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Affective Dissonance: (post)feminism And Popular Cultural Expressions Of Motherhood

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**AFFECTIVE DISSONANCE: (POST)FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF
MOTHERHOOD**

by

JUDITH LAKÄMPER

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

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DEDICATION

For Lina

without whom none of this would have come to matter

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INTRODUCTION

Stay-at-home moms, working mothers, women who have it all: these are some of the figures populating the American popular cultural imagination about “good” mothering. Current political debates about motherhood tend to be centered around questions of women’s reproductive rights and the compatibility of motherhood and career. In the so-called Lean-in-Debate and Mommy Wars, which antagonize women with opposing viewpoints on the compatibility of motherhood and career, contestations of motherhood spread from print publications through popular media and the blogosphere.¹ Answers to the question of what it means to be a “good” mother are marked by divisions of race, class, sexuality, and age, and are measured by the impact certain actions and decisions – where and how to give birth, whether and how long to nurse, and whether and when to resume professional careers – have on the child(ren). Experiences of pain, affection, attachment, co-dependence, frustration, anxiety, and despair as well as the concomitance of any (or all) of these are discursively simplified if not neglected, perpetuating an ideological structure in which the role of mothers continues to be defined through their contribution to a common good (i.e., patriarchy, the institution of the family, raising productive future citizens, etc.).

While these are not particularly new issues – on the contrary, Betty Friedan’s analysis of the experiences of motherhood in *The Feminine Mystique* is frequently credited with having started second wave feminism² – the fact that the discursive simplification continues to override, but also to produce the complexity of embodied experiences connected to mothering and motherhood indicates a need to explore further the ways in which maternal bodies encounter dominant ideological structures. Mothering as an experience is intensely visceral and thus personal in nature, but at the same time it is

¹ Both of these debates were triggered by books of the same name. See Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2013), and Leslie Morgan Steiner, *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families* (New York: Random House, 2007).

² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; repr., New York: Norton, 2001).

one of the most publicly discussed, governed, and regulated processes of life in contemporary America. The ubiquity of debates surrounding motherhood may be seen as directly provoked by its personal nature: because they are embodied, and thus so personal, experiences of mothering and motherhood are difficult to predict, control, and regulate so that any attempt to do so has to operate on a most personal level. The moment of conception, the fear caused by a series of testing for potential illnesses, the first ultrasound image, the growing, moving human body inside one's own, the process of birthing, and (potentially) the co-dependency for nurture and relief during breastfeeding are all highly prescribed by popular, political, and medical discourses. However, because these experiences are primarily and intensely visceral, there is a significant potential for bodies to be affected in ways other than those that are discursively constructed as appropriate or normal. In what follows, I explore this moment of friction in which maternal bodies are affected in incalculable ways by the experiences of gestation, the encounter with the (born or unborn) child, and the consequences of becoming a mother, as well as the emotional, physical, affective, and discursive responses triggered by such experiences.

It may be a commonplace that nothing can prepare one for motherhood, but little scholarly work has been done to examine exactly what it is that is so unsettling about becoming a mother. In *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*, psychosociologist Lisa Baraitser argues that the experience of motherhood is characterized precisely by its potential to produce a new kind of subjectivity that emerges from fleeting moments that have the “capacity to disrupt.”³ In her book, which draws from personal anecdotes as much as from psychoanalytic theory, Baraitser asks:

What is it like to be exposed to incessant crying, incessant demands, incessant questioning, incessant interruption? What is it like to love a child? What is it like to bear witness to a child in the grip of a tantrum? What is it like to be physically burdened by a child and their “stuff”, to negotiate the child-plus-buggy-plus-changing mat-plus-nappies-plus-bag-plus-juice bottle around the urban landscape? What do these experiences feel like and do to us? (11)

³ Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2009), quotation on 11.

Arguing that answers to these questions most interestingly emerge in brief instants that have the potential to produce “new experiences, sensations, moods, sensibilities, intensities, kinetics, tinglings, janglings, emotions, thoughts, perceptions” (3), Baraitser suggests that we think of these moments of new sensations as “‘hiccups’, or unaccommodations in the daily lived experience of mothering” (11). In this dissertation, I interrogate popular cultural representations of such unsettling moments and of the shift in consciousness they produce. I claim that these maternal “unaccommodations” take place when embodied, material experiences of motherhood do not quite cohere with the expectations raised by ideological constructions of “good” motherhood, an experience I describe as “affective dissonance.”⁴

My analysis relies on an understanding of the tenets of the ideological configuration of the “good” mother. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), sociologist Sharon Hays shows that current ideals of “good” motherhood prescribe a mode of parenting that she calls “intensive mothering,” i.e., a “gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children.”⁵ The activities that are central to this kind of mothering must be “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (54). In its emphasis on the mother’s emotional and physical investment in the child, this model of mothering is noticeably inflected by the categories of race, class, and sexuality: it is primarily the white, wealthy, heterosexual mother who is configured as both able to and desired to mother in these terms. As I emphasize throughout, women who do not fit this heteronormative ideal are categorically excluded from the possibility of being a “good” mother.⁶

⁴ It was not until after the completion of this manuscript that I came across the phrase in Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: 0 Books, 2010), 7.

⁵ Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), quotation on x.

⁶ For a brief genealogy of this ideology as well as a discussion of its limitations of race, class, and sexuality, see my chapter, “Maternity,” in *Gender: Love*, Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Jennifer Nash (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Library Reference, 2017), 63–77. For a more extensive historical overview, see Shari Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).

The ideology of “good” motherhood is deeply entwined with the popular cultural rhetoric of postfeminism, which lauds feminism and claims that its goals have been achieved, while at the same time, and in the name of the same feminism, reinscribing structures of the patriarchal order. This rhetoric both de-politicizes feminist concerns and idealizes traditional images of motherhood. British feminist theorist Angela McRobbie, who discusses postfeminism in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, argues that there is a backlash in contemporary culture against second and third-wave feminism and their major achievements.⁷ Even if this is not the first time feminism has experienced a backlash (second wave feminism, for instance, presumably rose out of the backlash experienced during the Cold War and its culture of confinement), this recent backlash operates more subtly by acknowledging the feminist movement as a necessity, albeit not of the present, but of the past.⁸ As McRobbie suggests convincingly, “in popular culture there is ... an undoing or dismantling of feminism [T]here is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such is something women can do without” (8). Contemporary popular culture and media discourses try to convince their audiences that feminism has lost its political relevance because social injustices based on gender and its racial, ethnic, and sexual intersections are not systemic, but questions of individual choice in an environment that is constructed as one of unrestricted freedom and agency.

This is specifically evident in popular cultural discourses surrounding motherhood: debates such as the Lean-In-debate and the Mommy Wars openly display a rhetoric of empowerment and choice. Within such a rhetorical framework, motherhood is no longer perceived and represented as a role which comes “naturally” to women, but rather one that is chosen. This perspective undermines any potential criticism of the structural factors that shape contemporary motherhood. In conjunction

⁷ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009).

⁸ The narrative of coherent feminist “waves” has been contested by a number of feminist scholars and theorists (see e.g., Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2011]). For the purpose of my argument here, suffice it to say that various feminist and anti-feminist forces coexist and respond to each other in public and popular cultural discourses.

with a mothering ideology that suggests that choosing to practice intensive mothering will lead to happiness, the postfeminist “sensibility”⁹ continues to discourage maternal accounts that differ from the ideal of maternal bliss from shaping the cultural imagination.

Hays’ work on ideologies of motherhood appeared alongside a surge of other publications about motherhood during the 1990s.¹⁰ It is situated within the larger academic field of motherhood studies, the emergence of which can be traced back to the publication of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). In this book, Rich distinguished between “two meanings of motherhood,” namely “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” and “the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (13, emphasis in the original). This distinction juxtaposes the individual experience of motherhood and the ways it has been “*defined and restricted under patriarchy*” (14, emphasis in the original). Contemporary motherhood studies often follow this paradigm and analyze experiences of motherhood in contrast to ideological formations of “good” motherhood.

However, as Samira Kawash demonstrates in her overview essay, “New Directions in Motherhood Studies” (2011), the relationship between motherhood and academic feminism has been fraught since its inception. Many feminists of the 1970s and 1980s were fighting against the oppressive nature of motherhood-as-institution, “while at the same time working to incorporate the perspectives and needs of women as mothers” (Kawash, 970). There was a brief surge of research centered around mothers and maternal experiences in the 1990s, which was quickly followed by a decade of near-silence. Kawash links this decline to the demise of “difference feminism” – i.e., feminism that based its political claims for equality on the acknowledgement of gender differences – and the ensuing

⁹ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007): 147–166, doi: 10.1177/1367549407075898. For more on postfeminist rhetoric, see Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005) and Susan Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work Is Done* (New York: Times, 2010).

¹⁰ See Samira Kawash, “New Directions in Motherhood Studies,” *Signs* 36.4 (2011): 969–1003.

concern that research about mothers might fall into the “pitfalls and limitations of essentialist thinking” (972). What is more, feminist scholars viewed research about motherhood skeptically, suspecting it to be “aligned with conservative ‘family values’ agendas that conflicted with feminist goals” (972). When scholars did consider motherhood, their work was often dedicated to emphasizing “the possibilities for expressing their feminist commitments through and in their mothering” (973).¹¹ In other words, throughout the history of scholarly engagement with it, motherhood was interrogated in its relation to feminism.

This fraught relationship continues to reverberate in motherhood research that employs a poststructuralist methodology. Such research builds on poststructuralist feminist analyses of the discursive constructions of gender and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and age. While such analyses, importantly, draw attention to the ways in which ideologies of motherhood are inflected by other categories of identity, they lack extensive discussions of the material forces these constructions entail. My dissertation aims at exploring the ways in which cultural, social, and political discourses continue to shape how maternal bodies orient themselves toward or away from certain objects via hopes, expectations, disappointments et cetera – in short, how these discourses continue to shape mothers’ affective lives. Such an approach implies a collapse of the distinction between experience and institution suggested by Rich: rather than seeing the two as separate forces, I explore how they constitute each other.¹² Interrogating the ways in which maternal experience is constituted through an encounter between ideologies of “good” motherhood and embodied maternity, I argue for a nuanced

¹¹ See e.g., Andrea O’Reilly, *Feminist Mothering* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008). O’Reilly is one of the leading figures in putting motherhood studies on the academic map. She is the founder of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI), which has its own journal dedicated entirely to the study of motherhood and is linked to Demeter Press, an independent feminist press publishing almost exclusively in the field.

¹² Baraitser similarly declares that she uses the terms of experience and institution interchangeably “in a bid to trouble the notion that ‘experience’ might lie outside of the cultural, political and social institutions that both shape and are shaped by it” (160).

understanding of how individuals engage both critically and affectively with the discourses they encounter in their everyday lives.

Like other poststructuralist feminist work, much of the research conducted in the field of motherhood studies is particularly invested either in asserting the feminist potential of mothering as an experience or activity, or in deconstructing mothering ideology and opposing it to the “reality” of the everyday. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue in the introduction to their edited volume *Material Feminisms*, “although postmoderns claim to reject all dichotomies, there is one dichotomy that they appear to embrace almost without question: language/reality.”¹³ Scholars taking this approach consider materiality to be “entirely constituted by language” (2). Indeed, Alaimo and Hekman claim, “postmoderns have turned to the discursive pole as the exclusive source of the constitution of nature, society, and reality” (2). When motherhood scholars take such an approach, they often focus on dissecting discursive constructions of motherhood, as did Hays, and on emphasizing the ways in which maternal subjectivity is constituted in and by those terms.

In contrast, the essays collected in *Material Feminisms* shift attention to the body from a feminist point of view that “build[s] on rather than abandon[s] the lessons learned in the linguistic turn” (6).

Alaimo and Hekman suggest that,

We need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant force. Women *have* bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure. . . . We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representation, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration. (4)

What emerges in the work of the scholars assembled by Alaimo and Hekman, then, is a feminist approach to theories of the body that “account[s] for how the discursive and the material interact in the constitution of bodies” (7), i.e., a material feminist approach. It is this emphasis on the materiality

¹³ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., “Introduction,” in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Alaimo and Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1–19, quotation on 2.

of bodily experience and the notion that it is an active factor in constituting subjectivities that motivates my interrogation of cultural expressions of contemporary motherhood.

Interestingly, new materialist feminism, despite its focus on corporeal experience, so far has shied away from exploring matters of motherhood. None of the essays included in Alaimo and Hekman's volume consider the materiality of motherhood, and if there are any book length studies on the subject they have yet to be widely recognized. In this dissertation, I draw attention to the materiality of maternal experience and ask how maternal subjectivities are constituted at the intersection of heteronormative ideology and such embodied experience. In this sense, the analysis that follows is a response to political theorist Samantha Frost's demand that "feminists leaven our analyses of the discursive constitution of embodiment and material objects with an acknowledgment of the forces, processes, capacities, and resiliencies with which bodies, organisms, and material objects act both independently of and in response to discursive provocations and constraints."¹⁴ In particular, the chapters that follow consider the ways in which, for instance, emotional responses to the experience of motherhood, material conditions of life with a newborn, the bodily functions of lactation, and sexual desires respond to and interfere with ideological notions of what it means to be a "good" mother.

In order to explore the entanglements of embodied experience and dominant ideologies, I draw on another branch of theory which conceptualizes ways to move "beyond" the perceived impasse of poststructuralist analysis, a theoretical framework that some scholars have described as the "affective turn."¹⁵ Scholarly work with a focus on affect, rooted in several humanistic disciplines, has led to the new field of affect studies. To speak of a "field" is not to say that there is much coherence,

¹⁴ Samantha Frost, "The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology," in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed. H. E. Grasswick (New York: Springer, 2011), 69–83, quotation on 70.

¹⁵ See e.g., Patricia T. Clough and Jean Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, Duke University Press 2007) and Melissa Gregg and Greg J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

or even that affect theorists work with consistent definitions of the term. On the contrary, in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth identify as many as eight different approaches to the field, all of which offer a differently weighed and nuanced understanding of the term as well as of the payoff of the so-called affective turn.¹⁶

In an attempt to offer a broad definition of the term, one might say that affect describes (human and nonhuman) bodies' capacities "to act and be acted upon" (Gregg/Seigworth, 1), "to affect and to be affected."¹⁷ Most affect scholars share a basic interest in acknowledging, identifying, and reevaluating forms of knowing that diverge from the dominance of cognition in the sciences brought about by the Enlightenment. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we see an emerging focus on the "visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion" (Gregg/Seigworth, 1). This understanding of affect is inherently relational: it interrogates the relationship between bodies and their capacity to affect and be affected in an encounter that is shaped by the particularity of its surrounding.

Gregg and Seigworth identify two strands that have been equally influential and that position themselves in opposition to one another. One line builds on the psychology of Silvan Tomkins and was taken up by, among others, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank.¹⁸ Following Tomkins, Sedgwick defines affect by distinguishing it from drive, but while both are considered "thoroughly embodied, as well as more or less intensively interwoven with cognitive processes," affects are much less constricted in terms of time, aim, and object: "Affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things,

¹⁶ Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 1–25.

¹⁷ Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvi–xix, quotation on xvi.

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

including other affects.”¹⁹ Importantly, Sedgwick also discusses the relation between affect and emotion: she maintains (again, following Tomkins) that there is “a limited number of affects [which] combine to produce what are normally thought of as emotions, which ... are theoretically unlimited in number” (24). In this line of thought, affect, while seen as different from emotion, is almost always thought in conjunction with it.

The second branch of affect theory follows Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their elaboration of Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics*.²⁰ Brian Massumi, in his “Notes on the ‘Translation’ of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,” defines affect as a “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution of that body’s capacity to act” (xvi). In this definition, affect is not only conceived of as distinct and separate from emotion; Massumi also shifts critical attention to the processual nature of being and experience, i.e., processes of (un)becoming. Emotion here is understood as a retrospective cultural construction of affective and thus precognitive modes of experience.

Both strands of affect theory develop from a critical engagement with poststructuralist ideology critique. Some critics see in the turn to affect the potential to move beyond what Sedgwick has called “paranoid reading,” i.e., the common practice in cultural studies to focus analysis primarily on uncovering “evidence of systemic oppression” (126). Sedgwick demonstrates that late twentieth century cultural theory, especially in feminist and queer studies, has often engaged in reading practices that were predominantly targeted at revealing structural injustice and oppression, despite the fact that knowledge of such injustice has become fairly commonplace. She rejects the way in which paranoid reading has become almost mandatory, the primary approach in criticism. Instead, “paranoid inquiry” should be “viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative

¹⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), quotation on 18–19.

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

kinds” (126). Consequently, as Ann Cvetkovich suggests, the turn to affect proposes “new forms of cultural studies, especially those that are not just confined to ideology critique.”²¹ Both scholars cited here thus express a distinct dissatisfaction with poststructuralist cultural analysis. Lauren Berlant, in contrast, emphasizes the continuity between the two approaches. In *Cruel Optimism*, she writes, “affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory; the moment of the affective turn brings us back to the encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way.”²² In Berlant’s view, affect and ideology have to be thought conjointly, their relationship characterized precisely by the way in which they interpenetrate each other. Thus, the turn to affect is not so much a turn away from poststructuralist modes of inquiry, but an expansion that enables the critic to account for affective and embodied forces and their engagement with one’s ideological positioning.

In this sense, some branches of affect theory share a common goal with the new materialist feminist approaches discussed above. Indeed, Gregg and Seigworth’s discussion indicates that there is some overlap between the two approaches. Describing one of the “main orientations” they identify within the broader field of affect studies, the authors explain that,

It attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of “experience” (understood in ways far more collective and external rather than individual and interior), where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm. (7)

In line with their suggestion that the various orientations they typify “undulate and sometimes overlap in their approaches to affect” (6), I conceptualize affective dissonance as both a material, embodied experience and an intensity that can find expression in an emotional response – or lack thereof – to the discursive frameworks encountered by the individual.

²¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), quotation on 5.

²² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), quotation on 53.

In the following pages, then, I draw on this understanding of affect as an embodied force to explore the potential disconnect between our critical ability to deconstruct ideological structures and our bodies' ability to respond to them in a myriad of expected and unexpected, intended and unintended ways, particularly as it pertains to experiences of maternity. Specifically, I look at different instances of cultural narratives about motherhood (memoirs, photographs, and television series) to explore the ways in which bodily encounters with racially, sexually, and socioeconomically rendered ideologies of motherhood produce experiences of affective dissonance. Thus, the following chapters interrogate the relationship between affect theory and ideology critique by thinking through the ways in which cultural narratives partake in the production and reproduction of affects and desires, but also how affective experiences produce new possibilities for positioning ourselves within the world.

My discussion of these cultural texts and images is substantially informed by Sara Ahmed's discussion of affect and its contribution to feminist theory in *The Promise of Happiness*.²³ Ahmed conceptualizes affect around the notion of attachment: "Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (230). Affect thus generates connections between bodies and objects. For Ahmed, "objects" might include specific items, but she takes the term in a broader sense to include other things as well: "Objects would refer not only to physical or material things, but also to anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the senses of values, practice, styles, as well as aspirations" (29). Her arguments about attachments between bodies and objects thus include specific items, but also more abstract concepts such as "the figure of 'the happy housewife'" (2). In this context, it appears necessary to explore the ways in which bodies become attached to things, activities, but also, I suggest, to discourses.

The kinds of connections that can be created between particular bodies and objects are, on the one hand, influenced by evaluative connotations that are present before an encounter: "Before we

23 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

are affected, before something happens that creates an impression on the skin, things are already in place that incline us to be affected in some ways more than others. To read affect we need better understandings of this ‘in place,’ and how the ‘in place’ involves psychic and physical dimensions, which means that the ‘in place’ is not always in the same place” (21). While Ahmed suggests a likelihood of particular links between objects and bodies, she also considers the possibility of affect as contingent in the sense that our bodies cannot be relied on to be affected in specific ways: “Even if you have been directed a certain way, we do not always know what will happen, how we will be affected, by what comes near” (236). To a certain extent, the kinds of connections that are created between bodies and objects are unpredictable.

In order to understand the “what is in place” and the contingency of affect it entails, Ahmed turns to the social dimensions of our affective lives. She argues that objects can never be encountered in a neutral space, i.e., they always already have values attached to them. Thus, we find ourselves oriented toward certain objects in ways that cohere with others’ orientations toward the same objects, which creates a sense of community: “To be affected in a good way by objects that are already evaluated as good is a way of belonging to an affective community” (38). Ideology plays an important part in creating these evaluative systems and affective communities. However, it is precisely at those moments when the alignment with the community breaks that the significance of affect becomes visible. Ahmed calls this “affective alienation.” She explains:

When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good. The gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects. (41)

This moment of alienation is at the heart of the maternal experiences of affective dissonance discussed below. In what follows, I focus on representations of these moments of alienation to explore how

maternal bodies behave in relation to narratives that reproduce the conditions of contemporary life, and what happens when the bodily responses do not fulfill particular expectations.

The insights about postfeminism generated by academics, while illuminating and important, pose several differently weighted questions: how is it that despite our skepticism, our analytical skills, and our familiarity with stereotypical, normative images of gender and its intersections with race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, some of these images are nonetheless powerful and provoke certain desires, such as the desire for a baby? What happens when we cannot resist, despite our theoretical understanding of the constructedness of our subject positions, particular images of good, fulfilled lives, and how are our bodies involved in these processes? In what ways are our processes of decision making influenced by corporeal experiences of media discourses and the anticipation of feelings?

Each chapter in this dissertation follows a similar trajectory. They review one or more cultural texts and their critical successes. Each chapter highlights how each set of texts can be and has been evaluated in dualistic terms: either as a challenge to ideological representations of motherhood or a reinforcement thereof. Drawing on the notion of affective dissonance, each chapter then explores why and how such evaluations are inadequate as they tend to neglect material, affective, and embodied maternal experiences. This is not to suggest that ideological representations do not matter or that we should not engage with them. Rather, I draw on the various moments of affective dissonance to illustrate how ideological constructions of “good” motherhood bring particular embodied experiences into being, regardless of whether these experiences reinforce or challenge culturally disseminated ideals.

In the first chapter, I draw on Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* to conceptualize the notion of affective dissonance. I demonstrate how famous working mothers like Sandberg and comedian Tina Fey provide accounts of their difficulties with identifying as “women who have it all,” although they are often perceived in such terms. I suggest that

the framework of affective dissonance provides useful insight into the discrepancy they experience between their own sense of self and the public perception of them as “women who have it all.” I argue that both Sandberg and Fey fail to contribute to a renewed political feminism because they disavow their experience of affective dissonance, rather than actualizing its political potential. These “women who have it all” are entrenched in postfeminist neoliberal discourses of choice and agency, which locks them in frameworks of identity politics, foreclosing the possibility of an ethics of solidarity necessary for a feminist movement that might produce political transformation.

Chapter 2 further develops the notion of affective dissonance by reading postpartum depression as an example thereof. The chapter focuses on three memoirs written by women who suffered from postpartum depression and highlights how each describes the depression in terms of a discrepancy between the expectations of bliss created by popular cultural narratives of motherhood and the material experiences of fatigue, irritability, anxiety, inexplicable bouts of crying, changes in appetite, and loss of concentration and memory that dominated the first months after childbirth for these writers. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Elizabeth A. Wilson, I argue that postpartum depression is best understood as a biosocial condition that is produced at the intersection between ideological framework, individual expectation, and the material reality of early motherhood. The notion of affective dissonance, in this chapter, underscores that postpartum depression does not simply betray popular cultural narratives of maternal bliss as “unrealistic,” but rather that it is produced by and through the maternal body’s encounter with these narratives. The material experience of postpartum depression, experienced as affective dissonance in and by the maternal body, thus reveals the ideological promise of blissful motherhood as one that is bound to be broken.

Chapter 3 discusses three visual representations of breastfeeding and the ways in which affective dissonance figures into their presentation of the maternal body. While one image that was

circulated widely via Instagram, other social networks, and popular news sites presents a model's naked body that fulfills contemporary beauty standards and does not show any material traces of motherhood, the other two images, both art photography, depict non-normative versions of contemporary motherhood. Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* reflects the art historical tradition of the Madonna-child motif, but undermines its normative content in various ways. Less explicitly in conversation with more traditional images of early motherhood, Elinor Carucci's photograph, "The Drop," zooms in on the material traces of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing on one woman's body, without including the face, thereby denying the viewer an immediate entry point through which s/he might try to access the woman's emotions. The juxtaposition of these three images provides a visualization of affective dissonance which materializes at the intersection between heteronormative ideologies and embodied maternity.

