

Director of Operations Meets Gangster from the Mother-hood

Consumer Culture and the Marketing of Maternal Identities

Representations of the maternal in consumer culture reinscribe the interests of the dominant culture through a mechanism of repression and wish fulfillment, whereby maternal anxiety is assuaged with promises of empowerment and adulation. In a world with few existential bearings, in which community has been degraded through the disembedding and sequestering of personal experience, individuals acquiesce to mediated representations and consumable identities to protect against cognitive dissonance and ontological insecurity. However, mothers are particularly vulnerable to the cultural forces of mediation and commodification, given their struggle to negotiate the disjuncture between the institutional demands of motherhood and their personal knowledge of mothering. By deconstructing maternal identity as represented in the “World’s Toughest Job” and “The Mother-hood” YouTube commercials, this article explores the power of consumer culture to sell images of motherhood that women can neither achieve nor abandon, because they effectively quell anxiety regarding the oppressive conditions of maternal labour, by offering utopian visions of elevated social status and collectivity. In both cases, buying into a prescribed identity bestows the benefits of membership; however, careful scrutiny reveals that cultural reproductions advance a fantasy of collectivity that is a poor substitute for individual agency. Ultimately, authenticity, as it relates to motherhood, is only possible when the personal meaning of experience is restored as the primary referent or ‘expert text’ in the practice of mothering.

The reification of maternal identity in mass culture has given rise to a number of consumable representations and narratives of motherhood that promote utopian fantasies of adulation and collectivity. These pre-packaged identities are attractive to women attempting to negotiate the meaning of maternity because

they neutralize social anxiety; however, through processes of mediation and manipulation these commodified images distort reality and perpetuate dreams of empowerment through idealization and consumption, such that culturally endorsed constructions of motherhood supplant personal ways of knowing and living the experience of mothering.

As Frederic Jameson argues in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” dominant cultural representations support particular ideologies by addressing social anxieties for the purpose of manipulation and containment, often through a calculated indulgence in fantasy. He refers to this process as a kind of “psychic compromise or horse-trading, which strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be laid to rest” (Jameson 141). This psychic horse-trading is evident in mass culture representations of motherhood in which normative definitions are reinforced by raising, and then, through the mechanism of wish fulfillment, quelling maternal anxiety about the social burden of motherhood. This paper will first explore the manner in which cultural mediation of experience and commodification of identity compromise the evolution of maternal self-concept; and, secondly, offer evidence of the repression-wish fulfillment mechanism identified by Jameson, whereby the ‘man-made’ myth of motherhood (Thrurer 341) is reinscribed in mass culture. The later will be accomplished through detailed analysis of two outwardly diverse constructs of maternal identity featured in American Greetings’ “World’s Toughest Job” and Fiat’s “The Motherhood” advertisements. In both cases, anxiety associated with maternal oppression is expunged by offering up the notion of power through idealization and identification with a narrative of collectivity; however, by alienating mothers from the truth of their own experience, seemingly harmless reproductions of ideologically informed images of motherhood ultimately constitute a formidable obstacle to women’s ability to come into consciousness of Self-as-mother or as agent in the creation of an authentic self-narrative.

Women’s vulnerability to the reification and commodification of maternal identity is made possible by the absence of existential bearings in contemporary culture. In a world in which community has been degraded and atomized through disembedding and sequestering mechanisms, experience is mediated through cultural representations resulting in a phenomenon known as *reality inversion* in which “the real object and event, when encountered, seem to have less concrete existence than their media representations” (Giddens 27). For Jameson, the “free-floating absence of the referent,” or the dissociation of the object world from the experience of ‘reality,’ is accomplished by consumer capitalism through commodity production whereby the “reproduction of copies which have no original” has replaced the value of authenticity (Jameson 135). However, the

consequences of this *simulacrum* have implications beyond the world of high art and mass culture. The commodification of experience, combined with the absence of unmediated external referents, complicates the negotiated meaning of authentic Selfhood, particularly in relation to the practice of mothering.

