himself. When Kate learns of Angie's betrayal, she distances herself from Angie. At the end of the film, as Angie gives birth to her and her ex-boyfriend's child, Kate appears to support her only to faint and be admitted to the hospital. Upon waking, not only does the doctor tell her that she is pregnant, which she quickly realizes must be from her one night stand with Rob that followed their single kiss, but Rob appears to make sure that Kate was not harmed in her fall. The film is thus tied neatly in a bow, as two non-normative childbirths bring all three characters together to form a family unit of baby mamas and partners for the children. This is confirmed in the final scene, a year later, when all three celebrate the first birthdays of the two children.

While Fey did not write or produce *Baby Mama*, the film came at a time that her stardom and brand of cheeky feminism was on the rise. The film was written by Michael McCullers, a writer for *Saturday Night Live* between 1997- 1998. The film was co-produced by Lorne Michaels, a producer of Fey's on *Saturday Night Live*. Working with a cohort of comedians and



comedic writers and producers likely empowered Fey to bring a certain amount of agency to this role, perhaps closing the gap between her performance of motherhood and her lived reality.

Michaels was also Fey's producer for *30 Rock*, a show that Fey developed, wrote for, and starred in, and in which she often questioned the idea of motherhood as well as her ability to perform the role of the "proper" mother.

Fey pitched *30 Rock* to Michaels while working as a writer and actor for *Saturday Night Live*. Picked up by NBC, the show ran for seven seasons with Fey as the head writer and lead actress and Michaels as an executive producer. Through the voice of her character, Liz Lemon, a producer of the struggling comedy *The Girlie Show with Tracy Jordan (TGS)*, Fey often explored and exposed issues championed by feminists, such as gender (in)equality in the workplace. In the seventh and final season of *30 Rock*, Liz considers having a child with her boyfriend Criss, played by James Marsden. While Liz, age 42 in the show, first opts for IVF hormone treatments, she quickly decides against this option when it makes her too emotional at work. When adoption agencies continue to discount her as a top candidate, due to her status as a single mother, she and Criss plan a last-minute wedding. Even after marriage, Liz and Criss are still on a long waiting list to adopt a newborn. When a pair of six-year-old twins becomes available for immediate adoption, Liz jumps at the opportunity.

Prior to this moment, Liz's work at her show, popularly known by the acronym *TGS*, has primarily revolved around her mentee relationship with supervisor Jack Donaghy, played by Alec Baldwin, and her wrangling of the show's two main stars Jenna Maroney, played by Jane Krakowski, and Tracy Jordan, played by stand-up comedian Tracy Morgan. Jenna is pale and blond, a diva, and egregiously vain. Tracy is African American, prone to unwieldy antics, and goofy. Days before Liz and Criss's twins are set to arrive, she learns that her beloved show is

going to be cancelled by NBC due to a lawsuit. She relentlessly tries to save the show by finding new funders, but from the outset, it is clear to other characters that her efforts are futile. As Liz's plans to save the show go awry, she gets a call from Criss announcing a mix-up from the adoption agency: the twins are set to arrive at the same time that she must present a showcase to the NBC board to save *TGS*. Liz must choose work or family and without more than a minute's hesitation, she chooses work. In this moment, Fey catapults the demands of a mother's work-family balance to the forefront of the show.

In *Bossypants*, Fey's best-selling autobiography published in 2011, she often refers to *30 Rock* as her child or her baby, just as Liz refers to *TGS* as her child. She calls herself the "mother of this five year old show" (194). Fey's performance as career-minded Liz supports women who choose alternatives to motherhood, just as her performance as Kate offers resolutions for the normative family. Through the accumulation of Fey's performances and her autobiography, Fey conveys a type of performance that seems closer to her reality than stars like Lopez, Aniston, Parker, or Thurman. In this way, Fey's type of performance aligns with that of Armstrong, whose performance of motherhood in her mommy blog works towards closing the gap between representation and lived reality. After Liz chooses her work child over her arriving twins, her cast quits on her as a community in order to support her not having to choose between two different types of "children." Liz makes it to the airport just in time and as her new children approach, she sees that they are uncanny child-like versions of Jenna and Tracy, confirming that as one child ended, *TGS*, it would be replaced by others, strengthening the equation of work and children as two similar and viable paths for women.