Chapter 4 turns to the Showtime series *The L Word* (2004–2009) and explores the ways in which various maternal bodies in the show experience affective dissonance. As the first major television series explicitly focusing on a group of lesbian women, *The L Word* was met with as much excitement about its non-normative protagonists as it was with criticism for depicting the women in what Lisa Duggan calls "homonormative" terms.²⁴ Throughout its six seasons, *The L Word* introduced multiple mothers, particularly centering on the material and embodied dimension of lesbian and queer maternal experiences. Following these characters' road to motherhood, the series interrogates how heteronormative notions of (biological) kinship, the ideological ideal of de-sexualized heterosexual pregnancy and maternity, and the discursive link between femininity and reproduction impact how non-heterosexual and queer mothers might experience their pregnant and maternal bodies. The chapter suggests that the depiction of affective dissonance on screen functions to queer motherhood

²⁴ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

writ large. Moreover, the chapter explores the possibility of another dimension of affective dissonance, namely how it might impact the consumer of these cultural texts. Arguing that *The L Word* not only depicts affective dissonance on screen, but also has the potential to produce it in viewers, i.e., to cause them to pause and reflect on the relationship between ideological constructions and embodied experiences of motherhood, the chapter gestures toward the broader political and ethical implications of the concept.

The analysis of the complexities that characterize the experience of contemporary motherhood is of very practical, political interest. Analyzing popular cultural discourses and how they construct certain expectations, but also how maternal bodies respond to them allows us to take more seriously experiences such as postpartum depression. My focus on the very different ways in which mothers experience seemingly similar circumstances allows me to emphasize the need to adjust possibilities and opportunities that consider individuality more thoroughly. On a political level, this might entail a demand for more flexible work environments not only for part time work but also for women seeking full time careers. This pertains not only, but also to women in the academy: the high demands of full time jobs in a number of professions make it increasingly difficult to coordinate professional, familial, and, no less importantly, personal needs and expectations. Critical consideration of the contingency of affect allows us to bring our individuality back into a debate that is very often dominated by discourses of justice and equality – discourses that aim to create equal opportunities for people who may or may not have similar experiences.

Second, I hope to provide theoretical insights that are relevant not only in the context of feminist or gender studies, but also for the field of affect theory. My engagement with the relationship between affect and ideology addresses an issue that is at the heart of current debates on affect, and this dissertation contributes to this discussion. While it is important to consider experiences of mothering and motherhood since they are so specifically visceral in nature, other experiences are

similarly structured by the contingency of affect, and thus their potential for the disruption of ideology needs to be taken into account as well. Exposing and analyzing moments of affective dissonance to show when and where ideology generates particular affects allows us to understand and acknowledge the extent to which the successful reproduction of ideological structures depends on affective complicity. In this sense, my argument complicates poststructuralist approaches to cultural criticism in that it acknowledges that understanding the discursive construction of our subject positions might not necessarily alter our affective attachments to particular objects. My dissertation will therefore show how affect theory can be used to complement ideology critique in several different contexts in order to shed light on the ways in which subjectivities are constituted as much by desires and expectations elicited by heteronormative ideologies as they are by the experience of their inadequacy.

CHAPTER 1: WHEN *BOSSYPANTS LEAN IN*: AFFECTIVE DISSONANCE, NEOLIBERAL POSTFEMINISM, AND THE FORECLOSURE OF SOLIDARITY

She has two full-time jobs, perfect children, cooks three meals a day, and is multi-orgasmic “til dawn”: This is how Gloria Steinem describes an ideal that circulates within contemporary culture: the “woman who has it all.”²⁵ Public figures like Tina Fey, Angelina Jolie, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sheryl Sandberg appear as embodiments of this ideal, sharing good looks and the ostensible ability to coordinate successful and busy careers with the demands of family life. The myth of the “woman who has it all” has replaced the myth of the “happy housewife,” which was at the heart of second wave feminist critiques ranging from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976). In her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), which climbed the bestseller list quickly after its publication, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg takes on the idea that women can have it all and offers a mixture of critique and affirmation as she encourages women to take control of their careers and strive for leadership positions. *Lean In* suggests that many of the obstacles women face in the labor market are internal and that “leaning in” to their careers will help women overcome these obstacles.

The publication of *Lean In* produced a wide range of commentary, oscillating between enthusiastic proclamations of Sandberg’s feminist agenda and rejections of her participation in contemporary backlash culture. On the one hand, American cultural critic Judith Warner, in an opinion piece titled “Why Sandberg Matters For All Women,” celebrates Sandberg’s book for its potential to give the “now much-repudiated women’s movement an invaluable boost,” and to produce a “cultural change that would improve the lives of all women.”²⁶ Contrarily, it is precisely this

²⁵ “Gloria Steinem on Progress and Women’s Rights,” *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, Oprah Winfrey Network, YouTube video, 3:51, 16 April 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orrmWHnFjqI>. A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in *Feminist Theory*, and I would like to thank Carolyn Pedwell and the two blind reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and edits, which helped develop the ideas and polish the writing here and throughout the entire dissertation.

²⁶ Judith Warner, “Why Sandberg Matters for Real Women,” *Time*, 7 March 2013, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/03/07/why-sandberg-matters-for-real-women/>.

applicability to all women that other critics contest. For instance, in her *Feminist Wire* essay, “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In,” bell hooks acknowledges that *Lean In* has allowed feminist discourses to regain currency after a time of ostensible redundancy, but criticizes Sandberg sharply for her limited point of view that derives from her position of sexual, racial, and socioeconomic privilege.²⁷ Her unwillingness to acknowledge such positioning obstructs her appeal to much of her wide target audience and thus prevents Sandberg from providing the feminist manifesto she claims her book to be. In hooks’ words, “Sandberg’s refusal ... to consider a vision that would include all women rather than white women from privileged classes is one of the flaws in the representation of herself as a voice for feminism.” What Sandberg pits as her goal, then, and what Judith Warner sees as the potential in her book, bell hooks denounces outright.

If criticism of Sandberg’s book ranges from enthusiastic proclamations of her feminist agenda to critical rejections of her participation in contemporary backlash culture, it is because there is sufficient evidence for both sides of the argument, as she displays an ambivalent engagement with the ideals of “having it all.” The book continuously offers readers arguments they can hardly disagree with, inviting an acquiescent stance that might lead them to overlook more controversial aspects of her arguments. In bell hooks’ words, Sandberg’s “spiel is so good, so full of stuff that is obviously true, that one is inclined to overlook all that goes unspoken, unexplained.” One example comes from the chapter titled “The Myth of Doing It All,” in which Sandberg warns women that this is the most detrimental idea brought forth by previous generations of feminists. The commonsensical assertion that it is impossible to have it all is undermined by the way in which the larger part of the book is conceptualized as a guidebook for women who strive to reach precisely this ideal, and Sandberg generously shares her advice on how to achieve it. An analysis of these contradictions provides

²⁷ bell hooks, “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In,” *The Feminist Wire*, 28 October 2013, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/>.

important insight into the ways in which contemporary popular cultural representations of ideal femininity as combining career and motherhood impact the everyday lives of women. In what follows, I draw on Lauren Berlant's concept of the genre to argue that Sandberg's response to the ideological figure of the "woman who has it all" is best described as conveying "affective dissonance" - the experienced discrepancy between expectations raised by dominant ideological formations and individual affective responses to such formations. I demonstrate that Sandberg's disavowal of her experience of affective dissonance obstructs her attempts to contribute to a feminist movement that strives for political transformation. Instead, Sandberg reverts to a neoliberal postfeminist agenda that employs a rhetoric of choice and empowerment, thereby foreclosing opportunities for a feminist solidarity across racial, socioeconomic, and sexual boundaries that might engender political transformation. Yet, if taken seriously, I argue, experiences of affective dissonance can provide a basis for solidarity that can boost political feminist movements, pushing beyond identity politics.

Berlant's notion of the genre illuminates Sandberg's complex encounter with the ideological structure of the "woman who has it all."²⁸ Berlant defines a genre as "an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme" (4). She discusses the ways in which popular cultural narratives in the history of American "women's culture" have helped create an imagined sense of community. By presuming common experiences among the members of the group they address, genres simultaneously promise such experiences and create a communal sense through binding members in their devotion to such promises. According to Berlant, genres within women's culture thus function to create an imagined common ground for women of different social, cultural, and

²⁸ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

economic backgrounds. The repeated circulation of form and content of these genres in popular discourses creates a specific set of expectations that precede women's actual experience of a particular moment in their lives. Drawing on this definition, Berlant categorizes femininity as one such genre. Femininity can be regarded as a "structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances" (4). Additionally, she characterizes it as "something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations" (4). Genres thus circulate in popular discourses as ideological structures or frameworks that lead the individual to anticipate certain experiences once a role is assumed and performed.

Berlant's concept of the genre as a discursive formation with which subjects engage affectively rather than cognitively resonates with Louis Althusser's model of ideological interpellation. In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser defines ideology as a representation of "the imaginary relation of ... individuals to the real relations in which they live."²⁹ The aesthetic structures Berlant identifies as genres provide similar representations that allow individuals to imagine their positioning in the world. The encounter with ideological representations is precisely what calls an individual into subjectivity – a process Althusser calls interpellation (118). A pivotal moment in this process is the individual being "hailed" by ideology and recognizing herself as the person being hailed, thereby becoming a subject (118). This becoming-subject is an ambivalent moment as it implies both the individual's status as a free subject with agency, and her willing submission (becoming subject) to an ideological Other (123). Importantly, this process is always one of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) in the Lacanian sense – it is always already an identification and thus appropriation of an externally provided image of constructed self-coherence. This process is naturalized: "It is indeed a peculiarity

²⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (1970; repr., New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126, quotation on 111.

of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are “obviousnesses”) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize*” (116, emphasis in the original). The use of the term “recognize” suggests that for Althusser, the process of the subject coming into being is decidedly cognitive. While ideology, in many cases, is successful in thus constituting subjectivity, Berlant’s understanding of genres allows us to consider affective encounters with discursive formations. In this chapter, I argue that the ambivalent responses to the “woman who has it all” offered in Sandberg’s account exemplify a conflict between the ideological interpellation of the subject and an affective, embodied sense of self which resists this process.

Co-authored with journalist and television writer/producer Nell Scovell, *Lean In* combines the personal anecdotes of celebrity memoirs with the instructive language of self-help manuals, all the while positioning itself as a “feminist manifesto” (9). Although co-author Scovell has been credited with using this term,³⁰ the authorial voice emerging from the text contributes to and draws from Sandberg’s public persona which functioned as a pivotal tool in marketing the book and ensuring its popular success. Throughout the book, Sandberg engages with the idea that women can ‘have it all’ in markedly ambivalent ways. A superficial reading might lead one to conclude that Sandberg rejects this idea as an unobtainable ideal. She observes that “these three little words [having it all] are intended to be aspirational but instead make all of us feel like we have fallen short” (121). In support of this claim, Sandberg cites economics professor Sharon Poczter of Cornell who argues,

The antiquated rhetoric of “having it all” disregards the basis of every economic relationship: the idea of trade-offs. All of us are dealing with the constrained optimization that is life, attempting to maximize our utility based on parameters like career, kids, relationships, etc., doing our best to allocate the resource of time. Due to the scarcity of this resource, ... none of us can “have it all,” and those who claim to are most likely lying. (121)

³⁰ Laura Bennett, “From Vanity Fair to Letterman to Lean In: The Long, Strange Journey of Nell Scovell,” *NYMag.com*, 4 December 2013, <http://nymag.com/the-cut/2013/12/long-strange-journey-of-nell-scovell.html>.

Sandberg thus deconstructs the concept of the “woman who has it all” via the logics of economics: since a decision for one thing is always at the same time a decision against something else, the very notion of “having it all” is not viable from an economic point of view. Yet she does not consider that “having it all” implies a very different set of economic and temporal challenges for women of a socioeconomic status not quite like hers (such as, for instance, single mothers) and that, indeed, men are never faced with such a conundrum at all. Thus, the struggles caused by the cultural ideal of “having it all” are specific to a portion of the female population from a restricted socioeconomic background. Sandberg’s limited understanding or recognition of this factor are what makes her book not a useful source for many of the women she targets. Sandberg’s logic, grounded in an abstract theory of time, obfuscates cultural, financial, and systemic pressures that force each woman to spend inordinate amounts of time on her career and family. Rather than focusing on such systemic factors, Sandberg encourages women to make the most of the situation they are in, and to relinquish their commitment to the idea of having it all. Ultimately, she concludes, “‘Having it all’ is best regarded as a myth” (121).

Sandberg, of course, uses the term “myth” in the colloquial sense of “untruth.” By suggesting that some women claim to have it all, and that they are presumably lying, she fails – or refuses – to acknowledge that the “woman who has it all” is an ideological structure that has a complex relationship with real-life experience. In other words, women rarely claim to “have it all” themselves; rather it is said about them. Sandberg herself has become a poster figure of this ideal, yet her reluctance to identify with it illustrates precisely how elusive the ideal is. Throughout *Lean In*, Sandberg repeatedly describes encounters with this genre, and emphasizes its inadequacy in describing her experiences and her place in the world. Just as she discourages readers to think of her as a “woman who has it all,” she professes her reluctance to think of herself as “powerful.” At one point, she describes her response to the name of a conference hosted by *Fortune* magazine editor Pattie Sellers, the so-called Most Powerful Women Summit. Sandberg had suggested to change the name to “*Fortune* Women’s Conference,” and

emphasizes that she was not the only woman to suggest this change. About this experience, she writes that, “I still struggle with this. I am fine applying the word ‘powerful’ to other women – the more the better – but I still shake my head in denial when it is applied to me” (51). While this may simply be a rhetorically strategic move to present herself as a possible identificatory figure or role model for a diverse audience – what bell hooks calls her “folksy” voice, which allows Sandberg to present herself as “just one of the girls” – her reflection on her refusal to accept this terminology in relation to herself provides a glimpse into the conflicted nature of her encounter with that genre.

Sandberg is not alone in her reluctance to think of herself as a woman who “has it all.” In her memoir *Bosypants*, comedian and producer Tina Fey infamously declares the rudest question one can ask a woman, “How do you juggle it all?”³¹ She elaborates, “People constantly ask me [this question], with an accusatory look in their eyes. ‘You’re fucking it *all* up aren’t you?’ their eyes say” (233, emphasis in the original). In *Lean In*, Sandberg cites this interview and claims:

Fey nails it. Employed mothers and fathers both struggle with multiple responsibilities, but mothers also have to endure the rude questions and accusatory looks that remind us that we’re shortchanging both our jobs *and* our children. As if we needed reminding. Like me, most of the women I know do a great job worrying that we don’t measure up. We compare our efforts at work to those of our colleagues, usually men, who typically have far fewer responsibilities at home. Then we compare our efforts at home to those of mothers who dedicate themselves solely to their families. Outside observers reminding us that we must be struggling – and *failing* – is just bitter icing on an already soggy cake. (122-123, emphasis in the original)

Fey and Sandberg thus take offense at questions regarding the compatibility of work and home life, i.e., the issue of work-life balance, because they feel as though the questions always already imply the impossibility of this ideal and thus a judgment for trying to accomplish it. That the issue nonetheless is real, and affects even those women who condemn questions about it vehemently, is demonstrated by an interview given in 2014 by Fey’s colleague Amy Poehler, a successful comedian, mother, and wife until her separation from her husband in 2012.³² At the outset of the interview, Poehler follows

³¹ Tina Fey, *Bosypants* (New York: Reagan Arthur Books, 2012), quotation on 233.

³² Taffy Brodesser-Ackner, “Poehler Power: Amy Poehler’s Rise to the Top,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, March 2014, 44–49.

Sandberg and Fey in rejecting the question about “juggling it all” as inherently sexist simply because working fathers are never asked this question.³³ However, shortly thereafter, she also implies that the question is one she herself is troubled with. When asked about her friendship with other women, Poehler responds, “I also like hanging out with women who are older than me. I like asking them how they navigate life, what they’ve learned. I respond to people telling me about their experiences rather than telling me what to do” (48). Despite Poehler’s aversion to being asked for advice about coordinating the demands of a busy life, it is evident that she herself looks to other women and their experiences for strategies to negotiate and meet these demands successfully. Rephrasing this concern as one about “navigating life” does not conceal the fact that women like Poehler struggle with it just as much as those women who ask her about it.

The theoretical rejection of the juggle-question as sexist is thus troubled by the reality of day to day life, in which the issue of negotiating a number of different demands can pose a real problem, and tends to do so for women more often than men. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild demonstrates in the 2012 revision of her study *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (first published in 1989), these questions target an important reality in most working women’s lives: while more and more women are joining men in the workforce, whether by choice or necessity, men have not to the same extent joined women in taking care of their children and home (xv). Indeed, even in families where men “happily shared the hours of work, their wives felt more responsible for the home” (8); “men had more control over when they make their contributions” (9); and “men do more of what they’d rather do” (9). Thus, while women like Sandberg and Fey might feel like they have achieved economic and political equality by gaining access to leading professional positions in fields traditionally

³³ Indeed, parenthood has very different consequences for men: in research regarding the probability of being hired for single and married men and women, with or without children, working fathers are found to fare best. See Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*, rev. and with a new afterword, with Anne Machung (New York: Penguin, 2012); and Mary Ann Mason, Nicholas H. Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden, *Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

dominated by men or, as Fey calls it, “the good fortune to be working at my dream job” (233), they are equally perturbed by the implication that the same might not be true for their life at home, or at least for the home life of the millions of women who look to them for advice and leadership.

Assuming that the juggle-questions are genuine rather than judgmental, they illustrate how the inquirers are motivated by an interest in the everyday, or indeed despair about their own perceived failure at fulfilling the expectations to “have it all.” The persistent interest in the way in which Sandberg, Fey, Poehler, and others like them structure their days in order to coordinate their own schedule with the needs of their children and, sometimes, their husbands, indicates a widespread perception of these women as having successful professional careers and fulfilled and fulfilling family lives. Regardless of how adamantly they profess to reject this contemporary ideal of femininity, they are poster figures as “the women who have it all.” Their forceful rejection and open disgust with the question, “How do you juggle it all?” and their continuous reassurance that nobody really can have it all merely demonstrate their inability to identify or recognize themselves as “women who have it all.” If we think of the figure of the “woman who has it all” as a genre in Berlant’s sense, i.e., “a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances” (4), Sandberg’s inability or unwillingness to claim this genre as her identity, i.e., to identify as a “woman who has it all” might derive from a discrepancy between the affective expectations of what it is going to be like to “have it all,” and the emotional and affective experiences involved in trying to actually accomplish such a lifestyle.³⁴

In this sense, Sandberg can be considered what Sara Ahmed calls an “affect alien.” In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed claims that “happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods” (41). Defining affect as “sticky,” or as “what sustains or preserves the connection

³⁴ One should, even if only in a footnote, consider the possibility that this unwillingness is merely a projection or display of emotion, one for which the reader has no evidence, a case of “affected” rather than “affective dissonance.”

between ideas, values, and objects” (230), Ahmed shows how particular objects can be identified with a likelihood to make us feel a certain way, i.e., to raise a particular set of affective expectations. If we are affected by achieving social goods in the expected ways, we are aligned with what Ahmed calls an “affective community.” However, we may become alienated from our affective community if we fail to experience the objects in the expected ways. In this sense, Sandberg’s rejection of the idea that she has it all has less to do with the fact that, economically, no one can ever have it all than with her inability to recognize her experiences as a working mother in the terms suggested by the “aesthetic structure of affective expectation” that is the “woman who has it all.” Since her experience as a working mother does not match the affective expectation generated and reiterated by popular cultural instantiations of the genre, Sandberg is an affect alien. Her struggles as a working – albeit wealthy – mother exemplify female encounters with generic expectational constructs and the personal consequences experienced due to the discrepancy between these genres and one’s own sense of self.

While Ahmed’s concept of affective alienation demonstrates how affective encounters with genres constitute aspects of group belonging, the notion of affective dissonance focuses more specifically on the encounter between the (female) individual and the genre. In her essay, “Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation,” Clare Hemmings conceptualizes “affective dissonance” as an experience that is at the heart of all feminist political activity, and is rooted in a troublesome relationship between ontology and epistemology, a relationship feminism has traditionally struggled with.³⁵ Hemmings relies on Elspeth Probyn’s distinction, in Hemmings words, “between an embodied sense of self and the self we are expected to be in social terms, between the experience of ourselves over time and the experience of possibilities and limits to how we may act or be” (149).³⁶ What Hemmings calls the “onto-epistemological gap,” then, exemplifies the conflict

³⁵ Clare Hemmings, “Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation,” *Feminist Theory* 13.2 (2012): 147–161.

³⁶ Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1993).

between the discursive knowledge available to an individual, and her embodied experience of her position in the world. Biographically, for Hemmings this consisted of beginning to feel the “rather profound differences between my sense of self and the social expectations I occupied with respect to gender and sexuality” (150). The experience of the onto-epistemological gap is triggered by moments in which one’s embodied sense of self does not coincide with the socially constructed version of the self available to the individual. The relationship between these two versions of the self is always under negotiation and thus dynamic. This chapter examines the consequences of a conflict between the ideological construct proffered in popular genres and the individual’s experience of being in the world.

As Hemmings suggests, affective dissonance can be processed in different ways. One might suppress the experience because one is convinced that, “it could be worse, remember” (157), or it might be used to explicate one’s experience and demand change in interpersonal relationships, or it might be utilized to justify political action. As Hemmings puts it: “Affective dissonance cannot guarantee feminist politicisation or even a resistant mode. And yet, it just might...” (157). Hemmings claims that the experience of affective dissonance might be a premise for a woman to be moved toward feminist politicization. She writes that,

In order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance. (150)

Feeling a discrepancy between one’s own experience of being in the world, and the models of identity and positionality available through dominant discourses thus creates a dissonance that can trigger the desire to influence discursive availabilities. Importantly, in this view, feeling precedes knowing: the realization that one’s experience is not properly accounted for in popular discourse begins with an embodied sense of something being “amiss,” before it transforms into knowledge. Sandberg’s experience of the onto-epistemological gap fulfills the premise for political mobilization. However,

her mode of processing the experience of affective dissonance indicates her commitment to the neoliberal status quo.

On the one hand, then, *Lean In* offers the story of a woman who is in a position of power, who could use her economic knowledge as well as her experience of affective dissonance to deconstruct and negate the idea that women can have it all, and she does so explicitly in the chapter I have highlighted above. On the other hand, the rest of her book is nonetheless devoted to providing guidance to other women for them to achieve a fulfilled and fulfilling balance between work and family life, which is the main pillar of the aesthetic structure of affective expectation that Sandberg professes to reject. Some of her chapter titles illustrate the kind of advice Sandberg passes on (despite her claim that her book is “not a self-help book,” 9). In the chapter titled “Sit at the Table,” Sandberg emphasizes the importance of self-fulfilling prophecies and encourages women to display more self-confidence in the workplace in order to advance their careers more successfully.³⁷ In “Don’t Leave Before You Leave,” she advises women to solely focus on the advancement of their careers rather than trying to plan ahead and rejecting career advancement opportunities for fear they might interfere with future family planning.³⁸ In “Make Your Partner a Real Partner,” she discusses the importance of having men become involved in household duties and childcare activities. Taken together, all of these pieces of advice effectively function as a guidebook to achieve family-work balance, the epitome of what it means to “have it all.” As the language in these chapter headings indicates, Sandberg considers the ability to combine high demands of family and career a matter of making the right

³⁷ More recently, this point has been supported by a new study which has popularized the notion that a “confidence gap” is the main source for gender inequality in corporate America. See Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, “The Confidence Gap,” *The Atlantic*, 14 April 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-confidence-gap/359815/>.

³⁸ By virtue of her own biography as well as through the advice offered in the chapter, Sandberg also suggests postponing family planning and childbirth until a career has been established. However, postponing pregnancy into one’s late Thirties may entail a different set of costs. Medically thought to pose significant health risks for mother and child, such ‘later’ pregnancies are often subject to more intense medical monitoring, and women are given fewer options for childbirth. Solutions to the increasing risk of infertility (adoption, in-vitro fertilization [IVF], etc.) may be available to women of Sandberg’s social status, but do not come easy to women with smaller financial means in the case of IVF or, e.g., untraditional family units such as same-sex couples in the case of adoption.

choices – choosing the right appearance, choosing the right reproductive schedule, and choosing the right husband. Making all of these choices, Sandberg suggests, will allow one to be an empowered woman with a successful career and satisfactory work-family balance.