The project of the Self, according to cultural theorist Anthony Giddens, is a reflexive process whereby the individual negotiates a collage of culturally mediated representations in an effort to circumvent cognitive dissonance and construct a coherent self-narrative (26); however, the experience of mothering is inherently vulnerable to such dissonance as the myth of maternity, particularly its overwhelming insistence on perfection, regularly comes into conflict with the reality of life as a mother. In “The Myth of Motherhood,” Shari Thurer argues that “the current ideology of mothering is not only spurious, it is oblivious of a mother’s desires, limitations, and context.... This has resulted in a level of confusion and self-consciousness among mothers that their predecessors never knew” (332). Feelings of inadequacy fuel ontological insecurities, which generate anxiety and prevent authentic growth, expression, and recognition of the ‘true’ Self (Giddens 191). Women’s alienation from this ‘true’ Self, in the context of motherhood, is articulated by Adrienne Rich as a function of the appropriation of maternal experience by the interests of the dominant culture, and the proliferation of particular master narratives. Rich comments,

I realize that I was effectively alienated from my real body and my real spirit by the institution—not the fact of motherhood. The institution—the foundation of human society as we know it—allowed me only certain views, certain expectations, whether embodied in the booklet in my obstetrician’s waiting room, the novels I had read, my mother-in-law’s approval [or] my memories of my own mother. (39)

In this way, authentic expressions of Selfhood are compromised by the cultural and discursive limits that dictate the practice of motherhood. Cultural influences shaping women’s understanding of Self as mother include a combination of the forces of modernity and patriarchy - abstract systems/institutions; mediation and sequestering of experience; and consumption - all of which operate within a fundamentally oppressive ideology that alienates women from knowledge rooted in the embodied experience of mothering.

Reproductions of the dominant narrative of maternity foster inauthenticity by demanding acquiescence to culturally scripted performances of the maternal role. In truth, mothers are often forced to practice in social, political and class realities that are not of their own devising. For Sara Ruddick, “As inauthenticity is lived out in maternal practice, it gives rise to the values of obedience and ‘being good;’ that is, to fulfill the values of the dominant culture is taken as

an achievement” (223). In the context of powerlessness, mothers often avoid cognitive dissonance by replacing the conflicted project of Self-actualization with a single-minded adherence to the socially scripted, pre-packaged narratives of motherhood, such as those advanced by consumer culture. However, the abnegation of personal interest for the sake of cultural approval, or for the purpose of advancing a child’s social appreciability, inevitably leads to repressed maternal anxiety that capitalism defuses with compensatory fantasies of power and liberation.

The idealization of maternal love is one fantasy that has been perpetuated and manipulated throughout history to reinforce patriarchal ideology and its investment in maternal perfection. The role of women’s labour in reproducing and raising children is a function on which society depends (Plant 2); however, the social mandate of motherhood demands a level of selflessness that is overwhelming, exhausting and oppressive. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich posits motherhood as an institution that is disruptive to maternal subjectivity. She comments, “I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is ‘unconditional;’ and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous?” (23). Rich’s failure to imagine a coherent Self in the context of institutional motherhood reinforces the notion that inauthenticity and self-censorship are the inevitable consequences of representations that alienate authentic maternal presence. Rich acknowledges that it is only through re-animation of the Self, through agency, embodiment, and creative activity that she is able to re-constitute a sense of Being and coherent Self-narrative. She speaks of an “embattled” relation with motherhood and struggling to “give birth to—a recognizable, autonomous self, a creation in poetry and in life” (29). However, the work of reconciling consumer culture’s reproductions of maternal identity with an autonomous Self-concept is a project that women often sacrifice to stave off the anxiety generated by the knowledge of oppression. For many women, acquiescence to social mandates regarding the performance of motherhood, or ‘sleepwalking’ as Rich describes it, quiets existential anxiety by generating an illusion of ontological security. However, by living a ‘copy’ of a socially constructed representation of the maternal, women are denied the agency of negotiating the meaning of their own experiences and, thereby, alienated from the unfolding of a narrative of Selfhood rooted in personal significance and embodied ways of knowing.

In the construction of a coherent and original narrative of experience, the Self is a potentially authentic referent or site of meaning-creation; however, commodified reproductions of maternal identity negate the importance of this ‘primary text.’ Without a solid framework of personally meaningful external referentiality, individuals are tempted to “buy in” to commodified Selves that

annihilate genuine presence. This idea relates to the conspicuous absence of the maternal subject in mass cultural representations. Thurer comments, “There is a glaring need to restore to mother her own presence, to understand that she is a person, not merely an object for her child, to recognize her subjectivity” (332). Even supposedly ‘expert texts’ on parenting tend to construct motherhood in accordance with an ephemeral idea of what it means to be a mother. Such texts, in the absence of the original referent (the experience of real moms), reproduce motherhood in a manner that renders the lived experience of individual subjects obsolete. Mass culture, then, as a “message mass or semiotic bombardment from which the textual referent has disappeared” (Jameson 138) has a direct relationship with representations of motherhood that deny the authentic presence and the embodied experience of mothering.