In the final episode, of both the season and the show, Fey tackles the gender norms of motherhood and the "mommy wars" between SAHMs and working mothers. With the end of

Liz's show and the arrival of her twins, the caretaking of TV stars Jenna and Tracy seems to have seamlessly shifted to the caretaking of twins Janet and Terry. After she ushers Janet, Terry, and Criss out the door respectively for school and work, she sits down, opens her computer, and throws a question out into the mommy blogosphere. She explains that she is a new SAHM, and that having had a high-powered (HP) job, she is wondering how to adjust. While some mothers provide cheeky responses about how they devote all their extra time to parenting, so that their children hate them, so that they then have more of a reason to work on parenting, one mother in particular calls Liz out on complaining about getting to stay home with her children. This other mother is infuriated that someone could complain about this while they have to deal with their boss's endless "urgent" emails. The conversation escalates and Liz and the other mother agree to fight it out in Riverside Park in the next ten minutes. When Liz arrives, she realizes that the other mother is actually her husband Criss. They realize that despite gender norms, they are both posting on a mommy blogging forum and would each be much happier switching roles. Criss becomes the caretaker and Liz returns to work to be the breadwinner, revealing an alternative (and progressive) ending for the retreatism of the postfeminist female. This example is a stark contrast to the ending of *Motherhood*, when Thurman's character Eliza engages her six-year-old daughter in a dialogue about the gendered codes of labor. In that ending, Eliza ensured that her questioning of those issues would not move beyond a personal conversation into public discourse, relegating conversations about "woman's work" and female interests to the private sphere. Liz, on the other hand, poses her questions to the forum of female voices that partake in the public discourse developing in the blogosphere.

Fey not only addresses the absurdity of the supposed mommy wars, where mothers lash out at one another's different choices rather than trying to support one another, so that online

debate escalates to the point of real life stand-off, but she also provides alternatives for this debate as well as an alternative for what retreatism might mean in a postfeminist era.<sup>27</sup> In part, Fey does this by introducing, a figure who has been absent for much of this dissertation: the feminist male. Negra and Tasker rightly note that, “Recessionary culture seems to be both reenergizing and critiquing male breadwinner roles. One consequence of this is a heightened passivity in the male leads of romantic comedy; another is a succession of films in which high-profile female stars play single mothers (Jennifer Garner in *Juno* [2007], Jennifer Lopez in *The Back-Up Plan* [2010], Jennifer Aniston in *The Switch* [2010])” (17). However, in *30 Rock*, Fey writes this feminist male character into the plotline. Kinnear’s role as Rob in *Baby Mama* shows us another feminist male, and Kinnear’s role as the husband in *I Don’t Know How She Does It* was in a state of becoming a feminist male character just as the narrative re-instated Parker’s character’s place in the home. While this model only addresses heteronormative relationships, it does so because this is an ideologically significant part of the image of idealized maternity that continues to dominate popular media and the genre of romantic comedy. Excluded from this image are same-sex parenting partnerships, single mothers like Suleman or Gosselin, and multiracial parenting partnerships. However, in its limited scope of representation, the model of Liz and Criss still attempts to propose a solution for the mommy wars. Rather than choose one *side* or the other, the SAHMs or the working mothers, Liz can rely on her parenting partner and chooses one *role* rather than the other. While this in no way presents a solution, it does offer up a mediatized figure who performs a type of contemporary motherhood that relies on partnering and parenting with an equal. In regards to films discussed in chapter 3, the “partner” could instead

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, the humor of this scene functions in its exaggeration of these mommy wars, and the lack of mother to mother support, but if we think back to Armstrong’s *Dooce.com* and Drummond’s *Thepioneerwoman.com*, we must keep in mind that they both consistently address the hateful comments that they each receive in regards to their “brand” of motherhood.

have been the alternative feminist community which Zoe leaves in *The Back-Up Plan* as it was the amalgamated community of the best friend, Angie, and father figure, Rob, in *Baby Mama*.