Sandberg unmistakably speaks from a position of sexual, racial, and socioeconomic privilege, and her emphasis on women's choices and responsibilities only applies to women who share such privileges. Hence, she conveniently neglects systemic barriers that other, less privileged, women face. It is precisely this position of privilege which, for Hemmings, obfuscates the onto-epistemological gap. Hemmings remembers feeling deeply offended as an adolescent by the implication of inequalities between men and women. Describing her attitude at the time, she writes, "I was a strong, self-reliant, intellectual equal to any boy or man and would not be told that my chances in life were any less than theirs. I simply would not accept there was something that needed changing" (150). She reconsidered this position later after various experiences had drawn her attention to the utter lack of equality she had previously taken for granted. Retrospectively, she attributes her youthful naiveté to the privileged position enjoyed during her childhood and adolescence: "One might say that I did not see an epistemic realm as distinct from an ontological one precisely because of privileges. My commitment to being 'equal to any man or boy' naturalised the conditions of my own existence, obscuring social relations that enabled this happy belief in the first place" (154). The language Hemmings uses in this section illustrates precisely her entrenchment in ideology in the sense that it demonstrates an understanding of the "imaginary relations" as the "real relations" in which she lived. Hemmings' description of her past self thus offers a snapshot of a time in her life when her sense of being in the world matched that which was ideologically available, and she was thus in a state of ideological alignment, interpellated as ideological subject, and unable not to recognize ideological obviousnesses as such. However, this sense of alignment was later disrupted. Hemmings continues, "I was moved to become a feminist in order to maintain and value my self, and to find an alternate way of being in the world only once I had

experienced the dissonance between my sense of self and the possibilities for its expression and validation” (154). In Hemmings’ case, then, it is the emergence of a feeling that something is amiss that engenders the process of ideology critique. As Eric Shouse writes, these feelings are amplified by affect as intensity.³⁹ As such, the experience of affective intensity implies “an augmentation or diminution in [a] body’s capacity to act” (Massumi qtd. in Shouse). While Sandberg (and Fey) do appear to experience the onto-epistemological gap, they disavow this experience and naturalize the “conditions of their existence.” Their accounts thus repeat and thereby reiterate the genre they profess to undermine.

Sandberg’s mode of disavowal⁴⁰ relies to a large extent on separating her experiences in rational and emotional ones, and on detaching herself from her emotional experience in favor of predominantly reasonable explanations. Her arguments are presented as purely rational, but her vision of a successful work-life balance is troubled by her emotional response to specific scenarios, which she, rather than acknowledging and taking seriously, rejects as irrelevant and detrimental to her cause of leaning in to her career ambition. Following Ahmed, one might consider affect as bodily orientation towards specific objects (where these objects can be anything ranging from specific objects to larger cultural narratives as the “woman who has it all” that I suggest here, *Happiness* 34). By using the phrase, “leaning in,” Sandberg suggests a bodily orientation toward one’s career, and thus one’s becoming part of a revolution from within. Following her logic of economic tradeoffs, however, this also always means a leaning away from something else (in her case: her family life and children), which she accepts drily as a necessity.

³⁹ Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture* 8.6 (2015), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>.

⁴⁰ I use the term “disavowal” rather than “denial” or “repression” to emphasize the way in which Sandberg acknowledges a vague sense of discontent but, attributing it to the realm of emotion, immediately rejects it as negligible and irrelevant.

This is not to say that this bodily orientation does not sometimes cause dissatisfaction; however, Sandberg clearly prioritizes career over family and considers reason a more important factor in decision-making than emotions, thereby reinforcing traditional models of gendered spheres. For instance, she describes the moment of dropping off her children at school, where other mothers stay to volunteer, and of questioning her own choices. Her solution is simple: “This is where my trust in hard data and research has helped me the most. Study after study suggests that the pressure society places on women to stay home and ‘do what’s best for the child’ is based on emotion, not evidence” (135). The juxtaposition of “emotion” and “evidence” as opposites in this sentence – as though feelings did not provide a form of evidence – illustrates the dualism that is at work in Sandberg’s disavowal of her emotional life. Later in the same section, Sandberg briefly complicates the relationship between emotion and reason once more, only to repeat immediately the rhetorical strategy of disavowal. She writes that, “although I know the data and understand intellectually that my career is not harming my children, there are times when I still feel anxious about my choices. [However], that ... anxiety is actually more about the mom than the kids. We talk about it as though it is a problem for children, but actually it can be more of an issue for the mom” (136). In these sections, Sandberg depreciates mothers’ (including her own) emotional and affective responses by not considering them relevant factors in decision-making. At the same time, the insistence that what matters most is whether or not mothers’ actions are harmful to their children rather than themselves reiterates ideals of intensive mothering according to which mothers are always expected to put their children’s needs before their own.⁴¹ Her implicit endorsement of the ideology of intensive mothering and her reinforcement of ideologically gendered dichotomies between work and family and reason and emotion thus perpetuate a cultural idea that puts enormous pressure on working mothers, despite

⁴¹ As I mention in the introduction, Sharon Hays, who coined the term “intensive mothering” in her study *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, describes it as a “gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” in an “unselfish nurturing” manner (x).

Sandberg's ostensible attempt to justify working mothers' absences from their children's lives during working hours.

Thus, if there is only emotional, but no scientifically quantifiable cost, Sandberg considers a woman's resistance to "leaning in" unjustified. As I have suggested, this entails the disregard for her own feelings. In one of the few anecdotes she includes about her children, her eleven-month old son turned to his nanny rather than his mother for help. Describing her emotional and rational responses to this experience, Sandberg writes, "It pierced my heart, but [my husband] thought it was a good sign. He *reasoned* that we were the central figures in our son's life, but forming an attachment to a caregiver was good for his development. I *understood* his *logic*, especially in retrospect, but at the time, it hurt like hell" (137, emphasis added). While Sandberg asserts elsewhere that, "guilt management can be just as important as time management for mothers" (137), her own response to emotional experience suggests that by management, she means disavowal. It is precisely her disregard for the affective, embodied experiences of contemporary working mothers that prevent her from offering a convincing, coherent, and politically effective critique of the ideological figure of the "woman who has it all."

Sandberg's disavowal of her experience of affective dissonance roots her firmly in neoliberal discourses that emphasize the responsibility of the individual and the value of choice. While she acknowledges emotional difficulties as well as social structures that complicate the lives of working mothers, she immediately discards these difficulties and treats them as personal rather than structural concerns for which each woman herself must find a solution. This move toward de-politicizing and individualizing systemic failures is the main point of contention for Catherine Rottenberg who, her essay "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," argues that Sandberg exemplifies a development in recent feminism which she calls "the turn toward happiness."⁴² This turn, rather than focusing on structural injustices, emphasizes women's needs to work out their own work-family balance rather than

⁴² Catherine Rottenberg, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," *Cultural Studies* 28.4 (2014): 418–437, quotation on 16.

criticizing systemic structures that simultaneously suggest this as a desirable goal and make it so hard for women to achieve. In the wake of this turn, a new genre of femininity, the neoliberal feminist, emerges. In Rottenberg's words, "neoliberal feminism not only interpellates a subject responsible for her own self-care but this subject is also normalized by this address, called upon to desire both professional success and personal fulfillment, which almost always translates into motherhood" (428). By defining happiness in such narrow terms, i.e., to be achieved through the balance between a successful career and a fulfilled (maternal) family life, this feminism dictates an ideal that reflects neoliberal ideology. As Hays emphasizes, these configurations privilege "portraits of professional-class women; the life-styles of working-class and poor women are virtually ignored" (132). Although Sandberg recounts an experience of affective dissonance upon her encounter with the ideological figure of the "woman who has it all," her critique of the way in which the genre posits the balance between personal and professional life as the ultimate – and only – way to female happiness is restricted to an emphasis on the difficulty of achieving this goal in a necessarily limited amount of time. Reinforcing the ideal by suggesting its attainability, she ignores her discomfort and champions neoliberal feminism.

However, this neoliberal subject is better considered postfeminist rather than feminist. Postfeminist rhetoric lauds feminism and claims that its goals have been achieved, while at the same time, and in the name of the same feminism, reinscribing structures of the patriarchal order. British feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill views postfeminism as a sensibility that circulates through popular media in both the UK and the US. One recurring theme, writes Gill, is the coexistence, or "entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (161). Feminism, in other words, is "simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" (161). Similarly, British feminist theorist Angela McRobbie argues in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* that there is a backlash in contemporary culture against second and third wave feminism and their major achievements. This backlash operates

more subtly than previous ones – such as the 1950’s backlash of confinement culture which sparked second wave feminism – by acknowledging the feminist movement as a necessity, albeit not of the present, but of the past. As McRobbie suggests convincingly, “in popular culture there is ... an undoing or dismantling of feminism [T]here is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such is something women can do without” (8). The ambivalence in Sandberg’s encounter with the genre of the woman who has it all is best understood in these terms: postfeminism suggests an environment in which the infamous glass ceiling has been broken, and that it is up to women themselves to exercise their agency and freedom of choice to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Sandberg.⁴³

Importantly, the rhetoric of postfeminism is intricately intertwined with neoliberal political structures. As Gill and Christina Scharff argue, postfeminist ideology interpellates the female subject as a consumer who is empowered through the wide availability of personal choices and consumer products and services, particularly ones promising the opportunity for self-improvement.⁴⁴ Sandberg’s book is one such product: a best-selling memoir/self-help book/feminist manifesto, it offers advice for women to improve their social positioning by making the right choices. Thus, the book’s marketability draws from what Gill and Scharff have called “the powerful resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism” (7), affecting, among other things, the construction of the female subject, which is “autonomous, calculating [and] self-regulating” according to neoliberalism and “active, freely choosing [and] self-reinventing” according to postfeminism (7). It is within these frameworks that *Lean In* enjoyed such immense popular success. The text’s acknowledgement and simultaneous repudiation of feminism and its advisory tone deriving from an emphasis on

⁴³ While the image of the glass ceiling has been dominating popular discourses for decades, Joan C. Williams coined the term “the maternal wall” in 2004 in order to show how the factor of motherhood further complicates access to leadership positions (see Joan C. Williams, “The Maternal Wall,” *Harvard Business Review* October 2004, Harvard Business Publishing, <https://hbr.org/2004/10/the-maternal-wall>).

⁴⁴ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

individuality, choice, and empowerment explain its success on a popular market heavily invested in these ideas. Both on the level of content and as a successful consumer product, *Lean In* thus contributes to a dominant culture that diverts attention from structures of power and oppression which, in fact, endow only a limited number of individuals (mostly white, heterosexual, middle and upper class ones) with the wide array of choices they celebrate.

The main challenge for women, following these assumptions, is to make the right choices. Sandberg's rhetoric of "internalizing the revolution" and the advice she provides throughout the book suggest just that: it is the "internal obstacles" we need to overcome in order to tackle the inequalities in the workplace. She writes,

Internal obstacles are rarely discussed and often underplayed. Throughout my life, I was told over and over about inequalities in the workplace and how hard it would be to have a career and a family. I rarely heard anything, however, about the ways I might hold myself back. These internal obstacles deserve a lot more attention, in part because they are under our own control. We can dismantle the hurdles in ourselves today. (9)

Sandberg's assessment of internal obstacles like self-doubt or low self-esteem as separate and independent from structural inequality and as personal matters as under our control is inadequate and, indeed, detrimental to a feminist politics that might gain momentum from the shared experience of affective dissonance. The sections discussing her emotional struggles are a case in point: while she can respond reasonably to her feelings of guilt or inadequacy, she cannot, in fact, prevent these conflicted feelings from emerging. The editorial decision is to reframe her feelings of discontent in the context of traditionally gendered dichotomies of family and career which reinforce the mind-body split. While the book's success on the popular market suggests that these notions resonate with a large audience, responses from academic and feminists of color such as bell hooks indicate that Sandberg's decision against utilizing her experience of affective dissonance for a politics of solidarity diminishes the "manifesto's" potential to incite structural change.

In contrast to what McRobbie and Diane Negra have referred to as Sandberg's "corporate feminist" stance,⁴⁵ which uses her position as the COO of Facebook to emphasize the need to further break what is but a crack in the glass ceiling, Tina Fey's relationship with feminism is more complicated. Much of her creative work in comedy, particularly her role as Liz Lemon in the television series *30Rock*, critically engages various images and stereotypes of feminists and postfeminists, often in satirical modes. Nonetheless, her memoir *Bossypants* (2012) is, like Sandberg's book, devoted to telling the story of a woman who combines having a family with a successful career in a field traditionally dominated by men, and implies the possibility that other women might do the same. Like Sandberg, Fey neglects to acknowledge the ways in which childcare and housework complicate the lives of many working mothers who are not as comfortably situated as herself. In the memoir, she recounts her resistance to pointing out to the nanny that she felt the baby's fingernails were being cut too short. Fey argues that there are several complex reasons and "layers of truth" (234) causing this resistance, and she identifies some, including her awareness of and appreciation for the loving care the nanny provides to her baby. Most importantly, however, "the deep truth" was that "I didn't want to spend MY PRECIOUS TIME AT HOME having an awkward conversation with the babysitter. I JUST WANTED TO BE WITH MY KID" (234). The all-caps in this section provide snapshots of an experience many working women share – the desire to spend the little time they have at home with their kids – and thus offer a platform for identification with the famous and successful Fey for her wide audience. However, the section also reveals that the women who are seen as a new generation of "women who have it all," who take the liberty to emphasize the difficulties that come with this lifestyle, actually do not share what most women experience as the central challenge of "having it all": working the "second shift." By using the language of choice and empowerment, and by disregarding

⁴⁵ See Angela McRobbie, "Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism," *New Formations* 80/81 (2013): 119–137; and Diane Negra, "Claiming Feminism: Commentary, Autobiography and Advice Literature for Women in the Recession," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23.3 (2014): 275–286.

the ways in which their positions of privilege have a concrete impact on the number and kinds of choices available to them, both of these women who “have it all” (including a nanny) thus foreclose the opportunity of being an identificatory figure for many of their contemporaries.

Rottenberg sees the focus on achieving personal happiness as the precise problem preventing neoliberal feminism from gaining political relevance: “The very turn to a language of affect, namely, the importance of the pursuit of *personal* happiness (through balance), unravels any notion of *social* inequality by placing the responsibility of well-being, as well as the burden of unhappiness, once again, on the shoulders of individual women” (431, emphasis in the original). According to Rottenberg, it is precisely the rhetoric of affect via what Ahmed calls the “happiness duty” (*Happiness*, 7) that personalizes and thus de-politicizes. In the case of Sandberg’s *Lean In*, this assessment is true, specifically because of the way in which Sandberg neglects her affective dissonance. For Hemmings, this outcome certainly is one possibility, but need not be the only one. On the contrary, if used productively, affective dissonance may well lead to affective solidarity.

So while the criticism that Sandberg’s book de-politicizes contemporary feminist concerns by focusing on women’s own responsibilities and capabilities to change an unjust system is more than warranted, the book has another, potentially more detrimental effect: at a time when women are no longer as geographically isolated as Betty Friedan found them to be in their homes of 1960s white American suburbia, *Lean In* evokes affective isolation. By reiterating the genre of the “woman who has it all,” and thus perpetuating such an “aesthetic structure of affective experience” sets women up for experiences of affective alienation, i.e., a lack of feeling aligned with their community. As Berlant emphasizes, genres that circulate in women’s culture “cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real” (*Female Complaint*, 5). By affirming the core components of the genre of the “woman who has it all,” and by neglecting her experience of affective dissonance, *Lean In* invites the affective attachment of the audience to the ideal of “having it all.” What

is more, the suggestion that all women are equally equipped to achieve such work-life balance brushes over the various life circumstances that complicate this process in a myriad of ways. The affective attachment to the ideal of “having it all” thus distracts from the factors preventing it from being an achievable goal. The mass market appeal of Sandberg’s and Fey’s books reveal that many of their readers do indeed “*feel* as though it expresses what is common among them” (Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 5, emphasis in the original). However, those readers who share Sandberg’s experiences of affective dissonance do not find words of encouragement, or the emergence of a new feminine ideal with which they can identify, but rather yet another narrative that assigns the responsibility for their feelings to themselves, claiming that they are “under our own control.” Instead of providing a platform for solidarity based on the experience of affective dissonance, then, Sandberg provides a narrative that is much more likely to produce feelings of alienation and isolation in her wide readership. The consequences are ultimately de-politicizing if our bodies and subjectivities continue to orient themselves toward the concept of the “woman who has it all,” and our feelings of alienation and isolation (What is wrong with me?) interfere with our cognitive awareness of the unattainability of such ideals. If our rational abilities to deconstruct cultural norms and ideals do not suffice to overcome their power, it is time to pay more attention to our affective encounters with them.

Even though Sandberg proclaims a feminist agenda and has in many ways become the “public face of feminism” (Negra, 284), her disregard of privilege and systemic structures of oppression obstruct the kind of solidarity that many academic feminists have been working towards for decades. Already in 1984, bell hooks noted white women’s failure to deal appropriately with their own race and class privilege, undermining the language of sisterhood which was intended to create solidarity.⁴⁶ More recently, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has argued that much Western feminism oversimplifies structures of oppression across the globe and assumes female victimization and exploitation as a

⁴⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

common experience unifying all women. In *Feminism without Borders*, Mohanty writes that this oversimplification is rooted in a conflation between the discursive construction of “Woman” as a “cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses” and historical “women,” i.e., “real, material subjects of their collective histories.”⁴⁷ Sandberg and Fey’s disavowal of the experience of a discrepancy between what is discursively constructed and what is historically, materially experienced, and their rhetorical strategy to naturalize the conditions of their existence mimic the characteristics of Western feminist discourse that Mohanty highlights.

Both hooks and Mohanty are invested in replacing obsolete models of solidarity with ones that account for differences among members of a particular group or movement. hooks suggests that “women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. . . . We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity” (*Feminist Theory*, 67). For Mohanty, solidarity needs to be grounded in an understanding of the oppression of women across the globe as comparable, yet particular and shaped by local histories, economies, and politics. She thus conceives of solidarity as a “community or collectivity among woman workers across class, race, and national boundaries that is based on shared material interests and identity in common ways of reading the world” (144–145). Both scholars suggest the need for a concept that allows women to express solidarity despite the differences in the kind of oppression they experience based on their national, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and geographic location. As the recent debate surrounding the twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen indicates, these models of solidarity are still widely contested, and group identity continues heavily to inflect potentialities for solidarity among women.

⁴⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), quotation on 19.

A feminist solidarity that draws on experiences of affective dissonance would derive its sense of belonging not from the commitment to an ideal that suggests the possibility of a better life despite obstacles (as the genre does in Berlant's framework), but from an investment in the conversation with others who struggle in similar, yet also different, ways with the genres of femininity they encounter. In order to combat the oppressive nature of what she calls "conventional solidarity," i.e., the kind of solidarity grounded in the assumption of a common experience shared by all women, political theorist Jodi Dean (1996) foregrounds communication about difference as the basis for solidarity. In her book *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics*, Dean traces the way in which conventional solidarity based on group identity has demanded a submission of difference to the goals of recognition and equality strived for by the group as a whole.⁴⁸ Demonstrating the ways conventional solidarity insists on the need for a unitary sense of identity and prohibits deviation for fear of disavowal, and thus fails to provide an important basis for a common ground within the contemporary feminist movement, Dean proposes to replace this approach to solidarity with one that she refers to as "reflective solidarity" (3). She defines this as "the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship. This conception of solidarity relies on the intuition that the risk of disagreement which accompanies diversity must be rationally transformed to provide a basis for our intersubjective ties and commitments" (3). It is precisely the potential for dissent and disagreement that she wishes to take as the basis for her concept of solidarity. In order to mediate this difference and ground solidarity within it, her concept relies pivotally on a communicative dimension:

With reflective solidarity we appeal to others to include and support us because our communicative engagement allows us to expect another to take responsibility for our relationship. Here we recognize the other in a way that is neither immediate nor restrictively mediated. We recognize her in her difference, yet understand this difference as part of the very basis of what it means to be one of "us." (39)

⁴⁸ Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

While Sandberg's account of her experiences of affective dissonance gestures towards the communication of the particularity of an experience, and one that deviates from the ideological construction of the group membership she represents, its embeddedness in postfeminist and neoliberal discourses and its orientation towards the capitalist market foreclose the possibility of a larger conversation about such difference, and thus the potential for solidarity grounded within it.

Like Dean, Judith Butler has suggested that we think about new ways to conceive of the possibility for solidarity despite difference, or indeed *through* difference. Butler's approach to contemporary political challenges builds on an ethical commitment to critique. In *Precarious Life*, Butler suggests that what all humans share is a "common corporeal vulnerability," a dependency on anonymous others for survival.⁴⁹ It is important to note that she does not posit this commonality as the basis for a new humanism; rather, she emphasizes the way in which the recognition of this vulnerability is a condition for one's being considered human life. In Butler's words, a "vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen" (43). It is only when one's vulnerability becomes recognized that the experience of violence can become a matter of critique. Suffering that is not recognized as such cannot become a matter of public discourse, effectively robbing the latter of its democratic elements. Butler writes that, "the foreclosure of critique empties the public domain of debate and democratic contestation itself, so that debate becomes the exchange of views among the like-minded, and criticism, which ought to be central to any democracy, becomes a fugitive and suspect activity" (xx). While Butler is mostly concerned with Human Rights' violations that are largely invisible to the American public – the killing of Iraqi children and Palestinian civilians, the indefinite detention of terror suspects in Guantanamo etc. – her arguments are insightful in regards to the discourses

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), quotations on 43, 20.

surrounding Sandberg's *Lean In* as well. Sandberg's book exemplifies the limited range of critique that is permissible in the context of contemporary neoliberalism and its capitalist consumer culture: hers is a feminism that sells. Critique of social conditions is acceptable and will be heard only when it is immediately attributed to the individual's realm of responsibility. It is permissible only when it comes from a very particular subject position – a well-established, wealthy, white woman whose arguments remain rooted in the conditions provided by her position of privilege. Thus, while Sandberg and Fey might bring feminism back into popular awareness and make it fashionable, as Warner and hooks indicate, their modes of processing experiences of affective dissonance promote the transformation of the self rather than of the oppressive structures held firmly in place by neoliberalism. Their feminist fronts actually participate in the perpetuation of a heteronormative patriarchy that draws much of its power from the exclusion of racial minorities and lower class (male and female) workers. Like other neoliberal postfeminists, Sandberg and Fey recognize their experience of affective dissonance only to ban it immediately to the realm of personal choice and responsibility. The way in which they target audiences of similar racial, socioeconomic, and marital statuses forecloses the kind of solidarity that might be necessary to incite change.

Assuming that there is still a need for a feminist politics – and, if nothing else, *Lean In* provides ample evidence that there is – it is time to complement discourses of reason and cognitive disavowal of the emotions with an account of affective and emotional evidence. Contemporary feminisms invested in political transformation – be they academic or popular – should take into serious consideration the turn to affect which provides a helpful framework for analyzing experiences of discontent and for identifying its systemic origins. Affective dissonance can provide a common ground that allows for solidarity regardless of identity politics. In other words, even if I cannot identify with Fey and Sandberg's actual life circumstances, I might identify with their experience of affective dissonance, i.e., their experience of having a limited number of genres available to them, and feeling

that these do not correspond to their epistemic sense of self. This is an experience many women might share, regardless of the precise content of the ideological structures available to them, and the parameters of their existence that interfere with the experience of these structures as “real.” Solidarity, then, might emerge from a process of identification which, while not oblivious to difference, is not rooted in particular aspects of identity or investments in group belonging. The basis for identification is not the affective attachment to a shared fantasy of the good life, but the common experience of dissonance that is similar in structure, yet different in content. In the following chapters, I focus on several instances of cultural texts that depict and produce such a sense of affective dissonance, and explore the ways in which they address and engage with contemporary ideologies of motherhood and femininity. The experience of affective dissonance across these different media and contexts illustrates the applicability of the concept beyond the scope of this dissertation. By embarking on the project of solidarity in dissonance to effect political transformation, contemporary feminists can retrieve experiences of failure and discontent from the realm of personal responsibility and work toward a social movement that continues to take seriously the affective dissonance experienced by many women, regardless of identity and positionality. Such a movement based on solidarity would actually be strengthened by diversity and even disagreement because they would allow it to produce the wide range of narratives necessary to close many an onto-epistemological gap.

**CHAPTER 2: BROKEN PROMISES OF HAPPINESS: IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHERHOOD IN
CONTEMPORARY MEMOIRS OF POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION**

While throughout the 1990s, postpartum mental illness was visible in the media mainly through the spectacle of “murderous mothers” like Andrea Yates, who drowned her five children in a bathtub in 2001, and Susan Smith, who did the same to her two sons by strapping them in their seats and rolling her car into a lake in 1994, the 2000s saw the publication of various memoirs detailing mothers’ experiences with and recovery from postpartum depression (PPD). In this chapter, I discuss three such memoirs: Susan Kushner Resnick’s *Sleepless Days: One Woman’s Journey Through Postpartum Depression* (2000), Brooke Shields’ *Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression* (2005), and Marrit Ingman’s *Inconsolable: How I Threw My Mental Health Out with the Diapers* (2005).⁵⁰ Shields’ memoir in particular gained public visibility, not only because of the author’s own position as a famous actress in Hollywood spotlight but also because of actor and Scientologist Tom Cruise’s public remarks denouncing her decision to take antidepressants and the subsequent debate they triggered.