Transitional life events, such as birth, invite a renegotiation of meaning and, thereby, offer the potential to restore individual agency through an encounter with Selfhood that is both embodied and unmediated. However, these experiences are often sequestered in our society as they threaten consumer culture’s best efforts to contain personal ways of knowing. Giddens argues, “Birth and death are the two main mediating transitions between inorganic and organic life whose wider existential implications are difficult to escape” (203). Likewise, Jameson suggests that it is “the haunting and unmentionable persistence of the organic ... which the cellphone society ... desperately recontains in hospitals and sanitizes” (Jameson 142). In other words, the power to break free of ideological restraints and consumable identities is accomplished by encounters with our own humanity: life experiences that reestablish our connection to the living world and excite existential musings, critical thought, and embodied knowledge. Such transformational experiences invite a kind of “psychic reorganization” (Giddens 13) that has the power to interrogate false consciousness and initiate a re-awakening to the possibilities of authenticity.

Having briefly examined the cultural politics informing the production and consumption of maternal identity, this paper now turns to illustrations of the mechanism whereby the dominant ideology is reinscribed in consumer culture through recourse to utopian fantasy that effectively quells women’s anxiety regarding the disjunction between authentic Selfhood and the mandated performance of motherhood. For example, anxieties regarding the social value of maternal labour and the oppressiveness of the maternal condition are openly addressed in the American Greetings’ YouTube commercial, “World’s Toughest Job” (YouTube). Its popularity, suggested by close to twenty-two million hits, suggests the effectiveness of this idealized portrait of motherhood as a vehicle of ideological propaganda. In this commercial, a group of diverse, young executives are interviewed for a ‘fake’ job that has actually been posted. They are told that it is “the most important job” and that “responsi-

bilities and requirements are really quite extensive.” However, they begin to rail against the terms of employment when they are told that they will not be able to sit or have a break. They are informed that they will only be permitted to have lunch “after the associate has had theirs;” and, because the associate “needs constant attention,” the hours are estimated to be “135 to unlimited per week.” One of the interviewees asks, “Is that even legal?” In spite of such protests, the interviewer goes further to suggest, “If you had a life, we would ask you to give that up” and insists that all tasks must be done with “a happy disposition.” The executives continue to revolt against the relentless demands of this “all-encompassing” position. One respondent comments that the proposed conditions are “cruel ... a sick, twisted joke,” while others suggest that they are “inhuman” and “insane.” The greatest resistance occurs when the interviewer comments that the position “will pay absolutely nothing.” In response, one of the executives emphatically states, “No one would do that for free.” Ultimately, the big reveal is that the position, “Director of Operations,” is actually already filled by billions of women who ‘work’ as mothers everyday. In keeping with Jameson’s theory regarding the need to raise anxiety for the purposes of manipulation and containment, it is interesting to note that the commercial blatantly acknowledges the oppression of women as defined by the institution of motherhood. The sheer burden of the labour, combined with the lack of remuneration becomes a source of collective gratitude, which is used to neutralize genuine maternal angst about the conditions of employment. Consequently, by itemizing the social expectations governing maternity, the commercial uses the ‘fake job’ ruse to reinforce a representation of the maternal that generates compensatory sympathy and appreciation, while simultaneously delineating and, thereby, perpetuating the conditions of maternal oppression.

Though the commercial pays tribute to mothers, it is in the absence of real maternal subjects that the terms of the labour contract, defining the sanctioned performance of motherhood, are negotiated and reinscribed. In this way, the commercial reinforces the separation of public and private spheres and the marginalization of maternal labour. These young executives are productive citizens of the dominant culture, living proof of the fulfillment of a mother’s ultimate mandate to properly socialize her children. The commercial celebrates their indebtedness to her for reproducing the normative function of motherhood; however, by extending gratitude in their mothers’ absence, the commercial reinforces the division between the corporate domain of professional employment and the maternal worksite or domestic realm. On a deeper level, by discounting the presence of ‘the primary referent’ (i.e., the subject of the commercial), the centrality of maternal experience and the notion of authentic Selfhood are dismissed in favour of the advertisement’s recognizable portrait of ideal motherhood. In the context of the commer-