In another of Fey's performances as Portia Nathan, in the 2013 film *Admission*, she plays a similarly career-track minded woman who has risen the ranks among Princeton's college admission officers. When Portia is contacted by John Pressman, played by Paul Rudd, about doing a recruitment visit at his new developmental school, we learn that his true motive is to introduce Portia to the son whom John thinks she gave up for adoption. This alleged son applies to Princeton so that throughout the film we see Portia negotiating her own issues with pregnancy and motherhood and reimagining her life as a mother in addition to having had a successful career. Portia consistently challenges the idea that a lack of motherhood means an inability for the affective labor, or labor of caring, so often associated with this role. In a meeting with her male supervisor and her female competitor Corinne, played by Gloria Reuben, after they have just learned he plans to retire and name one of the two women his successor:

PORTIA: I'm spending an extra four days in the Andover-Hotchkiss Triangle.

CORINNE: And I've added five full days to the San Francisco bay area, Northern California.

PORTIA: And I've added a number of new schools. In fact, I was just talking to the co-founder of Quest, a developmental high school with their first year of college applicants.

CORINNE: Clarence, we're going to be back on top and make that happen by working together, (extends hand to Portia) right Portia?

PORTIA: Absolutely (Looks at Corinne, extends her hand and smiles).

CORINNE: As a mother myself, I know the importance of teamwork.

PORTIA: And I am not a mother (said with emphasis) but I know the importance of it too. Can't go it alone (Portia grimaces and pulls hand away).

As Portia notes, she is just as capable of teamwork as a woman who is a mother, denying the use of motherhood as a leveraging tactic for female workers. As Portia visits Quest, John's school, she begins to know him and her possible son Jeremiah. John himself is a single father, and

similarly to *30 Rock*, we see Fey's character taking cues from a male parent figure. In this film, John's character is more maternal than hers. Part of this lack of maternal affection is explained by the relationship between Portia and her mother.

Portia's mother, Susannah, performs a representation of a second wave feminist mother. Susannah, played by comedienne Lily Tomlin, wrote a landmark feminist text in the 1970s. She now lives in the woods and is in the process of achieving total self-sufficiency and isolation. When Portia opts to stay with her during her visit to the Quest school, she learns that Susannah had had a mastectomy five weeks earlier and she is upset that her mother had not asked for her help. Susannah replies, "Mother... You know I'm thinking you should start calling me Susannah. I think this could help us avoid all this mother-daughter role-playing crap that you can't seem to shake. You're welcome to stay... but there's not much for supper unless you want to go pick some kale." Portia was raised without a father and her mother seems to relish telling Portia her birth story: she picked a man to fertilize her on New Jersey Transit and then got on with her life, implying: as any good feminist would.

When Portia and Susannah's relationship reaches its boiling point later in the film, the rift between Susannah's second wave ideals, politics, and practices and Portia's own form of postfeminism is articulated when Portia yells,

I've got something to say Susannah. Having sex on a train with a stranger to get pregnant? Really not so great. You didn't even ask his name. And so I will never know who my father is. Maybe he's in Paris. Maybe he's in Hoboken. Maybe he's President-obviously not that. But I'll never know because you forgot one important thing on your way to self-empowerment. ME. Why didn't you ask his name?!

Portia's attitudes towards motherhood are significantly influenced by her mother's dismissal of family. What we see in this film is that Portia moves from emulating her mother's attitude

towards maternity to emulating John's attitude towards paternity and community building. Portia's postfeminist emergence into motherhood comes through an acceptance of alternative models of community: modeled by the single parenthood of one of her contemporaries.

What Fey presents as a media figure, consistently performing motherhood across autobiographical and fictional roles, is a version of motherhood that has its successes and its failures, a version that moves between the isolated poles of intensive and rebellious, or SAHM and working mother, so often invoked in the contemporary cultural discourse of the American maternal. Fey's success in this mobility comes from engaging in an era of media convergence in which shifts across representational platforms are now the norm, rather than the exception. By engaging in digitextuality, Fey opportunely constructs a complex and nuanced persona through which she approaches issues of motherhood from multiple angles, providing audiences with a prismatic view of this issue and offering solutions for the politics of identity by insisting on a new mode of visibility.

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