While both Resnick and Shields offer teleological narratives of recovery, already implicated by the use of the word “through” in both subtitles, Ingman provides a much more uncertain, fragmented, and nonlinear account of postpartum depression, stylistically mimicking the sense of entrapment and hopelessness that is one of the central symptoms characterizing PPD. What all three memoirs share, however, is an emphasis on the discrepancy between what the women expected to feel as new mothers, and how their experience differed from their expectations. All women indicate a commitment to some of the central tenets of the ideologies of intensive mothering and attachment parenting, often accompanied by idealized versions of natural childbirth, and all three display a struggle with their perceived failure at such ideals as a central aspect of their experience of postpartum depression. At

⁵⁰ Susan Kushner Resnick, *Sleepless Days: One Woman’s Journey through Postpartum Depression* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000); Brooke Shields, *Down Came the Rain: My Journey through Postpartum Depression* (New York: Hyperion, 2005); Marrit Ingman, *Inconsolable: How I Threw My Mental Health Out with the Diapers* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005).

the same time, each memoir addresses the mother's dependency on antidepressant medication in her recovery. In what follows, I take my cue from Elizabeth A. Wilson's claim that depression follows a "logic of entanglement," and propose that we understand PPD as a biosocial condition that is caused as much by biological and material changes in the early postpartum maternal body as it is by social expectations and ideologies of "good" mothering.⁵¹ Drawing on Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism," I explore how these ideologically reinforced expectations of maternal bliss create false promises of happiness (Ahmed), which can lead to the kind of affective dissonance of which postpartum depression is an example.

PPD is generally understood to be a form of depression beginning sometime between just before childbirth until about a year after. The list of possible symptoms includes sadness, hopelessness, irritability, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy and loss of self-worth, troubled concentration and memory, frequent bouts of crying for no apparent reason, inability to bond with one's child, fear of not being able to care for one's child, lack of energy, oversleeping or insomnia, changes in appetite, physical ailments, avoiding social contacts, loss of interest in usually enjoyable activities including decreased libido, and visions and thoughts of harming oneself or others.⁵² PPD is to be distinguished from the so-called "baby blues," which are generally thought to be caused by the sudden drop of estrogen and progesterone in a woman's body after delivering the placenta and usually subside within the first three to four weeks after giving birth. In addition, there are various forms of postpartum mental illness, which further include anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and psychosis. While postpartum psychosis is a frequent cause of infanticide, which has a much better chance of receiving national news

⁵¹ Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁵² All three memoirs provide an introduction or preface that describes PPD and lists these symptoms. Other sources for this list of symptoms include Verta Taylor, *Rock-a-by Baby: Feminism, Self-Help, and Postpartum Depression* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2, as well as the websites of various organizations addressing postpartum mental illness, including Postpartum Progress (postpartumprogress.com) and Postpartum Support International (postpartum.net).

coverage than more moderate cases of postpartum mental illness, it is distinct from and much less common than PPD.⁵³

In the medical field, it is generally assumed that PPD is caused by a variety of physical and emotional factors. The drop in hormone levels can cause chemical changes in the brain that lead to mood swings, which are in turn exacerbated by the lack of sleep and exhaustion caused by tending to a newborn and the inability to recover fully from childbirth and the lingering physical discomforts it causes. Additional risk factors include a history with depression, particularly during or after a previous pregnancy, a history of pregnancy losses, a traumatic childbirth experience, medical complications during or after childbirth, a stressful life event (such as a move, losing a job, death of a loved one) during pregnancy or around the time of the child's birth, and lack of strong emotional support from friends and family. In this chapter, I argue for an understanding of postpartum depression as a biosocial condition which unfolds in an ideological environment that views good mothering as natural, instantaneous, and intuitive, but which becomes tangible through the maternal body's experience of the biological and material consequences of tending to a newborn – sleep-deprivation, possibly the exhaustion caused by breastfeeding, physical recovery from childbirth, and hormonal changes along with chemical imbalances in the brain. Postpartum depression, then, is experienced as a form of affective dissonance that becomes evidence for the often contradictory relationship between ideological narratives and everyday life.

Advertised as the first American memoir on PPD, Susan Kushner Resnick's *Sleepless Days* (2000) narrates the memoirist's struggle with PPD after the birth of her second-born child, her son

⁵³ The CDC estimates that PPD occurs in about 10% of new mothers, while the major nonprofit organizations suggest the number is closer to 15 or 20% (the CDC estimate is based on mothers self-reporting, but the stigma attached to the condition prevents many women from doing so. Postpartum Support International, Postpartum Progress, and March of Dimes all describe PPD as the “most common complication of childbirth” in the contemporary United States. According to Postpartum Support International, postpartum psychosis is much less common and occurs after about .1% of deliveries.

Max.⁵⁴ After a history of depression, two miscarriages suffered between two pregnancies carried to full term, and a high-tech birth, Resnick describes her descent into PPD and her long process of recovery, aided by psychotherapy and antidepressant medication. Brooke Shields's *Down Came the Rain* (2005) follows a similar trajectory, recounting events over a two-year period, which include her repeated attempts to get pregnant, multiple rounds of IVF treatments, a miscarriage, her father's death three weeks prior to her daughter Rowan's birth, a traumatic birthing experience culminating in a C-section, and her subsequent struggle with PPD. With the help of both psychotherapy and antidepressant medication, Shields is able to recover from her postpartum depression and to experience the maternal bliss and joy she initially missed. Both memoirs reinstate the medicated sufferer into the normative role of the loving and devoted mother and thus affirm PPD as a medical condition preventing mothers from functioning in socially acceptable ways. In contrast to these two memoirs, Marrit Ingman's *Inconsolable* (2005) is less teleological in structure and more comfortable with not resolving her less-than-idyllic depiction of early motherhood.⁵⁵ Instead, Ingman is invested in challenging social and cultural expectations of early motherhood in relation to the very material circumstances – exhaustion, sleep deprivation, isolation – that complicate the fulfillment of these ideals and lead to her experience of PPD. The memoir ends in an afterword which asserts that while Ingman's suicidal thoughts have subsided, motherhood continues to pose frequent challenges.

⁵⁴ There have, of course, been earlier pieces of American literature addressing the difficulty of early maternity. Prominent examples include Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which, although written as a short story rather than a memoir, draws heavily from the author's own experience with PPD (repr., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym, 6th ed [New York: Norton, 2003], 832-844). In 1976, Jane Lazarre published her memoir of early motherhood, *The Mother Knot* (New York: McGraw-Hill: 1976), which included detailed accounts of maternal ambivalence and other thematic similarities with the memoirs discussed here, even though her experiences are never explicitly categorized as PPD. *The Mother Knot* was published in the same year as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, implicating the mid-1970s as a time period in which maternal ambivalence was first publicly acknowledged and discussed, only to be pushed to the sidelines again until the 2000s.

⁵⁵ For instance, one chapter detailing her recovery from a suicidal episode is immediately followed by one in which she recounts the details of her birth, an unplanned C-section, which some readers might presume to mark the beginning, rather than the middle, of her story.

While these memoirs draw attention to PPD from the perspective of the personal narrative, feminist theorists have avoided the topic of postpartum mental illness and its inherent entanglement with the experience of early motherhood. However, they have explored other forms of depression as a particularly female malady. In her book, *Understanding Depression: Feminist Social Constructionist Approaches* (2000), clinical psychologist and scholar Janet Stoppard categorizes three basic approaches to dealing with depression in women.⁵⁶ First, women-centered approaches that draw on psychological models to explain depression suggest that it is caused by a combination of particular pre-existing personality traits and stressful life events. Second, social models of depression consider a variety of “social structural factors (such as poverty, living conditions, employment status), interpersonal relationships (for ‘social support’), and other sources of adversity arising within the fabric of everyday lives” as potential causes for depression (12).⁵⁷ Third, biological approaches focus exclusively on biochemical imbalances in the brain and hormonal origins of mood disorders and emphasize the ability to treat them medically.⁵⁸ While contemporary popular cultural accounts often consider biochemical imbalances in the brain the primary cause of PPD, Stoppard emphasizes that “explanations based on a single factor ... have now generally been discarded in favor of more complex multifactorial approaches” (10). Indeed, most experts in the field suggest that “ultimately depression is likely to be explained as arising from some combination of individual biological make-up (genes, biochemistry), psychological characteristics (personality traits), and social conditions (circumstances of everyday life)” (10). The three memoirists assembled here describe a variety of factors from all three areas, in addition to stressful life events surrounding their pregnancy and childbirth. In this sense, their accounts support

⁵⁶ Janet M. Stoppard, *Understanding Depression: Feminist Social Constructionist Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁷ For working mothers, this may include the labor performed in what Arlie Hochschild has called the “second shift,” i.e., household and child care labor done after a full day of paid work.

⁵⁸ In her analysis of the postpartum depression self-help movement, sociologist Verta Taylor equally identifies three approaches which she describes as focusing on “societal causes, the physician/medical institution, and the patient” respectively (30).

Stoppard's claim that their depression has multifactorial causes.⁵⁹ In what follows, I explore the ways in which the memoirists attribute their experience of PPD to various biological, material, psychological, social, and cultural factors. Through my reading of the memoirs, I argue that a multifactorial approach to PPD can highlight that the experience is caused by both medical-biological and sociocultural factors while also being embodied and thus legible through physical experiences that contradict expectations raised by ideological constructions of good motherhood. PPD, then, is a biosocial condition, experienced as affective dissonance, through which the ideological promise of blissful motherhood is revealed by the material experiences of maternal bodies as one that is bound to be broken.

Despite the overall differences between the memoirs by Resnick and Shields and Ingman's, there are quite a few similarities, particularly in the description of symptoms experienced by each mother. All memoirists offer detailed descriptions of the symptoms with which they struggle, ranging from inexplicable sadness, insomnia, and restlessness to feelings of hopelessness, self-doubt and inadequacy, guilt, and shame, from being easily overstimulated to intrusive thoughts and suicidal episodes. By describing the symptoms in detail, the memoirs offer a depiction of postpartum mental illness that becomes recognizable to the target audience who might suffer in a similar way. In addition, each memoirist draws on the experience of each of these symptoms to reflect both on how they contradict their expectations of early motherhood and on the origins of these expectations. In particular, large segments of Brooke Shields' memoir suggest that her depression might be directly related to the way in which her expectations of early motherhood are disappointed on a daily, if not hourly basis. Indeed, Shields makes countless references to her expectations in juxtaposition with her actual experiences. These begin at childbirth, which she expected to be "the closest thing to grace I'd

⁵⁹ However, as we will see, the memoirs by Shields and Resnick in particular undermine this approach through their teleologically structured accounts that aim to reinstate notions of the "good" mother.

ever experience, yet in reality there was nothing graceful about it” (47). In contrast to the beautiful, quiet, and peaceful birth she hoped for, she describes her actual experience in dehumanizing terms. When discussing her C-section, she describes her doctor as “firing up the chainsaw” (41), referring to her body as a “war zone” and a “scene of the crime” (44) and to herself as “looking like roadkill” (45) with her “guts spread out like a garage sale” (46). The graphic language in this section captures Shields’ disappointment over the inability to deliver “naturally” (i.e., vaginally and without medication), as well as the experience of fear and threat at the hand of the doctors who have turned her from a birthing woman into a subject of violence. Yet, after her baby is born, she expects a moment of immediate recognition, a “sense of déjà vu” and “an instant bond between us” – “Instead I didn’t remember her at all” (56). In terms of her emotional response, Shields writes, “I had been waiting to be overwhelmed by the deepest love fathomable, and all I felt was distance and dread. Nothing was as I had pictured it” (79). Thus, her experience of childbirth was “the antithesis of everything I had expected” (80).

What is particularly revealing about Shields’ account of disappointed expectations is the role that cultural images play in disseminating such ideological visions of early motherhood and, even more so, her own participation as an actress in the apparatus that perpetuates these images. About the idea of nursing her newborn, Shields writes “I had dreamed of breastfeeding my whole life. I had even done a movie called *The Blue Lagoon* in which, after my character has a baby, the infant intuitively finds his way to my breast and starts to suck while I look on, smiling. I was only fifteen at the time and have had that image stuck in my mind for years” (95). Thus, as a young actress, Shields embodied the idea of an instant bond between new mother and nursing infant which precedes the actual experience and thus shapes her expectations about it. In her book chapter, “Tom vs. Brooke Or Postpartum Depression as Bad Mothering in Popular Culture,” feminist motherhood scholar Jocelyn Fenton Stitt argues that the *Blue Lagoon* memory “epitomizes the conceptual gap between mothering as ‘natural’ and individualistic as presented in popular culture and Shields’s lived experience of mothering as

requiring social support and the knowledge of other women.”⁶⁰ By citing this experience, Shields emphasizes the role of televisual images in shaping women’s expectations about early motherhood.⁶¹ However, instead of challenging the sociocultural narratives that lead her to expect these experiences, she concludes that there is something “wrong” with her, and that she is a “horrible mother” (71). Thus she individualizes and personalizes her inability to enjoy early motherhood and faults herself rather than questioning the idyllic ideal she had previously impersonated.

In describing her disappointed expectations, Shields gives valuable insight into the cultural and ideological environment she is exposed to as a new mother. Motherhood scholars have analyzed and described this environment since the early 1990s, and have traced the appearance and perpetuation of the ideals Shields describes through a variety of media including pregnancy and child care manuals, magazines, news reporting, TV shows, and film. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Hays argues that the contemporary ideology of “intensive mothering” imposes that “correct child rearing requires not only large quantities of money but also professional-level skills and copious amounts of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy on the part of the individual mother” (4). What is more, through her analysis of the most popular child rearing manuals of the twentieth century, most prominently among them Benjamin Spock’s *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946), Hays reveals that for the so-called experts authoring these books, “maternal love and affection are not only vital, they also

⁶⁰ Jocelyn Fenton Stitt, “Tom vs. Brooke Or Postpartum Depression as Bad Mothering in Popular Culture” (*Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks, [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2012], 339–357), quotation on 347.

⁶¹ There are far too many instances in which Shields refers to her expectations to cite them all here. However, I would like to list one more instance that emphasizes the role of cultural images in perpetuating expectations as Shields writes, “I had been clinging to this notion that when a baby entered my life, everything would fall into place, and a rhythm would be established. Together my child and I would epitomize the image I had internalized from watching all those happy families on TV in my youth, with a dose of Normal Rockwell thrown in for good measure. In my mind, this was the perfect, blissful picture of motherhood I assumed I would experience when I had a baby” (94). And to all those readers who still missed the point, Shields admits toward the end of her memoir, “It sounds like a Hallmark card, I know, but it’s clear that I have sometimes chosen to live in a fantasy world, creating perfect family moments in my head” (Shields 195). As Hilary Clark emphasizes, what makes Shields’ memoir “worthy of analysis,” is certainly not “its writing or style” but rather its “(ideological) contradictions” (Hilary Clark, “Confessions of a Celebrity Mom: Brooke Shields’ *Down Came the Rain: My Journey through Postpartum Depression*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38. 3 [2008]: 449–461, quotation on p. 458).

come *naturally*” (57, emphasis added).⁶² The implication that a “good” mother loves her newborn instantaneously and knows naturally and intuitively how to provide the best care has become a pillar of mothering ideology since the middle of the twentieth century and functions to isolate the mother and to discourage her from relying on others to help and support her as she adjusts to her new role. As Shields’ example shows, these ideological conceptions create powerful expectations that can lead to substantial guilt and self-doubt when the ostensibly natural and innate aspects of femininity are not experienced in the way the experts suggest.

In a more recent formulation of similar research findings, American feminist and cultural critic Susan Douglas and philosopher Meredith Michaels designate this ideological framework as the “new momism,” which insists that “no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.”⁶³ Shields emphasizes not only the lack of fulfillment she experiences after Rowan’s birth, but also a loss of her sense of self due to her (albeit temporary) withdrawal from acting. Pondering her new identity as a mother, she writes, “I truly wanted to feel like, and be considered, a mother, but that wasn’t all I wanted to be” (99). As an actress who had consistently worked since her childhood, Shields describes how her sense of self derived almost exclusively from her work, and her lack of employment immediately after Rowan’s birth led to “my senses of identity and self [having] been markedly unsettled” (131). By admitting that the role of mother is not all-fulfilling for her, that she misses her work, and that she longs to return to the stage, Shields violates the ideology of intensive mothering and suggests that it constructs a “highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet” (Douglas/Michaels, 4). Affective dissonance,

⁶² See e.g., Benjamin Spock, *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946).

⁶³ Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), quotation on 4.

then, expresses itself in the lost sense of self that new mothers can experience, but that are unaccounted for in contemporary mothering ideology.

It is important to note that Shields' position as a celebrity puts her into a position that differs significantly from the other two authors discussed in this chapter. Shields writes in a context of intense scrutiny. As Canadian literary scholar Hilary Clark emphasizes in an article on *Down Came the Rain*, audiences are invested in stories of celebrity mental illness because they long to see those fail that tend to make them feel the most insufficient. In a cultural environment of "celebrity commodification," stories of mental illness sell regardless of the fact that the author runs the risk of being scrutinized and criticized (452). More specifically, there are particular risks and benefits involved in opposing the genre of the celebrity mom profile, a type of story that has been popular in women's magazines since the 1980s, and that presents famous white mothers as ideal maternal types whose lives have been fulfilled through the advent of their child (450). According to Douglas and Michaels, the celebrity mom profile "banished [...] negativity: No ambivalence, not even a mouse-squeak of it, was permitted" (116). Instead, these magazine stories present celebrity mothers as the success story of feminist endeavors as "they represented the feminist dream of women being able to have a family and a job outside the home without being braided traitors to true womanhood" (Douglas/Michaels, 118). In other words, these profiles suggest to the audience that motherhood and participation in the labor force are not mutually exclusive and that, indeed, feminists can embrace both roles.⁶⁴ By explicitly addressing the contradictions between her expectations and her actual experiences, Shields offers an explicit counternarrative to the celebrity mom profile, challenging the notion that famous, affluent, white women are naturally and innately able to mother and find ultimate fulfillment in such a role. She writes,

⁶⁴ "Celebrity moms" continue to be popular in all tabloids, which often feature famous mothers on their front pages. These portraits and "news" stories describe women either as "good" mothers (current examples are Angelina Jolie [albeit less so since her separation from Brad Pitt in September 2016], Beyoncé, and Kate Middleton) or as "bad" mothers (evidenced by the reporting on Britney Spears and, more currently, Kim Kardashian).

I had always felt that a baby was the one major thing missing from my life, that a child would complete the picture and bring everything into focus. Once I was a mother, the different parts of my world would all converge, and I would experience life as I'd envisioned it and in turn would know what I was meant to be. But having a baby clouded my vision and threatened whatever peace already existed. (69–70)

While indicating that she was equally under the spell of such ideals as the audiences of these narratives prior to becoming a mother, she uses her memoir as a self-directed variation of the celebrity mom profile to challenge some of the assumptions that are perpetuated and disseminated through these discourses. Directly opposing them to her experience of clouded rather than focused vision and disturbed peace rather than content bliss, Shields alludes to the absurdity of such visions in light of the presence of a constantly needy infant. Her emphasis on the fact that having a baby did not – as previously expected – lead to a new sense of self-fulfillment but rather produced a temporary loss of self indicates the experience of affective dissonance in which maternal experience challenges expectations raised by ideological concepts of “good” motherhood.

Marrit Ingman's memoir *Inconsolable* follows the impulse to question ideological constructions of good motherhood even more explicitly. Not only does the author open her memoir by stating that she is interested in the “sociocultural origins” (3) of PPD, but she also identifies a number of factors that contribute to such an experience. Among these are the sleep deprivation and exhaustion, isolation from other parents in the suburb, and unrealistic expectations about the behavior of infants. Dealing with a colicky infant with reflux who refuses to be put down or sleep by himself, Ingman rejects the idea that her depression is of purely biological origins. In the chapter “Fuck Dr. Sears, or the Fallacy of Designer Parenting,” she takes those experts to task who have contributed to the perpetuation and intensification of the ideology of intensive mothering since the 1990s. Dr. William (Bill) Sears, originator of the now popular style of so-called attachment parenting, wrote and published *The Baby*

Book with his wife Martha, a registered nurse, in 1992.⁶⁵ An instant success, the book draws on the psychoanalysis of John Bowlby and others who have argued since the middle of the twentieth century that attachment is essential to the development of a healthy mother-child bond, and by extension a healthy development of the child. According to Attachment Parenting International, some of the core techniques of attachment parenting include skin-to-skin contact⁶⁶ and babywearing, (safe) co-sleeping, and breastfeeding on demand as well as extended breastfeeding, i.e., breastfeeding that extends well beyond the generally recommended time of about one year.⁶⁷ While numerous feminists have criticized attachment parenting because of its emphasis on parenting techniques which overemphasize the role of the mother and thus shamelessly romanticize the ideals of the new momism (Douglas/Michaels, 320; see also Warner, *Perfect Madness*, 15), others have pointed to the remarkable popularity of attachment parenting techniques such as extended breastfeeding, particularly among white, middle-class professionals (Hausman, 88–89).⁶⁸ Ingman describes her relationship with AP in conflicted terms. Reading *The Baby Book* while pregnant, she finds that it “seemed to validate what I suspected...: I was properly invested with all the emotional and physical tools necessary to raise a happy, healthy child. I should trust my instinct and do what felt natural” (85). Her reading of the Sears’ approach to parenting confirms women as naturally equipped with the necessary instincts to provide good care for

⁶⁵ William and Martha Sears, *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know About Your Baby from Birth to Age Two*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2003).

⁶⁶ Rather than separating a newborn baby from the mother immediately after birth only to return him or her bathed and wrapped in a blanket, recent trends in birthing practices value skin-to-skin contact, where the baby is placed naked on the mother’s chest for up to two hours, or until after the first breastfeeding, before being weighed, measured, and bathed. Studies suggest that this practice holds various advantages for both mother and baby, including facilitation of breastfeeding, increased production of oxytocin (often cited as a bonding hormone, it is also essential for the uterus to contract and shrink), and thermal regulation and adaptation to the new environment for the newborn. Attachment parenting advocates suggest continuing and repeating the practice during the weeks and months following birth. The importance of skin-to-skin has become a staple in natural birthing discourses, proponents of which continue to claim that hospital environments are hostile to the idea and make it almost impossible after C-sections (although recently, stories about skin-to-skin contact after C-sections have begun to emerge on social media). The investment in skin-to-skin contact as part of a peaceful birthing environment may point to another unfulfilled expectation that all three women suffered from due to their unplanned C-section births.

⁶⁷ “API’s Eight Principles of Parenting,” *Attachment Parenting International: Nurturing Children for a Compassionate World*, accessed 13 March 2016, <http://www.attachmentparenting.org/principles/principles.php>.

⁶⁸ Judith Warner, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Riverhead, 2005); Bernice Hausman, *Mother’s Milk: Breastfeeding Controversies in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

their babies. This notion is underlined by drawings which accompany the text and which depict “a smiling mother with a neat bob nursing, fastening her sling, ... and otherwise assisting her babbling, secure infant on its journey through life. How reassuring! We would be attachment parents” (85). Like Shields, Ingman displays an investment in intensive mothering and attachment parenting techniques that promise not only a happy and healthy baby, but also a well-adjusted, capable, and peaceful mother.

While Ingman follows much of Dr. Sears’ advice, breastfeeds, and wears the baby continuously, none of these techniques seem to prevent Baldo⁶⁹ from crying constantly nor her from becoming depressed. What is more, *The Baby Book* suggests that well-adjusted, i.e., attached, babies have no reason to cry, thereby completely ignoring the case of colic, in which case newborns do precisely that: cry without particular reason. Ingman writes, “The message of attachment-parenting philosophy is clear: A satisfied baby doesn’t cry. And a mother of an attached baby isn’t depressed. Both statements are bullshit” (87). Thus, the reality of everyday life as a new mother, particularly with a colicky baby that exacerbates the problem of sleep deprivation which already troubles mothers with “healthy, happy babies,” refutes the Sears’ arguments. Nonetheless, attachment parenting proves to be a powerful ideology – one that continues to paint tempting pictures of fulfilled motherhood despite its obvious flaws and blind spots. In encountering other parents of infants, Ingman observes that, “mothers cling to [these false statements] – as I did, initially – with almost religious fervor” (88). Indeed, the conviction with which contemporary parents, particularly of the white middle class, defend the principles of attachment parenting has led to an almost competitive environment, increasing the demands on mothers and along with them the potential for feeling guilty and inadequate. As Douglas and Michaels emphasize, attachment parenting is practiced within such an atmosphere of “high achievement and cutthroat competition,” that it “opens the door to standards of excellence that would

⁶⁹ In the introduction, Ingman explains that she does not reveal her son’s actual name in the memoir, but rather uses his prenatal nickname “Baldo,” because “the baby in this book isn’t necessarily the person my son really is. The baby is the person my son appeared to me to be when I was deranged and exhausted” (x).

put any law partner wannabe to shame” (321). With a constantly screaming baby, a lack of sleep, and suicidal thoughts, the experience of early motherhood for Ingman entails the painful realization that “our standards of success, of happiness, of demonstrating our love for our children are inflated. We’ll never meet them. Our reach will always exceed our grasp” (95). Ingman thus reveals attachment parenting as an ideology that does not create realistic expectation for life with an infant.