cial, the mother is central to the plot, yet she has no autonomous presence aside from her job description. In Jameson's terms, the primary referent is absent, but ultimately unnecessary. The audience readily identifies with the commodified signification of 'mother,' and, in this way, reproducible images come to obscure the value of personal knowledge gained through the experience of mothering. The commercial's manipulation is accomplished by celebrating maternal sacrifice and, thereby, containing anxiety associated with the implications of such sacrifice; however, by consuming this idealized and culturally mediated definition of maternity, women compromise the project of Selfhood and the quest for maternal authenticity.

In mass culture, the normative definition of motherhood is reinforced through consumable identities that encourage acquiescence to a scripted performance of maternity. The mechanism, whereby representations enable both repression and wish fulfillment, hinders critical perception and the agency required to challenge the ideological presuppositions informing maternal identity formation. Thurer encourages the interrogation of the myth of motherhood, by highlighting its cultural origin: "Motherhood—the way we perform mothering—is culturally derived.... The way to mother is not writ in the stars, the primordial soup, the collective unconscious, nor in our genes" (334). Our susceptibility to cultural mythologies, Jameson argues, is rooted in the desire to identify with a coherent narrative that signifies belonging amidst a wasteland of fractured social groups, once united in relation to landscape and locale (135). Indeed, it is this fantasy of unified consciousness and collectivity that Jameson argues is regularly indulged by mass culture to contain anxiety and advance particular ideological agendas. Capitalism, therefore, satisfies existentialist angst through the illusion of collectivity implied by reproducible, consumable narratives of Selfhood. In the case of "The World's Toughest Job" commercial, the ad reproduces motherhood by re-constituting many of the traditional assumptions associated with maternity. We collectively identify with the 'job' of hardworking, selfless and unconditionally loving 'mother' as advertised, idealized, and subsequently performed by the countless mothers who strive to validate this reified and ideologically approved version of maternity. However, dutiful performances, while socially acknowledged, negate diversity of individual experience and the range of alternative narratives potentially realized through restored agency and the reinstatement of the 'primary text' (i.e., the maternal subject).

In terms of Jameson's theory of containment through fantasy, mothers are placated by the commercial's "world's toughest job" acknowledgement, and the accompanying outpouring of gratitude, such that they dare not challenge the terms of their own oppression. Mothers' hope that they might be valued for their efforts and granted status in the market economy is indulged by the flattering, though fictitious, "Director of Operations" employment title that

becomes synonymous with “mom” in the advertisement. However, Thurer argues that “the extent to which childcare is degraded as gainful employment ... betrays the real value of mothers’ work, despite the idealization of the stay-at-home mom” (337). The reality is that childcare workers make \$35 a day or less, while many stay at home mothers receive no compensation, security, or benefits. However, mothers engage fantasies of idealized maternal value, in spite of the evidence, because they are invested in the cultural narrative that the sacrifices of motherhood garner rewards beyond monetary remuneration. Indeed, all of the interviewed executives had an appreciation for the socially constructed meaning of “motherhood.” So, while the commercial reinscribes the oppressiveness of the job description, mothers are appeased by the idea that their children, in some imagined future, will share a collective respect and genuine gratitude for their performance of motherhood. In essence, mothers want to believe that they are cherished beyond their functionality; and, within the context of this advertisement, the cultural demands of maternal love, selflessness and perfection are legitimized by the utopian fantasy that motherhood *is* recognized as prestigious employment with an appreciative audience beyond the family.

While the “World’s Toughest Job” commercial reproduces and celebrates maternal labour that conforms to an idealized image of maternity, Fiat’s “The Motherhood” (YouTube) commercial¹ reinscribes the ideal by marketing its ironic inversion. It sells the fantasy of maternal identity as a site of resistance, promising power through open defiance and meaningful identification with place and community; however, irony inevitably invalidates the hope of rebellion and the normative representation, actualized through consumption, becomes the default source of maternal redemption. The mother in the commercial is figured as a gangster rapper living in the “mother-hood.” The idea of the “hood” is synonymous with a ghetto neighbourhood and, by default, with segregation and the material reality of oppression. The utopian function of this narrative is to advance the hope that resistance invites a collective and liberatory response to oppression; however, in the case of this advertisement, the fantasy of rebellious solidarity is raised only for the purposes of reinscribing a socially acceptable definition of maternity. Jameson writes, “the dominant white middle-class groups -- already given over to anomie and social fragmentation and atomization -- find in the ethnic and racial groups ... the image of some older collective ghetto or ethnic neighborhood solidarity” (146). Here, the gangster image of the mother-hood is appropriated by marketeers for the utopian value of the perceived and idealized solidarity that can be found through class struggle and resistance; however, the speaker’s obvious privilege, as evidenced by her white upper middle-class status, nullifies any legitimate claim to power through the conditions of oppression.