One might argue, then, that by reiterating these expectations and veiling them in the appearance of expert advice, Dr. Sears and other attachment parenting proponents contribute to the widespread occurrence of PPD because they are “in the business of making mothers feel inadequate” (Ingman 96; see also Douglas/Michaels, 318), and, as Ingman emphasizes, “one of the criteria for measuring postpartum depression is the presence of feelings of maternal inadequacy” (96). In turn, PPD, as Ann Cvetkovich argues about depression more generally, registers as an affective and material response to “forms of biopower that produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction, whether through incarceration, war, or poverty, but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless” (13). Depression, then, is the consequence of larger social and political networks that impact the affective lives of individuals, of “liv[ing] in a culture whose violence takes the form of systematically making us feel bad” (Cvetkovich, 15). For Ingman, the case is clear:

Parents – especially mothers, for reasons of socialization as much as biology – who carry this great bilious load of unattainable expectations are punching a one-way ticket to Crazy Town. If our baby isn’t content and approvingly silent, like a neonatal customer service supervisor, we have *failed*. It sounds risible on paper – of course we haven’t *failed* – but when you’re sleep-deprived and suddenly isolated for long stretches of time, ... you can quite literally go fucking insane. (96, original emphasis)

In contrast to the other two memoirs, Ingman thus takes a clear stance against ideological representations of “good” mothers as selfless, intuitive, and fulfilled, demonstrating that the realities of everyday life with a newborn infant make these ideals utterly unattainable. In this memoir, PPD with its psychological as well as physical symptoms becomes legible as a counternarrative of affective dissonance, opposing that which is ideologically constructed as “normal.” Rather than being an illness,

however, Ingman considers PPD a natural side effect of living with an infant. Indeed, at the end of her memoir, the fact that appears to bring the most relief is that “infancy is officially over” (242). She writes, “There is no conclusion to our story. We have put certain things behind us ... but the rest remains a part of our daily work. It’s still hard work, but I am better able to handle it” (253). In the end, Baldo has outgrown the most difficult stage of his childhood (at least for the foreseeable future), and Marrit has grown into her role as mother, albeit slowly and painfully.

Both Shields’ ceaseless discussion of disappointed expectations and Ingman’s sharp criticism of attachment parenting ideology suggest that contemporary ideologies of good mothering construct a version of the good life that is not only hard to attain, but – in its negligence of the difficulties of everyday life – also obstructs new mothers’ successful management of actual, day to day challenges of life with a newborn. In this sense, these memoirs make postpartum mental illness legible in Lauren Berlant’s terms of “cruel optimism.” According to Berlant, a

relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (1)

Ideologies of good mothering accordingly create a set of expectations (about bliss and fulfillment) that are not simply bound to remain unfulfilled, but in fact to produce in the mother the kind of feelings (failure, guilt, inadequacy) that are indicative of PPD. Thriving in the role of the new mother is obstructed precisely by limited ideals of *how* to thrive; the attachment to and affective investment in the particular “good-life fantasy” (3) that “good” mothering promises to produce is precisely what produces depression and prevents the mother from achieving the ideal.

However, while Ingman ends her memoir without offering her reader closure but with continued criticism of this fantasy of the good life, the overall composition of Shields’ memoir is aimed at affirming her in the role of the loving, devoted, and beautiful “celebrity mom,” and thus

affirming the validity of contemporary mothering ideologies. As Clark demonstrates, the memoir is split into two halves. Following the generic trajectory of medical recovery stories, Shields describes her descent into the illness, while the second half of the memoir details her recovery and her ability to become a good, capable, loving, and devoted mother (Clark, 454). Thus, the second half of the memoir “draws the veil of perfect celebrity motherhood over the wounds, both literal and emotional, exposed in the first part of the book” (Clark, 455). The memoir “ends idyllically with a truly saccharine scene” (Clark, 455), a pathos-laden moment showing mother and child in blissful unity, singing and acting out the nursery rhyme that gives the book its title: the itsy bitsy spider. After the eponymous line, “Down came the rain and washed the spider out,” Shields sings, with tears in her eyes but in sync with her daughter, touching her fingers as they imitate the spider’s movement: “Out came the sun and dried up all the rain, and the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again” (222). The powerful image drawn from the nursery rhyme washes away the feelings of dread, inadequacy, despair, exhaustion, and guilt and restores the mother as a happy, blissful presence, darkness replaced by sunlight. Resnick’s memoir similarly ends in a moment of blissful unity between a mother and her children. One day, as she is looking at her children, she notices that “something is different here. It is the first time, the very first time since Max’s birth, that we are a team. . . . Today we are a working threesome, just as I imagined when I was pregnant with Max. Not only are we a team, but we’re finally playing our intended positions” (159). The rhetoric of intent naturalizes the image of the unified family headed by the blissful mother as a universal experience rather than an ideological construct. Reiterating the idea that “good” motherhood comes naturally and that ideological visions of bliss can be attained, both memoirs thus confirm PPD as a mental illness, a disease which disables mothers from functioning appropriately within contemporary ideological frameworks of good motherhood. Overwriting other potential causes in such a way, both memoirs “testif[y] to the fact that the ‘insight’ of maternal ambivalence remains to this day so frightening, so taboo, that it must be rejected at all costs and labeled

as a psychological disorder” (Stitt, 350). In the end, the narratives suggest, the ideal of blissful maternity is attainable for anyone.

Thus, a medicalized understanding of postpartum mental illness overwrites insinuations about idealized cultural expectations about motherhood as a major contributing factor to the experience of PPD, particularly in Shields’ and Resnick’s memoirs. In the healing process, antidepressants take a prominent role and these memoirs thus lean toward an explicitly biological stance. All three memoirists recount their experiences with antidepressant medication, and in all three cases this medication contributes, more or less significantly, to the improvement of their mental states. At the beginning of her memoir, Resnick declares that, “Seventy-five percent of women with PPD will get over it in a year without pharmaceutical help if they have the strength and patience to wait until their hormone levels return to normal. But as a friend of mine who suffered PPD said when she heard that statistic, “That’s a pretty long fucking year to wait” (7). However, the healing power of antidepressant medication is not easily attained, which is partly due to the women’s own resistance. Although Resnick opens her memoir with this comment on the benefits of medication for balancing one’s hormones, her initial reluctance to taking medication betrays this insight as a retrospective epiphany. In both Resnick and Shields’ accounts, denial figures prominently as a factor inhibiting them from accepting the help that they need which, in their cases, includes the use of antidepressants along with psychotherapy. However, when the psychiatrist first explains to Resnick that she could benefit from such treatment, she writes: “I can’t understand that at the time. I only feel incompetent and deeply ashamed about my dependence on therapy. It is more proof, I am sure, of my failure as a person” (104). Shields recounts a similar thought process writing that, “I couldn’t face the thought of being dependent on medication to feel better” (87), that the idea “scared me” because “I had always believed I could solve my own problems in a natural and healthy way and was ashamed by the thought that I might need drugs” (89); furthermore, she “was afraid that the world would know I was on medication

and think I was weak or crazy” (90). The women’s preconceptions about weakness and failure are a common thread in the narratives and they reflect an internalized sense of the stigma attached to postpartum mental illness; they also imply particular expectations of happiness and self-fulfillment about motherhood that each woman feels too weak or incompetent to fulfill, increasing the sense of shame that is already a part of her daily postpartum struggle.

Nonetheless, eventually both women experience relief of PPD symptoms and improvements of their overall mental states once they find the ideal dose and medication for them. In retrospect, Resnick concludes that the medication was pivotal to her recovery, particularly as a prerequisite for her ability to tackle remaining psychological issues. As her psychiatrist explains to her, the medication is needed to “straighten out my brain’s wiring deficiencies” in order to gain “the perspective and clarity needed to grasp problem solving skills. When your brain is always battling itself, there’s hardly any energy left for common sense” (103–104). Further on in the memoir, she finds that, “the Zoloft has brought me back to my old self with the same satchel of worries, insecurities, and bitterness I’ve always lugged around. But the old me has returned with a couple of crucial tools. ... I’m the proud owner of perspective, what I consider Zoloft’s greatest gift to me” (161). Zoloft has thus become a part of the recovery process, albeit not the only necessary tool in the mother’s sanity kit. More specifically, recovery is constructed as a multiple-step process with antidepressants as a primary step to prepare the maternal body (i.e., its brain) for psychotherapy and the development of coping strategies. Although Ingman mentions antidepressants only in passing in the narrative section of her memoir (“It’s a glorious fucking day if I get Zoloft in my mouth and pants on my ass,” 24), in her afterword she similarly conceives of her recovery as a two-step process that relies on antidepressants first to establish mental, chemical, and hormonal balance. However, for Ingman, antidepressants do not simply prepare women to cope with their situation but rather enable them to address and tackle the

various sociocultural factors that create situations in which women become prone to experiencing PPD (250).

In Shields' narrative, the antidepressants take a crucial role. Despite her initial reluctance to start taking the medication, she eventually succumbs to her doctor's suggestions. Although not entirely convinced that the improvement she then experiences is entirely due to that "pink little pill" she had been "taking diligently," she does observe that "I was no longer crying morning 'til night" (123). At the same time, she notices a change in the relationship with her daughter: "I was learning to bond with my daughter from the outside in, and although it was a slow process, I felt less hopeless" (123). The suggestion that she may need a pill to slowly learn what other – that is, mentally healthy – mothers presumably know intuitively and instantaneously reinforces the notion that she is suffering from a medical condition rather than going through the normal motions of early motherhood. At a subsequent photoshoot with HELLO! Magazine, during which she "reveled in the fact that I felt proud to show [Rowan] off" (126), it appears that she has finally reached the state of maternal bliss she has anticipated and desired for so long. Indeed, upon seeing the design of the photo spread, she rejoices, "I was struck by how peaceful I looked. And what a happy family! At last I was seeing the picture that had been etched in my mind so long ago" (127). Remarkably, it is only by seeing herself in the image of the happy family that she can think of herself as a happy mother.

Shields' response to the photo spread in a popular magazine complicates the distinction between dominant ideologies circulated through popular cultural media and individual mothers encountering them. Like the memory from the set of *The Blue Lagoon*, the photographic depiction of Shields' "happy" family confronts her with imagery in which she herself embodies the ideal of the white, wealthy, blissful heterosexual mother. Both examples indicate the significance of visual representations in creating expectations about motherhood (I explore this further in chapters 3 and 4). Despite not quite feeling the part, seeing herself as a happy mother in the images misleads Shields

to conclude that she no longer depends on the medication. She writes, “I had always been a big believer in mind over matter, so I thought I was now strong enough, and sufficiently well rested, to will myself into feeling better” (128). Following her initial instinct against taking the medication, she discontinues its use without consulting anyone, but soon feels the severe consequences of this decision. One night, she takes Rowan to meet all of her old friends from work behind the stage of their current show, and she starts to feel “uncomfortable, as if I would never again be accepted as part of this world” (129). The feeling of inevitability overcomes her once more, and she feels as though she has lost her old sense of self as a successful actress to her identity as a new mother. For Shields, affective dissonance expresses itself in the disconnect between seeing pictures of herself embodying the cultural ideal of the blissful mother and the discomfort she experiences in that role.

During her backstage visit, this discomfort spirals into a full-on panic attack with physical symptoms. The memoir thus takes a devastating turn to remind readers that the “pink little pill” is essential to the mother’s healing process. As the evening wears on, Shields recounts, “I became more and more disoriented. ... It felt physical, like I was about to get sick or faint. I couldn’t understand what was happening. I had been doing so well. My heart began to race, my hearing became muffled, and I had to get out of there immediately” (131). In this moment it is her body which becomes the measure for her mental state, but at the same time it is what prevents her from acting in a way that conforms to her own as well as others’ expectations. On her way home in the car, she experiences a truly suicidal moment, “getting the terrible feeling that I was going to ram the car into the wall on the side of the freeway. ... I wanted to smash violently through the window” (131). Ironically, it is the presence of the baby that saves the mother from acting on her impulses (132). In consultation with her gynecologist, she confesses that she had thought the medication had nothing to do with the improvement in her mood, but rather that she was “doing better as a result of mind control” (136), and thus that her improved mental state was her own accomplishment. After experiencing this

“breakdown” (132), she “had to admit to being a legitimate member of a depressed mommy society” (142). It is this insight that finally prepares her to accept the help that she needs and thus to embark on her journey to recovery. Her suicidal episode thus functions not only as a turning point in the memoir, but also as a cautionary tale against underestimating the importance of antidepressants on the road to recovery and thus affirms PPD as a medical affliction. In doing so, Shields explicitly urges her audience to acknowledge the suffering mother’s need to rely on medical assistance in overcoming PPD.⁷⁰

The way in which Shields pitches body and mind against each other is significant in her conceptualization of PPD and another narrative theme that her memoir shares with Resnick’s. In both memoirs, the body appears as that which interferes with the woman’s ability to fulfill sociocultural as well as her own expectations of good motherhood. In conversation with a friend, Shields states that “the problem was that I couldn’t reach my heart or my mind” (85). Viewing heart and mind as the places where the soul or one’s identity are located, Shields presents PPD not as a part of her maternal identity, but as a bodily mechanism that prevents her from accessing any kind of self – be it a pre-maternal identity or a new-found one that relates to her status as a new mother. Resnick similarly feels betrayed by her body. When having to wean her baby in order to be able to start taking Prozac, Resnick despairs over losing the only closeness she experiences with her son. She writes, “Without nursing, I will never be as close to my baby again. I am losing something I had no intention of giving up, losing it because my body has failed me again. My brain went this time instead of my thyroid or uterus, the two parts that malfunctioned when I was pregnant or trying to conceive” (109).⁷¹ Both women thus

⁷⁰ In this context, Shields reflects on the suicide of her close friend David, an event that she mentions early in her memoir as something that was truly devastating to her. Shields knew that her friend had discontinued his medication prior to ending his life, and revisits this fact in light of her own suicidal thoughts. By acknowledging that “I should have learned then to have more respect for the value of medication” (135), she appeals to her reader to take her word and learn from her experience, rather than potentially falling prey to the same complacency that almost cost her her life. The implicit lesson to be learned here is for women to take the medication even if they might not think they need it.

⁷¹ The emphasis on breastfeeding as a way to be particularly close to one’s child further displays the author’s investment in ideals of attachment parenting, where extended and on-demand breastfeeding are assumed to increase bonding between

reiterate a discourse that juxtaposes mind and matter as opposites in a binary which values the mind and all that it has come to exemplify – rationality, masculinity, progress – over the female body and its perceived inability to function according to these ideals. In doing so, they subject their experience of PPD to judgment based on an assumed male universal, in which factors such as hormonal change, structural injustice, and physical recovery rarely come to matter. Instead, the medicalized discourses both women subscribe to are part of a surveillance system which presents the female body as something that needs to be subordinated and controlled by one’s mind to comply with ideologies of “good” motherhood.

Beyond biochemical imbalances in the brain, the authors discuss additional ways in which their depression can be registered in, on, and through their bodies. Resnick, for instance, describes one day in August which, like the other ones, “has been like one long fingernail scratch on a blackboard. Every moment hurts. Even with the Zoloft ... I am almost constantly in pain. There is a never-ending feeling of agitation, like layers of grime that can’t be washed off or an itchy wool turtleneck clamped around the neck” (116). This constant physical pain that feels to Resnick as if she is being strangled directly leads to an emotional exhaustion that is legible as a symptom of PPD. She continues, “Everything – answering a child’s question, untucking a shirt to go to the bathroom, thinking of what to have for lunch – takes so much effort. Too much effort” (116). The sense of feeling overwhelmed and exhausted reflects both physical and psychological effects of PPD. For Shields, the onset of depression immediately after Rowan’s birth registers viscerally as well: “I started to experience a sick sensation in my stomach; it was as if a vise was tightening around my chest. ... I hardly moved. Sitting on my bed,

mother and child, an argument that is frequently attacked by formula-feeding mothers who contend that their relationship with their children is being diminished by such claims. Shields is equally committed to breastfeeding and reluctant to wean in order to be able to take the antidepressants. Shields writes that, “breast-feeding was my only real connection to the baby” (81) and that it “seemed to be one of the only maternal instincts that I had” (96).

I let out a deep, slow, guttural wail” (65). In this moment, Shields’ body enacts the depression and thus also makes it legible – or, in this case audible – to Shields herself as well as her reader.

Sleep deprivation and insomnia are presented as pivotal factors exacerbating the experience of PPD. About this, Resnick writes, “Whether you nurse or bottle feed, the baby’s cries pull you out of slumber several times at night. Solid nights of sleep are an impossibility for months. And this can easily stomp on even the strongest of mental states” (37). To emphasize the severity of this situation, she likens herself to “a prisoner withholding information” (39) and reminds her readers that “they used sleep deprivation to torture people in concentration camps” (46).⁷² Shields equally compares sleep deprivation to torture: “Just as I would begin to fall into an exhausted sleep, Rowan’s little bark, like Chinese water torture, would wake me up. This schedule continued incessantly and, thinking that it would be like this forever, I began to feel delirious” (68). The references to torture in both of these memoirs contradict ideological narratives which tend to ignore and neglect the difficult aspects of motherhood.⁷³ Both women not only describe the lack of sleep and its consequences, which are rarely included in images and narratives of maternal bliss, but they also draw explicit connections between this unavoidable condition of early motherhood and the deterioration of their mental state. In these moments, their memoirs bear witness to the daily life of a new mother and evoke sympathy from (and for) their readers. Here, contrasting the suggestion that embodied deviation from ideological configurations need be suppressed or medicated away, the body and its material experience of and response to early motherhood become the locus of maternal affective dissonance and the stage upon which it becomes visible, tangible, and legible.

⁷² More recently, the CIA has reportedly used sleep deprivation as one of their “enhanced interrogation techniques” post 9/11. Describing sleep deprivation as torture is no exaggeration; indeed, it can be considered an “especially insidious form of torture because it attacks the deep biological functions at the core of a person’s mental and physical health” (Kelly Bulkeley, “Why Sleep Deprivation is Torture,” *Psychology Today*, 15 Dec 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dreaming-in-the-digital-age/201412/why-sleep-deprivation-is-torture>).

⁷³ This is mostly true for romanticized visions of early motherhood, while in popular cultural and televisual parodies, mothers’ exhaustion and dishevelment is frequently ridiculed and exploited for comedic relief. Thanks to Erin Bell for pointing this out.

In *Inconsolable*, Marrit and her partner Jim make adjustments that allow the exhausted mother to sleep in longer increments, and she immediately starts to feel better. “It was heaven,” she writes. “After about a week of it, I actually felt slightly restored mentally. My obsessive thoughts about death slowed. I didn’t cry at all” (106). For Ingman, this experience clearly affirms sleep deprivation and exhaustion as an important contributor to PPD symptoms. Unfortunately, while sleeping more alleviates her mental state, it does not eliminate the baby’s needs: while she feels better, Jim has a nervous breakdown because he is now suffering from sleep deprivation. Thus, Ingman’s narrative not only illustrates the devastating effects of sleep deprivation, but emphasizing Jim’s suffering also points to environmental factors that contribute to the experience of PPD alongside biological and psychological ones.⁷⁴

Other environmental factors Ingman considers include the importance of a support network that helps the new mother recover from childbirth and adjust to her role. At one point in her narrative, Marrit is hospitalized because of a hepatitis infection, a stay she welcomes as a much-needed “vacation” (45) from tending to her colicky infant. Meanwhile, her mother stays with Jim, and his fellow workers are taking off work to help him take care of Baldo. However, as soon as she returns home, Ingman writes, “Jim went back to work, my mother went home, and no one offered to take off work to help me” (53). The blatant contradiction between the large support system Jim enjoys and the expectations that a mother, even one recovering from a malady such as hepatitis, is perfectly capable of taking care of her infant by herself points to the pervasiveness of contemporary mothering ideology and its effects on the conditions in which early motherhood is experienced. Similarly, Resnick emphasizes that “mothers and babies do need to be sheltered from the responsibilities of the real

⁷⁴ Recent research has emphasized that fathers and adoptive parents can also be affected by postpartum depression, indicating that while hormonal challenges might contribute to female postpartum suffering, they cannot be considered the exclusive cause. Indeed, such research would suggest consideration of environmental factors such as sleep deprivation and lack of support. The CDC cites a study from 2010 which estimated that between 1993–2007, 4 % of fathers were afflicted by postpartum depression during their child’s first year, the number increasing to about 20% by the child’s twelfth birthday.

world while they recover from a process that splits one body into two” (35). As evidence, she lists anthropological research that has found that mothers in non-Western cultures who are granted a forty-day recovery period during which they receive “rest, seclusion, and help” (36) suffer from PPD in much smaller numbers than are seen in the Western cultures who expect women to “bounce back” quickly after birth and show as little evidence of having given birth as possible. Thus, both women conclude, the cultural environment in which Western women mother not only entails ideological constructions of maternal bliss, but also a lack of support that prevents sufficient recovery from childbirth and adjustment to the new role. The material conditions produced in this context thus obstruct the ideals of fulfilled and natural mothering prescribed by its ideology.

It is important to note that these material aspects of early motherhood – sleep deprivation, exhaustion, lack of support – do not directly speak to the approaches explaining depression that Janet Stoppard described as biological. While such approaches tend to consider primarily biochemical and hormonal imbalances, as discussed above, the material consequences of living with a newborn addressed here differ substantially and offer additional insight. As Stoppard asserts in *Understanding Depression*, researchers taking a biological approach often regard material experiences that go beyond biochemical and hormonal imbalances as mere somatic symptoms and thus disregard their relevance for female – and in this case, maternal – experience. Problematically, Stoppard claims, such approaches to depression view the body as “an entity which is both neutral and natural, governed only by biological mechanisms and so distinct from sociocultural processes” (21). Other forms of embodied female experience, which may contribute to, exacerbate, or alleviate the experience of depression, are neglected in favor of one-dimensional approaches to explaining depression. Stoppard opposes these approaches by asserting that “depression is an embodied experience, one that is experienced subjectively and enacted physically by means of the material body” (21). Thus, in these memoirs, sleep

deprivation and exhaustion are as much causes of the depression as they are ways in which the maternal body expresses and lives its postpartum depression.

By acknowledging, however briefly, that a variety of factors affect their postpartum moods, all three memoirists appear to think of PPD in a similar way as Elizabeth Wilson does about depression in general. In *Gut Feminism*, Wilson identifies depression as “organized as entanglements of affects, ideations, nerves, agitation, sociality, pills, and synaptic biochemistry” (1). Instead of conceiving of depression as a purely biochemical (i.e., located in the brain) or socioculturally determined condition, Wilson suggests that other organs as well as other parts of the body such as the nervous system are equally involved in producing, regulating, expressing, and experiencing mood. Focusing in particular on the gut, she writes that it does not simply “[contribute] to minded states, but that [it] is an organ of mind: it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends” (5). More specifically, she writes that the gut and its actions are not simply “instruments for the expression of feeling,” but rather “sources of mind” (77). The memoirs at the center of this chapter suggest in similar ways that particular actions of the body (insomnia, inexplicable bouts of crying, reluctance to eat) are not simply indicators of a depressed state of mind, but rather the maternal body’s way of enacting and producing its depression.

While, as I have shown, these observations take the backseat to the medicalized models which particularly Shields and Resnick endorse, it is important to note that the authors do so for very specific politicized reasons. Despite falling short of thoroughly critiquing cultural images regarding early motherhood, the memoirs work toward the political goal of reducing the discourse of shame that is often attached to postpartum mental illness. How important this impetus was at the time of the publication of Shields’ memoir is evident in the ensuing public arguments with famous actor and infamous Scientologist Tom Cruise. Following the publication of *Down Came the Rain*, Tom Cruise appeared on the *Today Show* and condemned Shields’ use of antidepressants as described in the memoir. In his interview, Cruise claimed that “psychiatry is a pseudo science,” denied the existence

of chemical imbalances in the brain, argued that the use of antidepressants does nothing but “mask the problem,” and suggested that exercise and vitamins are better options to treat PPD, the existence of which he did not go so far as to question (Stitt, 339). As Jocelyn Stitt points out, Cruise’s comments met with much intense criticism, particularly because some of his views appear to stem directly from the philosophy of the much-criticized Church of Scientology. Critics felt that he was “out of touch with prevailing cultural norms that advocate medical help for mental illness” (339).⁷⁵ Shields’ memoir illustrates that these cultural norms are not as pervasive as Cruise’s critics suggest and that both women who suffer from PPD and men like Tom Cruise must still be convinced of its medical nature.

Cruise’s position and his conflict with Shields point to a complex force field in which questions of mental illness and treatment are negotiated. While Cruise’s argument is reflective of the antibiologist stance of many recent feminist theorists who view the “the medicalization of women’s biological experiences ... as oppressive” (Stitt, 341), his association with Scientology and his resulting increasing unpopularity interfere with a successful delivery of such arguments.⁷⁶ His denial of psychiatry as a science and the existence of chemical imbalances in the brain contradict the medical and popular wisdom of his time, and his assertion that exercise and vitamins suffice in treating PPD mimics the patronizing discourse of the predominantly male medical establishment which refused to take postpartum mental illness seriously for too long. Thus, Shields’ memoir takes an important stance in publicizing a first-person account which works toward eliminating stigma and encouraging fellow sufferers to get help if they need it. This political motivation explains why the memoir does not

⁷⁵ Shields herself responded to Cruise’s interview in a *New York Times* op-ed, in which she remarked, “I’m going to take a wild guess and say that Mr. Cruise has never suffered from postpartum depression.” She further called his comments a “ridiculous rant” and “a disservice to mothers everywhere” (Brooke Shields, “War of Words,” *New York Times*, 1 July 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/01/opinion/war-of-words.html?_r=0). Cruise subsequently apologized both in private and publicly (on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, among other places) for attacking Shields, although he never withdrew his condemnation of antidepressants. Shields and her husband Chris Henchy attended Cruise’s wedding to Katie Holmes in Rome the following year, and she has stated in multiple interviews that she no longer holds a grudge against him.

⁷⁶ For more on antibiologism in feminist theory and its relation with depression, see Wilson, particularly chapter 1.

foreground those segments which emphasize the clash between sociocultural expectations and lived experience and thus resonate with Cruise's claim.

The access to medical care to treat postpartum mental illness is a critical stake for the memoirists. As both Stitt and Taylor emphasize, having PPD recognized as a mental illness provides suffering mothers with a framework and a support system that allows them to acknowledge and share their feelings without guilt or the fear of being reprimanded or even punished. According to Taylor, this is a fairly recent development and is related to the sociopolitical context in which PPD occurs. In her research on the postpartum depression self-help movement in the United States, Taylor has found that early generations of activists were much more invested in discussing cultural forces that may contribute to the emergence of PPD. First popping up during the 1970s, early self-help groups emerged in the context of second wave feminism, which attacked antiquated gender roles and strove towards increased equality between the sexes (including, for instance, the equal distribution of domestic labor). Such activism drew on consciousness-raising as a tool: the experiences of individual women were used as a source to identify how social structures justified and cemented hegemonic gender relations (hence the slogan, "the personal is political"). The first support group initiated by Jane Honikman, who later founded Postpartum Support International, one of the two major organizations Taylor analyzes, "mobilized around a feminist frame that linked maternal depression to the sexual division of labor in the family that gives women primary responsibility for rearing and nurturing children but places them at a distinct disadvantage in the public world" (70). In other words, early activism surrounding PPD was informed by second wave feminist strategies to draw attention to structural gender inequality.

However, as the political climate changed in the 1980s, the postpartum depression movement followed suit. Neoliberal policies entailed a decrease in access to health care, specifically mental health care, the defunding of state programs such as child care and other support systems, and the general

emphasis on the responsibility of the individual. These developments led to an increase in self-help groups, many of which focused increasingly on therapeutic approaches as well as the individual's ability to improve her state of mind (Taylor, 71, 78, 89–90). Significantly, Taylor maintains that such a shift in approach is deliberate and politically motivated. Although “social factors in postpartum depression” are still generally recognized, according to Taylor, “the decision to emphasize the biological basis of women’s problems in order to campaign for recognitions as a bona fide psychiatric disorder was clearly strategic” (132). The discourse surrounding the medicalization of PPD, pushed forward here by women suffering from it, thus runs counter to much feminist theorizing, particularly in the field of science studies and medicine, which has argued against the medicalization of female maladies at the hand of the male medical establishment and instead emphasizes the entanglement of biological factors with sociocultural and environmental ones.⁷⁷

The medical model is deeply entwined with the neoliberal context in which it has emerged. In addition to the advances women have gained from access to antidepressants, the medicalization of PPD has also benefitted the pharmaceutical complex. Indeed, as Wilson argues, since Prozac was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in 1987, depression has “become more prevalent, more quotidian, more biochemical, more cerebral, and (paradoxically) both more treatable and more intractable” (7). Meanwhile, depression has also become more pervasive in everyday life and weaves through “support groups, talk shows, memoir, self-help book, op-ed pages, personal anecdotes, blogs, social media, [and] direct-to-consumer advertising” (10). In this context of the prevalence of the illness and its treatability, Prozac (along with other selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) takes on the role of a consumer product through which the women suffering from postpartum mental illness are enabled to manage their discontent and reinstate their experience of ideologically prescribed maternal

⁷⁷ See e.g., Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* 2nd ed. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2011).

experiences. The medicalization of PPD thus reflects the individualization and de-politicization of the gendered structures that produce experiences of motherhood. In the neoliberal postfeminist framework, explored in more depth in chapter 1, individual experience is no longer drawn on for political purposes. Instead, the ability to medicate discontent with the conditions of maternal existence is presented as an empowering tool for the emancipated, contemporary mother. The memoirists take an ambivalent stance on this matter: they highlight both the significance of antidepressants for their healing process and the way in which the medicalized model neglects the social, biological, and environmental factors that contribute to the experience of PPD. In doing so, they allow contradictory modes of explanation to coexist without necessarily striving to resolve them.

Since the exact causes for postpartum mental illness continue to be contested by experts and survivors alike, notions of “bad” motherhood often accompany popular debates about the topic. Emphasizing the social environment and suggesting that it contributes to the experience does not explain why only some, but not all mothers (and fathers) experience PPD. In contrast, women in the self-help movement as well as the authors of these memoirs focus on biochemical and medical explanations for the experience in order to accomplish their primary goal, namely “women getting care and finding support” (Taylor, 112). In particular, this also means escaping stigmata and labels of “bad” mothering. By participating in such self-help groups, and striving to redefine how PPD is viewed in medical and public discourses, women take charge of the labeling practices related to their experience. Stitt similarly views mothers as

participatory agents in defining their depression following childbirth as biological in nature, rather than as passive recipients of a diagnosis by the medical establishment. The medicalization of negative reactions to motherhood as “postpartum depression” has served to let women defend themselves against accusations of being bad and uncaring mothers. Illness rather than personal failing is responsible for feelings of resentment or detachment from one’s child. (345)

A definition of postpartum mental illness in medical terms thus carries the substantive benefit of allowing suffering mothers to distance themselves from the experience of guilt and shame that all three memoirists portray.

In this context, all three memoirs describe a process of slowly recognizing that suffering from postpartum mental illness does not make one a “bad” mother, contrary to what popular discourse might have mothers believe. The reluctance with which both Resnick and Shields respond to the suggestion that they might have PPD bears witness to their fear of being considered bad mothers. While Shields is initially convinced that her PPD diagnosis “was yet another sign of my weakness and failure as a mother” (86), Resnick “viewed my constant state of angst as a character flaw” (90). For both women, the absence of maternal bliss goes to the core of their identity as mothers and threatens the integrity of their sense of self. In the popular cultural view, good motherhood continues to be conceptualized as an essential component of fulfilled and complete femininity. The women’s fear of being considered “bad” mothers reflects the way in which this ideological configuration both elicits their desire to be a good mother and constructs their inability to produce the affective responses attached to it as a failure of the self.

Both women also reveal that their only association with PPD with bad motherhood comes from news reporting about murderous mothers. Resnick refuses to see herself as “one of those depressed mothers I’ve read about in articles. . . . I’m a perfectly capable mother. I’m just tired” (50). Shields references Susan Smith, with whose story I open this chapter, explicitly: “I associated [PPD] only with those people who harmed their kids by doing things like driving the car into a lake. . . . It hit only those people you read about in the news” (83). In the public imagination, they emphasize, PPD is inextricably linked not just with bad motherhood, but with killing one’s children. This vision of bad motherhood, it is important to note, is strongly inflected by race and class. While the “good” mother is usually portrayed as a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman, popular cultural discourses have

reserved much more negative images and stereotypes for non-white and lower-class women, ranging from the African-American matriarch to the welfare queen and from the overbearing Jewish mother to the lower class single and/or teenaged mother. Depictions of Susan Smith and women like her are striking precisely because they challenge these distinctions. Indeed, in the introduction to their edited collection *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, Historian Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky argue that, “the media seem stunned when a likable white woman like Susan Smith kills her sons, something we think a drug addict more likely to do” (3).⁷⁸ PPD thus collapses these racialized and classed notions of good motherhood and prevents the white middle-class women writing these memoirs from recognizing themselves in the ideological accounts available to them. The fear of being seen as a bad mother, then, is also linked to the loss of a sense of self as a good white, heterosexual, middle-class mother.

The link between postpartum mental illness and murderous motherhood, while misleading, is also detrimental to suffering mothers as it breeds fear and discourages them from getting much needed help. In describing their most terrifying experiences, both Shields and Resnick describe what the official lists of characteristic symptoms designate as “intrusive thoughts” of harming their babies. Shields writes,

During what was becoming one of the darkest points in my life, I sat holding my newborn and could not avoid the image of her flying through the air and hitting the wall in front of me. I had no desire to hurt my baby and didn’t see myself as the one throwing her, thank God, but the wall morphed into a video game, and in it her little body smacked the surface and slid down onto the floor (71).

Similarly, Resnick describes how the “darkness manifests itself in terrifying pictures projected onto my imagination” (120). One day, as she is preparing dinner,

I walk by the hot oven and it menaces me... . I imagine it snapping open its jaws and threatening to gobble [Max] in. But not by its own power. I don’t see the oven taking the baby. I see something worse in the images that flash by my eyes: the mother giving the baby to the

⁷⁸ Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umanski, *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

oven. ...When I walk by it holding Max when it is hot, I get a feeling of terror that I will suddenly lose control of myself and shove him in. I don't want to hurt him in any way. ... But he is the size of a roasting chicken and I believe I have no control of anything. (119–120)

Importantly, these moments capture the concomitance of conflicting emotions, as the images that appear uncontrollably in the women's minds are immediately followed by intense feelings of guilt, horror, and shame. After seeing her daughter slide down the wall in this mental image, Shields was "horrified, and although I knew deep in my soul that I would not harm her, the image all but destroyed me" (Shields, 71). Resnick describes the repetitive thoughts in similar terms: "These split-second horror flicks are followed by tremendous slaps of guilt. What kind of awful person would think that, I yell at myself in my head, *you should be ashamed*. And I am. The shame is so deep that I can't tell anyone about these thoughts" (122, emphasis in the original). The suffering is multiplied: the women are shocked by the thought of harming their children, and their already inhibited self-confidence is further diminished by the guilt and shame that increase feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-worth. Resnick's story is additionally complicated by the loss of trust in herself, as she is no longer convinced to be in control not only of her thoughts, but also her actions. The similarities in these two accounts are striking: the metaphor of darkness to describe these intrusive thoughts as low points in the mothers' struggle, the persistence of the flashing images of harming the child despite the explicit lack of a desire to do so, and the absolute terror produced along with them are common tropes in these memoirs. As personalized narratives of untypical experiences of contemporary motherhood, they bravely dare to speak the unspeakable.

Thus, while the memoirs emphasize the difference between the newsworthy stories of mothers who commit infanticide – most frequently diagnosed with postpartum psychosis – and those experiencing the "milder" forms of PPD, these visual moments of harming one's children simultaneously challenge such a clear distinction. In a chapter titled, "The Inevitable Remarks about

Andrea Yates,” Ingman muses about the difference between these seemingly distinct forms of postpartum mental illness:

Why do some of us survive while others slip away – into profoundly delusional thinking, into sudden, appalling violence against the very people we love? ... What separates you [Andrea Yates] – monstrous and perverse, a Medea – from me? Where is the line between a mother with ‘normal’ problems germane to her station – the fatigue, the loneliness, the isolation, the worry, the constant interruption of her thoughts and actions – and a mother who snaps? (227)

Resnick equally emphasizes the difficulty to distinguish between symptoms of PPD and the usual conditions of everyday life in early motherhood, which she describes as “garden variety new-motherhooditis” (77). None of the memoirs discussed here truly answer these questions, although all three women utilize their narratives in part to redeem themselves and prove to their audience that they are indeed “good” mothers. What the reader is left with, then, is a sense of early maternity as a “slippery slope ... between sanity and madness” (Ingman, 249). For Ingman, this is a sphere *all* new mothers inhabit: “We all live here. In so many moments I’ve wondered why we even make reference to ‘postpartum depression’ when life with young children is so self-evidently crazy-making. Love is not enough to keep you happy. Why do we tell mothers this lie?” (249). Again, it is important to note this romanticized notion that affects “all” mothers, at best, includes all white middle-class mothers, who are presumed to have a husband providing an income for them. In contrast, ideological configurations of other mothers, for instance, depict African-American stay-at-home mothers as lazy and imply that they teach their children to be the same. Nonetheless, Ingman suggests that the material conditions of tending to an infant in the United States is enough to produce the experience of PPD and that PPD operates on a scale, rather than being a disease that one either does or does not suffer from.

Despite the opaque stance the memoirs take on the relationship between PPD and postpartum psychosis and healthy maternity respectively, overcoming the association of PPD with bad mothering remains a pivotal point on the agenda of the contemporary feminist discourses surrounding

motherhood to which they contribute. In order to accomplish this goal, advocates for a medical approach to PPD have relied on comparisons between postpartum mental illness and other organic diseases such as diabetes and cancer. For instance, a 2015 public service announcement from the Hope for Depression Research Foundation⁷⁹ depicts a hairless woman, seemingly suffering from cancer, facing friends and family who tell her to “snap out of it,” to “stop it with the pity party,” and to “go outside and you’ll be fine.” At the end of the video, the message on screen reads: “You’d never talk like this to someone with cancer. Don’t talk like this to someone with depression.” As Stitt emphasizes, the argument that is often made in these discourses is that “the brain is an organ in the body, just like any other part of your body” (344). Biological explanations for PPD thus fulfill an important function in that they open a public conversation in which PPD can be considered as a disease for which the individual is not at fault herself, rather than as a character flaw or a sign of weakness.

The fact that Cruise’s outburst was quickly dismissed by public observers invites speculation that the implication that there might be factors other than medical or biochemical imbalances involved in producing the experience might have been perceived as a threat to the accomplishments made precisely through the medicalization of PPD. Stitt suggests that Cruise “unwittingly opened up the possibility that postpartum depression has a cultural and personal component. If social or emotional issues might cause postpartum depression, this raises the possibility that the social expectations of motherhood as completely joyous is incorrect” (346). Shields’ memoir invites this consideration briefly, but reverts quickly to the medicalized model of PPD. Despite her acknowledgment of a variety of environmental factors including her father’s death, her traumatic birthing experience, and her own expectations, the memoir strives to maintain the more acceptable narrative of mental illness. This might be partly due to Shields’ public visibility as well as considerations of the commercial appeal of

⁷⁹ Hope for Depression Research Foundation, “Hope for Depression,” Youtube video, 1:01, 17 Nov 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGJzPBjK67w>.

her memoir. In this context, Stitt quips: “Is it too much to ask that a Hollywood actor call for an economic and social revolution in our thinking about motherhood? Probably” (350). Nonetheless, the complexity of the memoir – its careful negotiation between social and environmental factors and biological explanations – suggests to the reader that there is more at stake. Ultimately, Stitt suggests that it is “possible to view postpartum depression (anxiety, fear, feelings of worthlessness, resentment of one’s partner and baby) as a *rational* response to the social inequalities and isolation experienced by many mothers” (351, emphasis added). While the structure of the memoir itself and Shields’ discussion of antidepressants (as well as the severe consequences of discontinuation) affirm the medical model, the other factors that are discussed in the memoir invite consideration of less pathological views of the experience.

Read alongside each other, the memoirs discussed in this chapter thus offer a complex interpretation of potential causes and effects of postpartum mental illness. Accounting for chemical and hormonal balances as well as the unattainability of sociocultural ideals of motherhood, the material realities of life with a newborn as well as environmental factors contributing to the experience, the writers reject the possibility of quick and easy solutions. While one might be suspicious of the way in which the narrative arc of both Resnick’s and Shields’ memoirs reinforce medicalized – and thus pathologizing – versions of postpartum mental illness, I have shown how this works as a rhetorical strategy to follow a particular political goal, namely to relieve mothers who do not experience pure bliss and fulfillment after the birth of a child from the guilt attached to the stigma of being bad mothers. Importantly, the perspective of these memoirs is not limited to providing such a narrow account, and Ingman’s memoir adds an additional dimension in primarily holding cultural expectations responsible for maternal suffering. Indeed, as I have argued, it is precisely the content of these cultural expectations, i.e., the ideological constructs of white, heterosexual, middle-class motherhood as a form of the “good life” and their ignorance of the realities of everyday life with an infant, which prevents

the mother from thriving in her new role. Illustrating how the demands of infant care interfere with dominant cultural ideals of immediate and instinctive motherhood, how chemical and hormonal imbalances can produce a sense of alienation from one's previous sense of self, and how the tired and exhausted body lives, reflects, and contributes to the mother's depressed state of mind, the texts invite an understanding of PPD as following what Elizabeth Wilson might call the "logic of entanglement" of factors producing the experience. Thus, they illustrate how "the ways in which depressions are diagnosed, experienced, and treated are all interlinked (that is, ... how we talk about depressions, and how we treat them, and how they crystallize biologically, and what they feel like, are all mutually complicated)" (Wilson, 9). Thus, it is the lived experience of early motherhood, impacted by biological and material realities and their complicated relationship with expectations about maternity, which betrays ideological representations of motherhood as promises that are bound to be broken.

As first person accounts, these memoirs are part of a larger discourse that has emerged since the beginning of the twenty-first century, contributing to a cultural environment in which postpartum mental illness and distress are increasingly receiving attention.⁸⁰ Like the members of the self-help group movement Taylor analyzes, Resnick, Shields, and Ingman emphasize "*experiential knowledge*, or common-sense wisdom of people's problems as an alternative or supplement to professional knowledge," and provide accounts of a "*shared experience*," that "becomes a basis for building solidarity with others" (19). In doing so, these memoirs reiterate the importance of a feminist epistemology that relies on personal accounts to juxtapose the ideological discourses of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and the pharmaceutical complex which have de-politicized individual experience and obliterated the knowledge produced by consciousness-raising second wave feminists. Unlike these second wave

⁸⁰ Other memoirs of PPD that have been published since 2000 include Marie Osmond, Marcia Wilkie, and Judith Moore, *Behind the Smile: My Journey out of Postpartum Depression* (New York: Warner Publishing, 2001); Adrienne Martini, *Hillbilly Gothic: A Memoir of Madness and Motherhood* (New York: Free Press, 2006); and Ana Clare Rouds, *Dancing on the Edge of Sanity* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014). During the same time frame, the internet, particularly social media and the blogosphere, has exploded with first-person accounts that provide counternarratives to contemporary ideologies of good mothering.

feminists, however, affective dissonance reveals not only the way in which ideology justifies and naturalizes oppressive gender relations, but how it continues to elicit desires and bind individuals to certain promises of the good life that are implied in these relations.

The texts reach out to and explicitly address readers who might also suffer from PPD and find themselves unknowing where to turn for help.⁸¹ In doing so, each author attempts to fill a gap that she herself identified and suffered from when trying to overcome her depression. All three describe the painful search for other first-person accounts, “looking for validation of their experiences, seeking reassurance that their depression will end” (Taylor, 107). During her search for such a book, Resnick finds that “there were none on the shelves” (3). When Shields starts thinking about narrating her story, “I started feeling like I was one of the few women who had experienced it and that it was not something one admitted going through” (144). Ingman equally observes that “despite the efforts of so many mother-writers, speaking about the ‘dark side of motherhood,’ whatever that means, is still taboo” (xi). Consequently, she affirms the need for stories about PPD most explicitly: “By sharing our voices, perhaps we will feel less alone” (14). Like the women that participate in the postpartum depression self-help movement, then, the writers discussed in this chapter have contributed to a larger discourse which, according to Taylor “poses the most serious challenge to ‘the myth of blissful parenthood that is ingrained in our society’ and confirms women’s feelings of sadness, unhappiness, hopelessness and loss that can accompany the changes brought on by motherhood” (50). The accomplishment of these memoirs, then, is not that they provide a determinate account of the causes of postpartum mental illness, but rather that they take PPD seriously as an experience of affective dissonance and draw on it to create an archive of stories of women whose experiences deviate from ideological accounts and the expectations they produce. In bringing their experiences into public

⁸¹ Each book ends in urging readers to get help *immediately* if they are experiencing similar symptoms, and each provides a list of resources available across the country and online.

awareness, the authors emphasize “the heavy demands on modern mothers and [call] attention to the way that maternal self-sacrifice undermines women’s identities and well-being” (Taylor, 179). At the same time, they contribute to the pathologization of postpartum depression without quite resolving the contradictions this implies. Affective dissonance thus becomes the basis for a public conversation that does not merely reveal ideological constructions of motherhood as unrealistic, but that emphasizes that this ideological formation of the “good” mother continues to elicit desire and bind its addressees to its promises in ways that prevent them from thriving.

So far, these memoirs have received little to no academic attention, which is due partly to a lack of interest in postpartum depression as a topic of feminist interest and partly due to their own lack of literary ambition. However, that none of these texts are of high artistic quality and that they emphasize the personal narrative form need not be seen as a flaw. Indeed, these particular stylistic “qualities” bear in mind the very material conditions in which the target audiences find themselves: with little or no time to read in the early days of motherhood, often unable to concentrate for long periods of time, and searching desperately for personal voices that sound like their own, mothers experiencing PPD find in these memoirs women who they can identify with. Thus, it is the precisely their use of quotidian language, repetitive sentence structure, and formulaic narrative arch that enables them to both stylistically emulate the experience of PPD and thus speak to and connect with women who share their experience of affective dissonance. Published at a time when personal narratives are becoming ubiquitous through the use of the Internet via blogs and as PPD is gaining more attention in the public realm, these memoirs contribute to an ongoing conversation which refuses simple solutions to the “problem” that is postpartum mental illness. As part of this larger conversation, they envision a feminist epistemology of embodiment to assert the relevance of women’s issues, despite the neglect these have endured over the centuries. Bringing PPD into public awareness and

confronting the dismissal of the condition by men like Tom Cruise, these memoirs and their writers draw on the experience of affective dissonance to politicize motherhood as a feminist issue.

While contemporary popular cultural discourses, despite their acknowledgement of other factors, tend to endorse a medicalized model of postpartum mental illness, academic feminists could contribute significant additional perspectives were they to enter this discourse more determinedly. In this chapter, I have attempted to draw attention to memoirs such as Ingman's and how they engage with, contradict, and complement accounts that receive more mainstream attention, like Shields' memoir and the increasing amount of mommyblogs addressing the issue. Drawing on feminist theories of depression and the pathologization of so-called female maladies, discussions like this one can increase awareness of the multifactorial causes of postpartum mental illness and emphasize the importance of addressing social and cultural expectations regarding motherhood. The experience of affective dissonance as described in these memoirs becomes a way of bearing ambivalence: the seemingly contradicting impulses of pathologizing postpartum depression and attributing its occurrence to social, cultural, and political circumstances are permitted to coexist without being resolved. At the same time, by increasing awareness of such individual narratives, academic feminists can contribute to the equally important goal of encouraging those mothers who are in more immediate need, for instance of medical assistance, to seek help. Affective dissonance in the form of postpartum depression, then, is both an individual concern that deserves attention and a propeller for challenging the ways in which ideological narratives help produce it.

CHAPTER 3: BREASTFEEDING MATTERS: MATERNAL BECOMING IN RECENT VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF NURSING MOTHERS

Questions of visibility and visual representation are central to current debates about the permissibility of breastfeeding in public. Despite the improvements that feminisms have brought to gender relations over the past decades, matters of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding continue to take stage on contested terrain in which visual representation produces particularly conflicted responses. Images of breastfeeding as a specific realm of maternal performance circulate in various environments ranging from popular media to art photography and theoretical feminist discourses. In this chapter, I juxtapose three photographs of nursing mothers, their discursive contexts, and their travel trajectories in order to show how they problematize the relationship between breastfeeding, its visibility and visual representation, and the notion of a distinctly maternal subjectivity. Taken together, the three images produce a visual exemplification of what I have called affective dissonance, i.e., the discrepancy between expectations regarding motherhood raised by dominant popular, narrative, and visual discourses of idealized maternity, and the embodied, material experiences of everyday motherhood. In doing so, the chapter highlights how visual representation both contributes to and reflects how bodies encounter ideological formations.