In the case of this advertisement, the socially prescribed maternal identity is reinforced by the commercial's presentation of its antithesis for humorous effect. The image of the mother as a gangster rapper becomes an immediate source of derision and, subsequently, any evidence of real or attempted resistance is ultimately defused by the humour implied by the suggestion that mothers are cool or transgressive. In spite of the self-deprecating humour, mothers are drawn to this narrative of maternal grace under fire, because it assuages women's fear that they are alone in their unspoken ambivalence toward the motherhood mandate.

In keeping with Jameson's theory, the anxieties generated by the conditions of motherhood are addressed for the sake of containment. In this case, containment is accomplished through the re-appropriation and rebranding of mother-hood as a site of belonging. The speaker's license plate, "Mother4Ever," addresses and subdues the fear of life-long servitude with the promise of communal identification. Jameson argues that "the family itself, seen as a figure of collectivity [is] the object of a Utopian longing" (147); and, in this advertisement, the collective of the family, as well as an implied community of similarly afflicted mothers, are employed as selling features to reinforce the socially prescribed definition of the maternal. In the ad, the mother's oppressive circumstances are neutralized by the control she exercises over her domain: "this is *my* crib and these are *my* babes." In other words, her power is established through identification with both the place and community that define the 'mother-hood.' Like the 'hoods' featured in rap culture, the mother-hood is a warzone; however, in this commercial, the mother's narrative is not a battle cry, but a mock-heroic epic of pseudo class struggle and survival. She says, "We use to talk about our lives, but now the conversation switches, we compare cesarean scars and episiotomy stitches." The terms of personal identity have shifted: relationships used to be established through connection, whereby the Self was the primary subject or 'text;' however, these war wounds, or signs of the embattled performance of motherhood, now take precedence over the broader context of women's lives.

This shift acknowledges the anxiety of middle-class women who feel betrayed by prescribed definitions of the maternal that eclipse more expansive understandings of Selfhood. As well, anxiety concerning the compromised stability of mothers' class status and personal economic security are raised when the speaker comments, "traded my sexy handbag for a snot stained sack;" and, when she laments, "my decor was smart, my taste was extra picky/Now my surfaces are cluttered, and nearly always sticky;" as well as her reference to her "designer sofa... [that now has] puke in the stitches." However, the speaker's frustration with the oppressive conditions of the mother-hood is ultimately dismissed by the humour generated by the evident contrast between her privileged position and the genuine victimization recalled by her association with rap culture and

ghetto survival. So, though the narrative outlining the deterioration of her autonomy and social security is legitimate, any claim to real sympathy is dismissed by the juxtaposition of her circumstances with the material conditions of genuine class struggle and racial oppression. The speaker's frustrated efforts to recover or reinvent her identity continue to be represented as a source of entertainment, rather than a sincere quest for Self-actualization. The speaker acknowledges that any attempt to escape the 'mother-hood' and the conditions of oppression, by recovering the dignity of her pre-maternal Self, is futile. She speaks of various diets and campaigns of exercise, but nothing has reversed the reality that her "life and body have somewhat changed." She says that she "tried to get her body back with some yogalates ... zumba class ... [and] these new pilates," and confides, "still got my wardrobe, but my thong now itches." In addition to these class-signifying approaches to physical recovery, her attempted Self-restoration through genuine intellectual development is also abandoned. She confesses that her book club is simply a charade to provide a socially acceptable venue to consume alcohol: "I joined a book club just so I could drink some wine."