While images of motherhood and pregnancy have become increasingly visible over the last few decades, and the internet has proven a helpful source in countering many taboos regarding this visibility, representations of nursing continue to strike a raw nerve. In the introduction to her collection of art photography entitled *Home Truths: Motherhood and Photography*, Susan Bright singles out visual representations of breastfeeding as holding a particularly awkward place in popular media, indicating that “the visceral and the biological in regard to mothering still occupies a strange and confused place within our visual culture, one that expresses both a public sense of revulsion and

conservative ideas about what should be kept private.”⁸² The photographs discussed in this chapter negotiate this contested terrain in different ways, leading them to varying degrees of visibility – one of them traveled across a variety of media outlets, one frequently appears in academic discussions of feminist motherhood, and one, even with a targeted google search, is hardly to be located online. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright correctly and importantly point out in the opening remarks to their propaedeutic *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, “meaning does not reside within images, but is produced at the moment that they are consumed by and circulated among viewers.”⁸³ When discussing images of nursing mothers it is thus important to consider both the image itself and the context in which it appears, i.e., to consider the places of medial occurrence and reoccurrence, the audience’s responses to each image, and the cultural environment with its conflicted stance on breastfeeding itself as well as its visibility as an act of maternal performance.

The first image in my triptych is a photo of Russian model Natalia Vodianova nursing her baby Maxim, which she shared via the social network Instagram in June of 2014. The photo is captioned, “happy birthday baby from Paolo, Maxim and I. Love you (@antoinearnault S)))).” Paolo is the photographer who took the picture, and the caption suggests Vodianova’s partner and the child’s father Antoine Arnault, heir of the Louis Vitton fashion empire and himself CEO of its subsidiary brand Berluti, as the addressee. The black-and-white photo depicts the model lounging naked on a couch, her leg and arm preventing visibility of her free nipple and genitals. Her half-opened mouth and eyes looking directly at the camera imitate the seductiveness familiar from the front pages of popular magazines.

⁸² Susan Bright, *Home Truths: Motherhood and Photography* (London: Arts Book Publishing, 2013), quotation on 15.

⁸³ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), quotation on 7.



Image 1. Natalia Vodianova nursing her son Maxim, photo posted to Instagram, 4 June 2014. Frame grab.

A feminist critique of this photograph has various possible points of entry. For instance, one might “read” the image in relation to the historical tradition it mimics. The language the image speaks is familiar, as many of the images discussed in John Berger’s seminal work *Ways of Seeing* indicate.⁸⁴ In his discussion of gender, Berger argues that over the centuries, European traditions of painting, specifically in the genre of the nude which depicts naked women directly looking at the spectator of a painting, generally conceived as male, have taught women to see themselves through the spectator’s eyes. In a sentence that well describes Vodianova’s image, Berger claims that “women watch themselves being looked at” (47). More specifically, the internalization of this male perspective leads the woman to “turn herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (47). In its most immediate sense, the model in the image looks toward the camera and/or the photographer, watching herself being seen by the photographer. At the same time, the caption indicates her husband as the intended additional audience, suggesting a private relationship between observer and observed,

⁸⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

subject and object of vision. This specific address, however, is of course undermined by the public channel Vodianova chose to send her husband his birthday greetings. Turning herself into a sight on a social network and reaching out to a potentially unlimited, anonymous audience, Vodianova thus amplifies the objectification of the sight and its underlying gendered relationship of visibility.

Berger's arguments were explored in relation to film by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which discusses the relationship between gender and visibility in a psychoanalytic analysis of Hollywood film.⁸⁵ Mulvey argues that relationships of seeing and being seen are structured by what she terms "the male gaze." According to Mulvey, film tends to address an assumedly male spectator, and female characters are presented as passive spectacles, catering to male fantasies. The female spectator internalizes the male gaze of desire and attempts to fashion herself in accordance with the ideal imagery presented on screen. Mulvey's account draws attention to the ways in which images do not merely represent, but also shape ideas about masculinity and femininity. Mulvey's arguments were quickly taken up by other feminist theorists and psychoanalysts. In subsequent feminist scholarship, the internalized gaze becomes a central concept to understanding the relationship between images, knowledge, and the power relations that structure practices of looking at film, but also other media representations. In mass media culture, which constantly confront consumers with a variety of images, the implied (male) gaze induces mechanisms of self-regulation in accordance with dominant heteronormative ideologies as perpetuated in these images.⁸⁶ Learning and internalizing the male gaze through representations in film, TV, and advertising teaches subjects, specifically women, to regard themselves through the camera lens. At the same time, fashioning the self in accordance with the internalized gaze produces subjectivity. The desire to conform to the

⁸⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18.

⁸⁶ We have since transitioned from the mass media age to the age of digitization in which images travel more multidirectionally than they did during the twentieth century. According to Steven Shaviro, "we are now witnessing the emergence of a different media regime," which is characterized by "new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience" (2). Nonetheless, the male gaze remains an important concept as women's self-representation continues to respond to the demands of a male-dominated culture, as my discussion of Vodianova's image suggests.

images seen via this gaze positions women in a constant struggle to reproduce the image content. The viewer of Vodianova's image is both literally and figuratively male: the photographer is known to be male, as is the intended primary audience (as much as this may need to be viewed critically due to the selected channel for dissemination), and Vodianova's self-fashioning replicates culturally known ways of seeing and looking and thus the dynamic between the male observer and the female observed. As the image object, i.e., as the depiction that is visible in the image – as compared to the subject to which it refers – the model is arranged and presents itself in accordance with male phantasies, looking back at the spectators as if she were seeing herself through his eyes.⁸⁷

Vodianova's image presents a body that, shortly after having birthed a child, displays no traces of such an experience. Her slim figure conforms to contemporary standards of female beauty and sex appeal. Thus, another point of contention from a feminist point of view is that while the image makes breastfeeding visible, it also helps to purport beauty standards that are difficult for most women to obtain and are, indeed, unrealistic in light of the physical changes the female body undergoes during pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing. In an essay called "The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood Revisited: Continuities and Changes", authors Kim Huisman and Elizabeth Joy survey the pressure many women experience in the early stages of motherhood.⁸⁸ They propose the concept of a third shift (alluding to and expanding on Arlie Hochschild's research which finds that working mothers continue to shoulder the majority of household duties, a phenomenon she referred to as the "second shift") to describe the pressure to "get one's body back," as much popular culture demands. This demand constructs childbirth as a rupture that disconnects the mother from her pre-maternal body and subjectivity, rather than offering much needed models of continuity. More importantly, the "third

⁸⁷ For use of the term "image object," see Lambert Wiesing's distinction between image subject, image object, image carrier (Lambert Wiesing, *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory*, trans. Nils F. Schott [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010], 19–20).

⁸⁸ Kim Huisman and Elizabeth Joy, "The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood Revisited: Continuities and Changes," in *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, ed. Linda Rose Ennis (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014), 86–103.

shift” posits ideal beauty as nonmaternal femininity.⁸⁹ Rather than offering an endorsement of early maternal experience, then, one might argue that Vodianova’s image is harmful in its perpetuation of impossibly high beauty standards which compete with and are added to other societal pressures new mothers experience.

Despite these criticisms, the photo was celebrated as an endorsement of breastfeeding, and thus a statement relevant to contemporary feminism, in a variety of different new media outlets. It appeared on the websites of the *Daily Mail*, *Vogue*, *Redbook*, and many others.⁹⁰ Most of these online magazines reported briefly on the post, celebrating Vodianova’s decision to “promote breastfeeding.” Writing for the Parents Section of the *Huffington Post*, for instance, Mandy Velez argues that Vodianova’s image works against the taboo surrounding breastfeeding in general and visible breastfeeding in particular.⁹¹ “Unsurprisingly,” Velez claims, the photo is a “beautiful moment between mother and baby.” She further describes the photograph as “stunning” and “gorgeous.” *Glamour* magazine calls the photo “intimate.”⁹² Similarly, at *SheKnows Pregnancy & Baby*, Monica Beyer writes, “The photo is lovely, pure and amazing. There is nothing more tender than a new mother wrapped around her newborn baby, who is nursing at her breast. That experience is such a precious

⁸⁹ In response to this pressure, January Harshe, blogger at *Birth without Fear*, started an Instagram account called “Take back postpartum” in 2015, in which she encouraged new mothers to post “real” pictures of their post-natal bodies. The overwhelming response expressed both in the sheer number of posts following this call and in the various articles featuring Harshe and her project indicate a desperate need for spaces which allow women to escape from this pressure. See e.g., Caroline Bologna, “‘Take Back Postpartum’ Instagram Encourages Parents to Redefine Life After Birth,” *The Huffington Post*, 4 April 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/15/take-back-postpartum-january-harshe_n_7064840.html. In February 2017, the account had 93,000 followers.

⁹⁰ Margot Peppers, “Supermodel Natalia Vodianova Shares Intimate Photo of Herself Posing Nude While Breastfeeding One-Month-Old Son Maxim,” *The Daily Mail*, 4 June 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2648440/Supermodel-Natalia-Vodianova-shares-intimate-photo-posing-nude-breastfeeding-one-month-old-son-Maxim.html>; Lauren Milligan, “Natalia Shares a Motherly Moment,” *Vogue News*, 5 June 2014, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/natalia-vodianova-naked-breastfeeding-picture>; Lauren Le Vine, “You Have to See This Celeb’s Beautiful Breastfeeding Photo Wishing Her Son a Happy One-Month Birthday,” *Redbook* 4 June 2014, <http://www.redbookmag.com/life/mom-kids/news/a17918/natalia-vodianova-breastfeeding-photo/>. Le Vine clearly mistakes the photograph’s addressee which indicates the willingness of some critics to ignore the sexual (sub)text of the image for the sake of endorsing the representation of breastfeeding.

⁹¹ Mandy Velez, “Model Natalia Vodianova Instagrams Stunning Breastfeeding Photo,” *The Huffington Post*, 6 June 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/06/natalia-vodianova-instagram-breastfeeding-photo_n_5454523.html.

⁹² Lauren Smith, “Natalia Vodianova Posts Intimate Breastfeeding Photo,” *Glamour Magazine*, 5 June 2014, <http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/natalia-vodianova-posts-breastfeeding-photo>.

one and no matter how rich you are and no matter how famous you become, when you nurse your baby, you're just like me."⁹³ All of these celebratory comments display a desire in the audience to make breastfeeding more visible, and to make it visible in ways that conform to contemporary standards of beauty so as to avoid categorical exclusion of mothers from the possibility of fulfilling these standards.

While superficial in their interpretation of notions of beauty, intimacy, and the naturalization of maternal-infant bonding, these endorsements of Vodianova's post appear in a media culture that is permeated by postfeminist assumptions about femininity, choice, and agency. As I have outlined in the previous chapters, postfeminist discourses rely heavily on "tropes of freedom and choice," by which "feminism is ... made to seem redundant" (McRobbie, *Aftermath of Feminism* 11). As McRobbie describes, this rhetoric is particularly prominent in popular culture, as exemplified by Vodianova's image and its circulation via social networks and other new media apparatuses. Many of the responses to her photograph build on an underlying assumption that is pivotal to McRobbie's description of post-feminist discourses, namely the idea that feminism's goals of women's freedom and equality have been achieved, and that to further insist on pointing out misogynist tendencies in media culture is anachronistic. In addition, the notions of choice and agency imply that since Vodianova was actively involved in the composition and dissemination of her photograph, this act of self-presentation is inherently feminist in its implications. In postfeminist media culture, the newly liberated female subject is expected to "withhold critique," and her freedom is thus predicated on her willingness to accept the post-feminist paradigm; this new ideal subject displays "an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past, in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure" (McRobbie, *Aftermath of Feminism* 18). As argued in chapter 1,

⁹³ Monica Beyer, "Check Out Natalia Vodianova's Stunning Breastfeeding Photo," *SheKnows Pregnancy & Baby*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.pregnancyandbaby.com/the-hatch-blog/articles/967883/check-out-natalia-vodianovas-stunning-breastfeeding-photo>.

this discourse is entwined with neoliberal ideals of the autonomous self-fashioning and self-regulating individual. In accordance with this paradigm, many viewers of Vodianova's image see it as an active appropriation of misogynist artistic traditions, undermining its power by *choosing* to repeat its content and, presumably, liberated from its oppressive implications. In this sense, Vodianova's image instates the model as a neoliberal postfeminist subject.

More specifically, one might argue that Vodianova presents herself as what Ariel Levy might call a "female chauvinist pig." Like Raunch culture, which Levy explores in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Vodianova's visual self-fashioning in the tradition of women's objectification "is a way both to flaunt [her] coolness and to mark [her]self as a different, tougher, looser, funnier – a new sort of loophole woman" (96). This new woman – the post-feminist female subject – can participate in the dissemination of visual ideals of femininity whereas the infant at her breast and thus the implication of motherhood are constructed as a form of implicit critique. The celebration of Vodianova's image as "beautiful," "gorgeous," or "stunning" indicates an attempt to embrace the beauty standards rather than being offended by them, enacting a postfeminist belief in women's ability to claim and determine contemporary definitions of beauty. The photo thus positions the model as offending contemporary popular cultural standards of beauty, which are punctuated by the presence of her baby. In doing so, the suggestion goes, Vodianova claims the availability of beauty standards to mothers who are generally excluded from such ideals.

What is more, it is precisely the image's legibility within the tradition of the nude portrait and its complicity with contemporary beauty standards that allows the image to travel and thereby be welcomed as a critique, however minimal it may be. Coming from a cultural archive most viewers are familiar with, Vodianova's photo invites a gaze via a very traditional route – the female object looking back. Although her gaze at the camera is seductive rather than passive, seeing Vodianova's image in this tradition reinforces the notion that the model fashions herself as an object of vision, a sight, in

accordance with internalized male practices of looking. My “reading” of Vodianova’s photo in the tradition of the nude painting is coherent with what French philosopher Roland Barthes, in his influential work on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), calls the *studium*, i.e., a “cultural participation” “in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the setting, the actions of an image.”⁹⁴ For Barthes, “most [photographs] provoke only a general and, so to speak, *polite* interest” (27). Vodianova’s image, in other words, invites the spectator into a familiar realm of female representation, differing from tradition only through the impersonal infant attached to the mother’s breast. As a spectator, to “recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions” (27). In such an encounter with the photograph, argues Barthes, the spectator recognizes its various functions, mostly disinterestedly. These functions include, “to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire” (28). My encounter with Vodianova’s breastfeeding photo is well described in these terms: I look at it as a representation of a certain kind of femininity, I “read” it in relation to its cultural context and tradition, I see its attempt to surprise, and, judging by its travel trajectory, conclude that it has succeeded in fulfilling most of these functions. However, the reason that it is allowed to travel is that while it surprises, it does not surprise *too much*; while it represents something new it does not do so in a new way. In this sense, Vodianova’s image might be the kind of photograph that Barthes describes as “critical enough to disturb ... but [...] also too discreet ... to constitute an authentic and effective social critique” (36). There is no “detail (*punctum*) which attracts or distresses me” (40). This discreetness helps account for the various positive responses the image triggered in the online community: it contains an amount of critique that is manageable for a popular audience, that is acceptable for the mass media, and that does not offend, or, as Barthes might have it, “*wound*” (41, emphasis added).

⁹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wan: 1980), quotation on 26.

Despite the limited range of critique offered by the postfeminist celebrations of Vodianova's image, it is fruitful to consider some of the critical elements that the image does produce, since its substantial visibility reflects the moods of contemporary popular feminism. While it is the superficial similarity between Vodianova's photograph and the tradition of the nude painting in which it appears that renders the image legible and allows it to travel, it is the slight variation on the tradition that contains its critical potential. Despite the image's context within the tradition as well as the lack of visual intimacy between mother and child, the presence of the baby undermines an important aspect of the male gaze and its objectification: that of depicting "the female body as the primary site of sexuality and visual pleasure."⁹⁵ In the history of Western thought, female sexuality and maternity have – paradoxically – been constructed as mutually exclusive. In her discussion of *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss (2009) emphasizes how this line of thought had long rendered pregnancy invisible.⁹⁶ In a chapter entitled, "Breaching the Taboo," Liss writes that, "Patriarchal discourse had schizophrenically coded pregnancy as that which should not and could not be seen; its obscenity would risk revealing the sexuality and passion that created the child" (13). It is in the same vein that Vodianova's image unfolds its critical potential: the baby nursing from the mother's breast juxtaposes these two functions of femininity that patriarchy has traditionally work hard to separate – maternity and sexuality.⁹⁷

Thus, while Vodianova's photograph may be criticized for being "too discreet," this may also be its strong suit. The image addresses one of the pivotal conflicts addressed by feminist discourses on maternity, namely that contemporary ideology represents white middle-class mothers as asexual –

⁹⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), quotation on 13.

⁹⁶ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁹⁷ It is important to note that this was not always so. Indeed, as Simon Watney explains in his essay "Madonnas and Mothers" (in Bright, *Home Truths*, 52–61), the first depictions of the Virgin Mary were shown breastfeeding. Watney provides several examples up into the fourteenth century. "In all of this ... the sensual and indeed sexual significance of the act was never entirely suppressed, as may be seen in countless images of the Virgin nursing.... But the imagery of the *Madonna Lactans* soon fell victim to later ecclesiastical prudery and double standards" (Watney 54).

their maternity interferes with the possibility of experiencing, let alone expressing sexuality. As Bernice Hausman emphasizes in *Mother's Milk: Breastfeeding Controversies in American Culture*, sexuality and maternity, and more specifically the maternal practice of nursing, have been seen as separate functions of femininity since the Enlightenment, when maternal virtue began to be constructed in opposition to female sexuality.⁹⁸ The public visibility of breastfeeding produces a transgression insofar as that part of the female body most commonly displayed in sexualized contexts – the breast – is now engaged in what is often regarded as the most foundational and virtuous acts of mothering, nourishing one's baby. In fact, as sociologist Linda Blum argues, it is the sexualization of the breast in the Postwar United States that discouraged many women from breastfeeding at all.⁹⁹ Blum writes that, “breastfeeding threatened to expose the breast to the heterosexual gaze, but also to compromise the object of that gaze, the stiff, uplifted breast of Barbie, the fashion doll who so epitomized the era” (38). That this conflict between the objectification of the female breast and its maternal function continues to dominate contemporary popular discourses is evident in the responses Vodianova's image received. Thus, the photo visualizes what sociologist Rhonda Shaw, in a discussion of breastfeeding as maternal performance, has called the “disjunction that exists for some people between what is perceived to be a woman's natural ontological role as mother and appropriate (read: discreet and non-confrontational) representations of that role.”¹⁰⁰ Vodianova thus addresses the double standard surrounding motherhood according to which breastfeeding is the epitome of good

⁹⁸ Indeed, as various motherhood scholars have noted, Rousseau's writings on childhood as a formative period which demanded mothers' undivided attention lead the way to an understanding of breastfeeding as a sign of virtuous motherhood, a virtue that was soon constructed as exclusive of female sexuality. See e.g., Hays, 25; E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 20–21; and Elisabeth Badinter, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*, trans. Adriana Hunter (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011), 61. For more on Victorian constructions of maternity and sexuality as mutually exclusive, see Thurer's classic, *The Myths of Motherhood*, 213–214.

⁹⁹ Linda Blum, *At the Breast: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁰ Rhonda Shaw, “Performing Breastfeeding: Embodiment, Ethics, and the Maternal Subject,” *Feminist Review* 78 (2004): 99–116, quotation on 111.

mothering, while the good mother is simultaneously expected to keep her sexuality, symbolized by the breast, at bay. The legibility of her photograph in the tradition of the nude allows her image to travel, and thus her critique, however insufficient we may consider it, to reach a large audience.

In this sense, the significance of Vodianova's image derives from the way in which it collapses her maternal relationship with her son and her sexual(ized) relationship with her husband. Gazing back at the spectator, she asks a question often posed in postfeminist popular culture: "Is a mother allowed to feel sexy?" And although her vision of sexiness reinforces traditional, patriarchal notions of the sexualized, passive, objectified female through its connection with canonized artistic representation of women, the image is welcomed by a large postfeminist audience which suggests the embrace of such sexiness as a matter of choice and empowerment.

The contradiction between empowerment and self-objectification indicate the vexed relationship between feminists and their attempts to counteract misogynist tendencies in patriarchal culture. As I have already indicated, the visual representation of pregnancy is equally contested territory. In *Home Truths*, Susan Bright discusses what she calls "photography's awkward relationship with pregnancy." Annie Leibovitz's infamous photograph of naked, pregnant Demi Moore on the August 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair* has been described by many as the first step toward gaining visibility for the pregnant body in popular culture.¹⁰¹ For Bright, the photo is the first instantiation of the move to "objectify the pregnant form in mainstream culture" (15). About the legacy of Leibovitz's photo, Bright writes that, "After its appearance, ... images of pregnancy suddenly became acceptable in the

¹⁰¹ Imogen Tyler credits the image with a cultural shift that not only increased the visibility of, but also sexualized the pregnant body. This shift, she argues, "reconfigured pregnancy into a sexy bodily performance" (Imogen Tyler, "Pregnant Beauty: Maternal Femininities under Neoliberalism," in Gill and Scharff, *New Femininities*, 21–36, quotation on 24). See also Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler's chapter "From Fetal Icon to Pregnant Icon: Demi Moore and Clones," in *Pregnant Pictures* (New York/London: Routledge, 2000), 195–218. While breastfeeding continues to be less visible and subject to more taboos than pregnancy, it is an equally contested terrain regarding the coexistence of maternity and sexuality. Leibovitz further explored this tension in a 1999 photo of American model and actress Jerry Hall nursing her son. For more detailed discussions on that photograph, see Shaw, "Performing Breastfeeding," and Alison Bartlett, "Thinking through Breasts: Writing Maternity," *Feminist Theory* 1.2 (2002): 173–188.

public domain ... liberating [other women] to show what was normally hidden from the camera” (15). The way in which Bright speaks of both objectification and liberation without acknowledging a potential conflict between the two is indicative of the cultural environment these photographs have to negotiate.¹⁰² Within the postfeminist context, self-inflicted objectification becomes an important means for enacting choice and agency, liberating women from the even-more-oppressive option of self-censorship and invisibility. At its worst, then, postfeminism leaves us with only two options: being invisible, or being visible merely as object or sight.

Nonetheless, rather than simply dismiss the positive evaluations of Vodianova’s photo in light of the critiques I have offered, I would like to consider additional reasons why this image was allowed to travel, and how it has become so celebrated as an endorsement of breastfeeding. While the depiction of the maternal body and the infant at the breast might themselves produce positive responses, there is much in the model’s gaze back at the camera that exemplifies ways in which the object can do more than simply gaze back passively. The implication of a mutual gaze – Vodianova’s look at the camera, and the presumed spectator looking at the image – complicates a simple reading of the model’s self-objectification. Vodianova’s gaze back at the camera illustrates her refusal to submit to the objectifying gaze aimed at her. It is precisely in her gaze that the refusal to fashion herself as the object of a sight emerges. While the sexual implications reverberating in the half-open mouth and the seductive eyes suggest a sexual invitation as the primary message sent by the woman, the infant attached to her body disrupts that image. Gazing back at the camera as if she was a passive object to sexual phantasy only, her gaze becomes defiant when the spectator notices the nursing baby at her breast, i.e., her refusal to submit to the separation of sexuality and maternity.

While the relationship between image object and the alleged addressee Arnault, particularly in light of his financial fortune, replicates that of the nude painting and is structured by relations of

¹⁰² Bright does mention in a footnote that images of breastfeeding are still more contested and remain somewhat taboo.

ownership and belonging, Vodianova's act of posting the photo on a social network disrupts this relationship. It is the public visibility that endows the image with some of its critical potential. The fact that social networks like Instagram, and more prominently facebook, have been at the heart of debates regarding the censorship of images of breastfeeding mothers provides important contextual knowledge for Vodianova's photo and the audience it addresses. Being aware that pictures of breastfeeding mothers are unwanted and often deleted from such websites, Vodianova's gaze back at the spectator refuses to hide a femininity that combines both maternity and sexuality.