Finally, the speaker's attempt to re-figure her oppression as a source of strength and resistance is ultimately degraded by humour, as the height of her enacted transgression is the ability to "pop a nappy on [the baby's] butt without a changing mat." In light of the speaker's failure to reinvigorate her former feminine identity or to convincingly sell her gangster image, she settles for definition through compliance with consumer culture's commodified expectations of motherhood. She brags, "My sterilizer's so dope, all my bottles be gleamin." Here the speaker compromises any claim to transgression by acquiescing, through consumption, to the reified image of the 'mother.' Given the speaker's pride in performativity, her postured resistance now rings hollow, as just one of many reproducible identities that thinly mask the desperation of genuine maternal oppression. Glimpses of this desperation are offered in the ad by the speaker's comment that she "would sell both kidneys just to get some rest," as well as her off-handed remark that she "spent three months in pyjamas, it was clearly a sign." Though she fails to name exactly the import of this sign, the reference to neglected self-care is suggestive of the possibility of postpartum depression, a frequently silenced maternal experience²; however, though the speaker's desperation and anxiety continually surface, their primary function is their entertainment value.

The degradation of the speaker's postured resistance is further reinforced by the misleading claim that she is "expressive," which we discover is not a reference to her capacity to give voice to oppression, but rather to her compliance with her doctor's imperative to breastfeed: "I express all the time, cause the doctor says to not breastfeed is a crime." Though breastfeeding is an embodied act,

often identified as a source of empowerment for mothers, it is interesting that it is used here to demonstrate the speaker's conformity through consumption and adherence to mandated maternal practice. Therefore, though the figure of the gangster rapper is used to sell the fantasy of authenticity through resistance, the speaker's deferral to expert texts and eventual acquiescence to the trappings of consumer culture perpetuate the institution of motherhood. Ultimately, the commercial utilizes the fantasy of strength in solidarity to quell maternal anxiety regarding the overwhelming commitment implied by motherhood. Indeed, both the fear and promise of the 'mother-hood' is its lifetime membership. The speaker's refrain reminds the audience that while motherhood might be oppressive, it offers the perk of collectivity: "It's the motherhood, it's another hood,/And once you're in the club, you're in for good." The anxiety generated by the realization of the inescapable nature of this 'club' is addressed and simultaneously contained. The psychic "horse-trading" to which Jameson refers is accomplished, in this example, through women's sense of identification with the strength and versatility celebrated as inherent to the normative practice of mothering. In other words, mothers are placated by this representation, as it extols mothers for their composure and competence in the face of a litany of daily battles: she's a "school-run-taker, fairy-cake-baker, deal-maker, orgasm-faker, nit-raker, rattle-shaker,/Cheese-grater, night-time-waker ... placater, peacemaker."

While the oppressiveness of these combined duties becomes fodder for entertainment, the acknowledgment of maternal hardship seduces mothers through the illusory comfort of recognition and collectivity. Ironically, in spite of the speaker's defiant tone, her status as 'mother' is ultimately defined by her self-proclaimed conformity to traditional, idealized images of the maternal, such as "placater [and] peacemaker." In other words, acquiescence is commodified through a brief and ironic claim to resistance, which is finally contained through identification with the power of peacekeeping and the fantasy of social harmony made possible through conformity and consumption. In fact, the advertisement assures the audience that the utopian vision of upward mobility and ontological security, potentially compromised by life in the mother-hood, can be reclaimed through ownership of a new, white Fiat. Indeed, Alison Clarke argues that "the process of 'becoming a mother' involves simultaneity of materiality and social conceptualization" (Clarke, 56) and that it is ultimately through consumption that women "make their babies ... and themselves as mothers" (59). The promise of communal identification through material acquisition, then, is used to assuage legitimate maternal malcontent that has the potential to actualize into 'real' resistance and genuine calls for liberation. The automobile, in this context, becomes a sign of the speaker's complicity with the ideological function of motherhood. Her narrative of tormented maternity is

undermined by the spoils of consumer culture, which fulfill a fantasy of collective identity based not on resistance, but on shared patterns of consumption. So, rather than exposing the conditions of the marginalized war-zone that is the 'mother-hood,' toward the project of emancipating mothers from mediated realities that engender inauthenticity, the speaker mollifies maternal anxiety by representing the mother-hood as a place where harmony is ultimately enabled through normative performance, enhanced by consumption, in spite of the occasional rebellious musical interlude.

Humour, like sentiment, is disarming. In these advertisements, reified maternal identities are manipulated through recourse to an idealized image of the maternal that arouses sympathy, in the first case; and, in the later example, through an ironic treatment of maternal oppression. In both cases, the containment of legitimate maternal anxiety is accomplished through manipulation that utilizes and indulges fantasies of adoration, power and belonging to foster complicity with reified images of motherhood. However, consumable narratives of maternity are sites of pseudo-belonging that seduce mothers through the mechanism of mediation, which inverts reality and prompts identification with, and adherence to, myths of motherhood and the ideological function of 'perfect' parenting. Like all consumables, however, the myth is manufactured. Commodification denies mothers their authentic presence, rendering them copies of the fiction they have been sold. In truth, mothers are particularly vulnerable to utopian fantasies that allay anxieties regarding the conditions in which they labour, as most mothers secretly long to indulge "narrative constructions of imaginary resolutions ... and illusions of social harmony" (Jameson 142). For this reason, Thurer argues that "mothers ... cling to an ideal that can never be reached but somehow cannot be discarded" (340). In truth, to some extent, we want to live the lie. Mothers ascribe to the myth of maternal perfection because they want to believe in an all-consuming, self-less love beyond ideological fictions; however, fantasies of idealized maternal devotion and empowerment, such as those featured in these commercials, perpetuate women's vulnerability to cultural myths and inauthentic expressions of Selfhood.

In a world in which experience is increasingly disembedded and mediated by culture, the mother remains a symbolic site of human continuity and grounded referentiality. Given this context, it is not surprising that the personal experience of mothering has been reified and manipulated by consumer culture to support the interests of capitalism. Through the mechanisms of repression and wish fulfillment characteristic of commodified representations, 'mother' is defined as anything we are willing to buy: She is both Director of Operations and gangster from the mother-hood. She is any commodity that satisfies our collective fantasy of her perfection. By exploiting such fantasies, the market serves its ideological function and effectively alienates mothers from embodied

consciousness and restoration of Self as the 'primary text.' Authentic maternal identity will only be possible, therefore, when individual mothers share diverse stories of personal experience that liberate the narrative of motherhood from the manipulations of consumer culture. In this way, the Self is potentially restored as the original referent in the negotiated meaning of each woman's evolving concept of Self as mother. As a result, mothers might live, not in accordance with a socially defined job description, but through a reclaimed agency that centralizes personal understandings of mothering toward the composition of authentic narratives of identity.

Consumer culture has a vested interest in the commodification of maternal identity. In the absence of personal meaning as a grounded source of referentiality, women are pacified by reproducible images, consumable Selves, which offer the benefit of familiarity. However, meaningful interrogation of the myth of maternal perfection, has "the potential to free mothers from arbitrary, culturally imposed restraints ... [and] the nervousness parents feels about their adequacy will dissipate when decent people are encouraged to mother in their own decent way" (Thurer 332). These words are succinctly in keeping with Carmen Shields argument that we can only make claims to authenticity when we reframe identity to accord with the meaning of experience over time through personal reflection. In this way, the individual comes to embody her own particular way of knowing and learns to embrace the concept of the Self as the primary or "expert text" (Shields 180). To defy the commodification of Being, it is to this text we must return, through the recovery of an abiding intimacy and presence in lived relationships with both the Self and others. Rich acknowledges the possibilities inherent in a return to the embodied Self as primary referent: "In order to live a fully human life ... we must trust the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (40). In terms of the practice of mothering, no manual or cultural edict is able to impart the wisdom gained through experience. Only through the practice of mothering can women come to accommodate, within the framework of an coherent self-concept, understandings of motherhood that resonate with personal truth. Maternal theorists argue that if women can be free to practice mothering in ways that are personally meaningful, motherhood as an institution will no longer dictate the performance of the maternal role. In essence, by freeing mothers "from an uncritical dependency on an ideology of good mothering that is ephemeral, of doubtful value, unsympathetic to caretakers, arbitrary and literally man-made" (Thurer 341) women will be able to integrate discordant elements of their maternal experience toward a "tenuous equilibrium" (Kurucz, personal communication) that balances social responsibility with a more personal, experiential knowledge of maternity.

¹It is interesting to note that the format of both advertisements is a YouTube video. Issues of class are raised, as the unspoken socioeconomic advantage suggested by the concept of the *digital divide* is that internet access is a sign of class privilege. The intended audience, therefore, is likely middle and upper-middle class mothers, enthusiastic consumers who feel the pressure to compete through consumption and have the means to “buy in” to consumable images of the maternal.

²For a complete etiology and comprehensive discussion of symptoms associated with postpartum depression, see Dalfen.

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