In light of the mother-shaming that frequently happens on these social networks, Vodianova's gaze is defiant in the way that she refuses to bow her head and divert her eyes in shame. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick discusses shame as an affect and addresses its relation with identity. Citing psychotherapist Michael Franz Basch, Sedgwick defines shame-humiliation as an "inability to effectively arouse the other person's positive reactions to one's communications" (Basch qtd. in Sedgwick, 37). In Sedgwick's own words, "shame is itself a form of communication. Blazons of shame, the 'fallen face' with eyes down and head averted – and, to a lesser extent, the blush – are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the personal bridge" (36). The diverted gaze is thus an embodied acknowledgement of another's disapproval and, at the same time, an attempt to restore the troubled connection between subject and other. It is precisely the absence of shame in Vodianova's image – the refusal to divert her gaze in shame – that visualizes the image's much-celebrated claim that neither breastfeeding nor maternal sexuality should be considered a cause for shame. Looking straight back at the camera, Vodianova indicates her independence from the mutually gazing relationship and her disregard for the anonymous spectator's disapproval. Or, one might argue, she reflects back to the spectators that they might not be looking at her in disapproval, but in a voyeuristic mixture of disgust and fascination, since otherwise Vodianova would have to divert her gaze in shame. In either case, the photograph demands an engagement of a large anonymous audience

that goes beyond mere appropriation and sexualization of the depicted “object” and invites a reflection on one’s own practices of viewing.

For Sedgwick, the experience of shame is explicitly linked to the materiality of the body and, by extension, one’s sense of identity. She writes, “shame is a ... kind of free radical that ... attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of ... almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity...” (62). While traditional attitudes towards breastfeeding demand a sense of shame experienced due to the exposed breast, or due to the breast’s unavailability to male ownership during the process of nursing, Vodianova’s proud and defiant look at the camera refuses to follow this script. In this sense, Vodianova refuses to allow shame to become part of her maternal identity. Sedgwick, in contrast, claims that shame is central to identity formation. She argues that “one of the things that anyone’s character or personality is is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one’s relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others” (62). Vodianova’s image does not give space to the experience of shame in the face of maternal nudity and the collapse of the traditionally separated female functions of maternity and sexuality, and instead claims these as part of a newly emergent maternal subjectivity.

The notion of the gaze receives a re-evaluation and reinterpretation in the second photo in my triptych, Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Nursing* from 2004. Andrea Liss calls this photo “one of the most powerful and magnificent contemporary photographic images of mother and child” (89). While also deeply rooted in a particular strand of patriarchal depictions of motherhood, this variation on the Madonna-and-child theme offers a more critical, less publicly visible critique of contemporary depictions of breastfeeding. Set against a red and gold fabric background, the portrait depicts lesbian mother-artist/photographer Catherine Opie nursing her son Oliver. While the white body of the

mother and the milky skin of her son merge into one another at the center of the photograph, Opie's dark hair and her sun-tanned arms supporting the boy clearly demarcate the two bodies. Gazing at the infant – rather than the camera – this mother is involved in an intimate moment with her son, nourishing his body with the fluids of her own.



Image 2. Catherine Opie, Self Portrait/Nursing, 2004, C-print, 0 x 32 inches (101.6 x 81.3 cm). © Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Opie's photograph, at first sight, appears to replicate the tradition of the Madonna motif, which, as Susan Bright reminds us, is one of the central figurations of maternity in art history. Having

long been an object of interest in portrait painting, it remained a central motif far into the age of photography.¹⁰³ As Bright argues, these photographs

still resonate as universal depictions of motherhood because they function within a symbolic framework that is centuries old. We do not understand these pictures so much in terms of verisimilitude, but as expressions of long-established values that we continue to hold dear to this day. These images transcend specifics to replay a primal motif of maternal tenderness, holiness and mythic feminine qualities that has been reproduced over and over again. (11)

While Opie's image certainly depicts maternal tenderness, replicates the composition of the Madonna paintings that imply holiness, and merges yet separates the two bodies in mythical fashion, her photo also undermines much of what this tradition implies. Her butch aesthetic, the uneven skin in her face, her tattoos, and her heavily set body contradict the conventional notions of beauty that Vodianova embodies. Slightly visible across her chest are scars forming the word "pervert," – traces from a prior self-portrait addressing the stigmatization of gay and lesbian Americans throughout the 1990s. For this earlier photograph, Opie had stitched the word into her skin in order to spell it in blood like a label mirroring responses to the body in the image, in addition to almost fifty needles stuck into her arms, and a leather mask covering her face. Opie's more recent nursing portrait, the label still legible across her chest, thus engages the viewer in complex reflections on the assumed links between lesbian motherhood, nursing, and perversion.

In this sense, Opie's image affirms the traditional and ostensibly universal ideology of good motherhood represented in the Madonna-and-child icon while asserting her ability to fulfill these ideals from a subject position that differs in various ways from the ideal. Describing the ways in which Opie's image, by imitating the Madonna-and-child tradition, disrupts some of its core ideological components, artist and critic Margaret Morgan writes, "Opie's maternal self-portrait offers a universal sign – motherhood – inflected by a set of powerfully resistant counter-signs, a kind of 'regional

¹⁰³ To name but a couple of examples, British photographer Julia Margaret Cameron produced some sixty Madonna-and-Child photographs between 1864 and 1872, and one of social realist photographer Dorothea Lange's most famous shots, "Migrant Mother," (1936) is a variation of the theme (Bright 11).

specificity,' if you like, that makes the image extraordinarily affirming of the maternal bond, fulsome in all its complexity, yet extremely resistant to easy instrumentalization."¹⁰⁴ Here, a middle-aged mother with sagging breasts nurses a son who is obviously no longer an infant, defying the notion of a young devoted mother nursing her newborn child, but only for what is popularly acknowledged as an appropriate amount of time. In addition, the photograph shows Opie looking at her son with concern, curiosity, and focus, all of which function to undermine the idea that mothering is always and exclusively fulfilling and self-evident, and instead emphasizing how the relationship between mother and child is also one of growing together, getting to know one another, and being doubtful about the adequacy of one's own performance in the newly acquired role as provider. Like the breastfeeding ad that is the primary focus of Shaw's essay, Opie's image demonstrates that "breastfeeding is not a natural instinct but an activity that requires practice" (113).¹⁰⁵ In this sense, her artfully composed photograph destabilizes notions of natural, innate maternal instincts lived out in heteronormative familial arrangements and instead emphasizes the devotion and hard work that is required of all breastfeeding mothers. Nonetheless, Opie presents a picture of maternity that claims the core values of good mothering, usually reserved for beautiful, feminine, white, middle-class mothers, and incorporates them into her own understanding of what it means to be a good, lesbian, middle-aged, artist mother.

What is pivotal to her achievement of this effect in the image is its variation of the female gaze. In contrast to Vodianova's photo, which depicts a mother gazing back at the spectator, Opie's gaze is focused on and returned by her son. As Sturken and Cartwright note, refusing to meet the spectator's gaze is an important tool in several of Opie's self-portraits (133). In this case, rather than

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Morgan, "Home Truths," in *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, ed. Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2011), 213–233, quotation on 216.

¹⁰⁵ Shaw focuses on a poster widely circulated in New Zealand in 2002, which depicted *Xena*-star Lucy Lawless, dressed in professional wardrobe, nursing a small child. While I do not agree with Shaw's assessment that the Lawless poster presents the nursing mother in a comfortable, "natural" position, her arguments offer insightful perspectives on Opie's image, as my reading here demonstrates.

simply not meeting the viewer's gaze, Opie instates another gaze, what one might call a maternal gaze. Andrea Liss has conceptualized the maternal gaze as an active way of looking at one's children that breaks through traditional forms of gazing and their implied gender relations. In her book, Liss focuses on photography by mother-artists as a record of maternal gazing, which, she writes, is "also about endowing the mother with the space to look from her perspective, and in so doing to reimagine culture from another gaze" (21). By looking at her baby rather than the camera, Opie offers a version of the maternal gaze that emphasizes the relationship between mother and child and thus interferes with the familiar gaze of objectifying an ostensibly passive female.

In doing so, the image sheds new light on the interconnectedness between maternal gazing, the relationship between infant and mother, and maternal subjectivity. As Liss writes, "feminist motherhood is the formulation of the maternal from within the mother's own subjectivity. This is a subjectivity, however, that is articulated from the mother's always in-flux psychic and political space, as well as through her watchful maternal gaze. This subjectivity arises from and opens up to an intersubjectivity that starts with the mother-child relationship" (xx). The photograph thus invites the viewer to consider breastfeeding in its relevance not only for the infant-mother relationship, but also as a pivotal moment in the genealogy of a distinctly maternal subjectivity. The proposition of a maternal subjectivity is a feminist concern also because it speaks back to male-dominated psychoanalytic discourses in which the mother is primarily considered as a force in the constitution of the child's subjectivity. As Jessica Benjamin emphasizes in *The Bonds of Love*, by 1988 "no psychological theory ha[d] adequately articulated the mother's independent existence."¹⁰⁶ The idea of intersubjectivity, in contrast, implies "a subject meeting another subject" (20). The depiction of the

¹⁰⁶ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), quotation on 23.

maternal gaze in the image as instigating such intersubjectivity implies both child *and* mother as independent subjects.

That this kind of intersubjectivity is viewed skeptically in contemporary media representations is highlighted by E. Ann Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992), in which the author similarly focuses on the mutuality of maternal gazing as exemplified in Opie's photograph. Referring to psychoanalytic theorist Daniel Stern's work and his observations about "extensive, silent and apparently pleasurable mutual gazing that was an automatic part of mother-baby interaction," Kaplan notes the difference between this mutual gaze and the "predominant, voyeuristic and fetishistic gazing that feminist film theorists... ha[ve] been discovering in the classical Hollywood film, and ... also in sexual behaviour outside the cinema" (49–50). Kaplan writes further,

The early mother-baby gaze seemed to have intersubjective possibilities that the objectifying, often degrading, so-called 'male' gaze totally erased in the popular film, and it suggested a number of questions: why do humans in our culture reject this gaze? ... What is actually going on, on the level of affect, during this gaze behavior? Is the mutual, as against the objectifying, gaze something that fosters an intersubjectivity many of us find threatening? How does this idea bear on the unconscious threat that the mother apparently represents? ... How does the idea of a mutual gaze also affect theories about the mother's symbiotic relation to the baby, such that she believes the baby to be part of herself, making an intersubjectivity impossible? (50)

Many of the questions Kaplan asks here provide insightful entry points into the discussion of the maternal gaze in Opie's photograph. By depicting the mother and the nursling engaged in this kind of mutual gazing, Opie undermines the objectifying gaze that Vodianova's image, in some ways, encourages. At the same time, the gaze in Opie's photograph causes unease due to several reasons, including the way in which boundaries between self and other are blurred, as Kaplan indicates, by the way in which the photograph allows the bodies of mother and child to merge into one another, while at the same time offering a clear distinction between both.

The maternal gaze in the moment of breastfeeding, an experience Andrea Liss describes as “these long, luscious moments of active rest and caressing, a dreamy absorption of one into the other” (74), thus destabilizes a distinction of boundaries that is implied in Kaplan’s discussion of intersubjectivity: on the one hand, the notion of an intersubjective moment between mother and child is threatening in the way that it circumvents the male viewer and the owner relationships usually implied in relationships of viewing, specifically of viewing the exposed female breast. On the other hand, there is the implication that intersubjectivity is impossible in the moment of breastfeeding, when the maternal gaze incorporates the infant’s being as part of the mother herself, thereby reinforcing psychoanalytic fears of overbearing mothers preventing the male child’s healthy progress into individuation, widely disseminated in the twentieth century through pop psychology discourses. The composition of the photograph, with the two bodies merging at the center and demarcated on the outside, emphasizing both the connection and the separation between mother and child, highlights the ways in which the breastfeeding relationship triggers cultural fears about both the implication of an intersubjective relation between mother and infant and a lack thereof.

In this sense, the image visualizes what Bernice Hausman has called the “nursing dyad.” Trying to address the difficulty of boundary maintenance many nursing mothers experience, Hausman argues for a “different conceptualization of the mother and infant – as a unique subject, a dyad, whose indivisibility at a physiological level suggests the inadequacy of contemporary notions of adult personhood to account for it” (15). Again, this notion of a dyad differs from the psychoanalytic tradition according to which the infant fails to perceive a distinction between himself and his mother as long as his needs are always immediately fulfilled by her.¹⁰⁷ Hausman’s concept of the nursing dyad offers a model to think through the relationship between mother and child in this early stage of

¹⁰⁷ See e.g., Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971). Winnicott writes that, “the mother, at the beginning, by an almost 100 per cent adaptation affords the infant the opportunity for the *illusion* that her breast is part of the infant” (11).

motherhood that bears the tension arising from the concomitance of the separation of two bodies and their mutual dependency for nourishment and relief.¹⁰⁸ As Hausman has it, “the nursing relationship signifies an intense biological connection that necessitates thinking of the nursing dyad as the proper object of analysis, rather than the potentially separable mother and child” (16). Opie’s photograph invites the viewer to consider nursing mother and baby as both an intersubjective unit and two individuals engaging in a relationship that is nourishing for both.

By extension, Opie’s image offers a conceptualization of maternal subjectivity that deviates from the “traditional” Lacanian/Mulveyian model in which subjectivity is attained by way of the internalized gaze. The way in which Opie engages with her child, through touch, nourishment, and the maternal gaze, emphasizes that this relationship is pivotal to the formation of an altered maternal subjectivity. Andrea Liss discusses at length how the maternal gaze sheds new light on Lacan’s model of the mirror stage and its relevance to the infant’s coming into subjectivity. She writes,

Thus, the mirror stage is not simply the self’s entrance into another, more stabilizing form, leaving the mother behind in the imaginary for the child’s accession to the realm of language. Nor is the transformation of the child into the Symbolic a clear-cut division. ... Thus, if the mother’s body is coded as the site of specularization and assurance for the child, the space of temporary intactness she holds for the child is also maintained through their mutual touching and caressing, and the surveying eyes are reciprocal. Indeed, that the Lacanian gaze has often been construed as solely male is not only one unfortunate misreading of Lacan but a giving up of a crucial place where the maternal can be reconfigured and differently insinuated. (25)

In line with much psychoanalytic theory, this argument focuses specifically on the relevance of the maternal gaze for the infant’s process of coming into subjectivity. In this sense, it replicates the pressure exerted on mothers in regards to the healthy psychological development of their children. Of Stern’s model of the mutual gaze, Kaplan writes that it “still places enormous burdens on the mother, since her affective states are seen as so determining of those in her infant, but its virtue is the focus

¹⁰⁸ By using the term “nursing dyad” I do not wish to reinforce romanticized notions of a natural, unifying bond between mother and infant. On the contrary, I argue that the concept allows for a nuanced consideration of the ways in which the simultaneous experiences of the separation of bodies and loss of boundaries affect the maternal sense of self. I read the nursing dyad as a formative step in the process of maternal becoming.

on ... the importance of non-verbal affect in the constitution of a subject” (50–51). Liss’s critical reading of the Lacanian gaze invites a reconsideration of the relevance of the mother-infant relationship and the maternal gaze for the engendering of a maternal subjectivity that may or may not be at odds with the mother’s pre-maternal sense of self. Importantly, maternal subjectivity, in this case, comes into being not through the engagement with the camera and a relationship with a formative internalized, but rather through the mutual gaze between infant and mother.

In the case of Opie’s photograph, the notion of maternal subjectivity as derived out of the nursing dyad is complicated by the material traces previous art works have left on the maternal body. To what extent does the still legible word “pervert” refer to the present image, i.e., the visualization of the private act of breastfeeding, as well as the notion of lesbian maternal identity? The lesbian nursing mother in the photograph undermines the patriarchal relationship of ownership with the female breast, and it does so in a different way than Vodianova’s. Commenting on the debates about breastfeeding in public, “one of those patriarchal taboos in the United States,” Liss claims that, “women’s breasts, don’t we know, are supposed to belong to her lover or any man who desires her. It is still that tired yet persistent matter of stolen ownership over women’s bodies” (75). Opie undermines the male gaze of ownership in two significant ways: first, by exposing the breast in its significant function for the relationship between mother and nursing, and second in its implication of two relationships that functions entirely without adult male interference and supervision – the one between mother and child, and the other between the mother and other adult women.

The fact that Opie offers such an offensive – because ever so slight – variation of a Western art historical tradition makes it a particularly welcome object of queer and feminist theoretical discourse.¹⁰⁹ The depiction of a nursing mother who does not meet contemporary beauty standards

¹⁰⁹ In addition to the essays referenced here, other academic discussions of Opie’s image include Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London/New York: Routledge, 2012).

and thus will not be perceived as a “stunning” or “gorgeous” celebration of motherhood precludes Opie’s image from the wide circulation in popular channels that marked the travel trajectory of Vodianova’s post. However, with its emphasis on challenging heteronormative traditions of good motherhood and destabilizing identity categories, it is a show case for feminist art historians and other scholars who are invested in postmodern feminist critique, or what Eve Sedgwick has termed, “paranoid reading,” i.e., the common practice in cultural studies to focus analysis primarily on uncovering “evidence of systemic oppression” (126). In her preface to *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, political theorist Jane Bennett refers to this reading practice as a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a term she borrows from French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, of which demystification is an important strategy and goal.¹¹⁰ What all of these terms hold in common is their commitment to deconstructive modes of criticism which aim to expose, analyze, and undermine binary oppositions that construct women as naturally nurturing, passive, and tied to the so-called domestic sphere.

It is the commitment to this kind of critical practice that characterizes Opie’s image and connects it to theoretical feminist discourses that aim to deconstruct mothering ideology. As Bennett argues, “demystification is an indispensable tool in a democratic, pluralist politics that seeks to hold officials accountable to (less unjust versions of) the rule of law and to check attempts to impose a system of (racial, civilizational, religious, sexual, class) domination” (xiv). This attitude reverberates, for instance, in Margaret Morgan’s reading of Opie’s photograph, which celebrates the artist as a Foucaultian *parrhesiastes*, i.e., a cultural critic desperately needed in democracies, one who speaks truth to power (213). That Morgan’s essay is included in a collection entitled *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* illustrates feminist art history’s commitment to a deconstruction of discursive realities

¹¹⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). Ricoeur spells out his arguments about the hermeneutics of suspicion in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). See Brian Leiter, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud,” in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 74–105.

via the insertion of more “real” depictions of motherhood. Opie’s image with its resistance to contemporary beauty standards and heteronormative conceptions of good mothering supports such an artistic and theoretical endeavor to reflect on, undermine, and critique discursive norms, which accounts for the image’s popularity in collections discussing feminist mother art. Thus, the direction of the gaze in Vodianova’s image, asserting both maternity and sexuality (via sexiness) as contemporaneous aspects of the depicted woman’s identity, and Opie’s refusal to meet the camera’s gaze both function to claim traditional values of good motherhood for a variety of maternal identities that do not fit the conventional ideal.

Offering yet another commentary on the notion of the maternal gaze is the third image in my triptych, Elinor Carucci’s image “The Drop,” included in her volume of photographs titled *Mother* (2013).¹¹¹ This photo is different from the other two in its focus on the materiality of the maternal body as well as the selective frame, which excludes the mother’s head from the viewer’s field of vision. Hence it conceptualizes subjectivity without a gaze, does not allow or offer the female gaze as entrance point into the image, and emphasizes the material traces of maternity and their effects on processes of maternal becoming.

¹¹¹ Elinor Carucci, *Mother*, with a foreword by Francine Prose (New York: Prestell, 2013), 13.



Image 3. Elinor Carucci, "The Drop" from the volume Mother (New York: Prestell, 2013).

Like Opie's photograph, Carucci's stands in and comments on the tradition of the Madonna-and-child motif, but employs a different kind of defamiliarization technique. While Opie reflects on the relevance of identity categories in the formation of maternal subjectivity, Carucci invites an unfamiliar view on the maternal body. The engorged breast, the darkened areola, the linea negra, and the drop of milk expelled by the idle breast depict a much less familiar image than Vodianova and, to an extent, Opie – a depiction of the very material traces that pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing leave on the maternal body. These material traces are invisible in much popular cultural representation, as Vodianova's "beautiful" image attests to.¹¹² It is this unfamiliarity that causes discomfort in the viewer.

¹¹² Carucci is certainly not the first female artist to have focused on material maternity. Most notably, Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra's produced a series of three photographs depicting mothers one hour, one day, and one week after giving birth in 1994. Susan Bright's description of the series reads as follows: "These extraordinary images are far from benevolent saintly Madonnas with happy babies suckling fondly at their breasts. These are real women who bleed, whose bodies are flaccid, and who are fierce but vulnerable, stripped of any romantic connotations. Both beautiful and shocking, Dijkstra's pictures show the early stages of motherhood to be a terrifying and primal experience" (16).

While the materiality of the maternal body in the image is central to its defamiliarizing effects (and I will discuss this at length), there is a more immediate characteristic of the photo's composition that prevents traditional modes of accessing image content: while the image displays the infant nestled into the curves of the maternal body, it does not include the mother's head. The viewer is not presented with the serene and devoted maternal gaze characteristic of the tradition and is thus refused clues regarding the mother's experience of the depicted moment. Is it blissful? Painful? There is no indication of the mother's response to the waywardness of her body, visible in the drop of milk that marks the letdown reflex on an otherwise idle breast. By thus excluding one of the most pivotal signifiers of the Madonna-and-child tradition – the content maternal face – Carucci's photograph resists the prevailing cultural narratives about the fulfilled (nursing) mother and instead invites the viewer to focus on the material traces left on the maternal body by the experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing. In addition, the lack of a face in the image de-personalizes the mother in the photograph, emphasizing that being part of a nursing dyad does not always hold the promise of bliss but can also entail the loss of a sense of self.

Thus, the missing head additionally comments on the complex issue of maternal subjectivity, specifically in relation to the maternal body. By cutting off the mother's head and thus her face, Carucci's photograph critically comments on and undermines the relevance of the gaze for the construction of subjectivity. Instead, the emphasis on the physical traces of maternity suggests the relevance of this very materiality for the mother's moment in flux – the breastfeeding moment or the nursing dyad as a moment in the sequence of *being one – becoming two – becoming one once more* that can (although it need not) be characteristic of the transformative period of coming into maternal subjectivity.

At the same time, the missing face complicates the notion of maternal subjectivity, and leaves the viewer unsettled. While Opie's photo shows a woman that is deeply involved with her child, albeit

not in the traditional modes of devotion and self-fulfillment, Carucci's image threatens even this kind of involvement and asks several questions for which it does not offer answers: Is the mother nothing but a milk-making machine? Is Carucci implying that she feels like one? While the missing face undercuts that common entrance point of the female gaze, and thus prevents the visual relationships of male ownership central to so many other depictions of nude women, it also precludes access to the woman's emotional state. In contrast to the maternal devotion so often portrayed in the genre of the Madonna-and-child portrait, and in contrast to the maternal gaze of tender concern depicted in Opie's photograph, Carucci's faceless mother allows no assumptions about her feeling towards her child. The fact that we do not see a mother filled with devotion and a sense of self-fulfillment does not necessarily deny the presence of such emotion, but it does indicate the possibility of ambivalence, i.e., of other emotions coexisting and interfering with such idealistic notions of maternal feeling. About her work, Carucci says, "I photograph as a mother, from a mother's point of view, showing the different aspects of motherhood as I see it, the beautiful and the ugly, the magic and the frustration, the extremes that live side by side when you are a mother. I try to photograph them all. Crying, sadness, anxiety, mourning the body I will never have again, the woman I will never be again" (qtd. in Bright 68). Her attempt to capture maternal ambivalence in visual representation carries into the present photograph, and the missing head is a cornerstone in achieving this. Not giving viewers immediate insight into the mother's emotional state forces them to consider all possibilities: love, devotion, rage, frustration, sadness, exhaustion, and many more. Undercutting the viewer's gaze thus prevents easy access to traditional processes of meaning-making.

In this sense, Carucci's photograph differs significantly from the other two. My analysis of the first two photographs was primarily shaped by Barthes' concept of the *studium* – the culturally embedded reading of the meaning of a photograph. Barthes famously contrasts *studium* with another function of photographs, a partial feature or detail that he calls *punctum*. "The second element will

break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). He writes further that, “very often the *punctum* is a ‘detail’ i.e., a partial object,” a partial feature of the image that stands out (43). Carucci’s photo invites an approach through this lens with its multiple elements that reach out and touch the spectator: the areola, the line, the drop, the baby’s fingernails, the marble skin. Any of these might constitute a *punctum* for any spectator, but my focus on breastfeeding in this chapter invites a closer look at the drop of milk: a white spot against the warm colors in the background. It is wayward; it is part of the body but also between bodies, with the potential to sustain life, but wasted involuntarily through bodily mechanisms. This picture presents a body that is unruly, that does not conform to beauty standards, and that is not arranged in a legible way.

The waywardness of the drop of milk expelled from the idle breast, produced through the let-down reflex caused by the baby’s suckling on the other breast, visualizes the way in which experiences of early motherhood undermine and defeat the Cartesian distinction between mind and body, and the rationalist assumptions that the mind controls the body. Breastfeeding in particular disrupts this distinction in various ways. In her essay, “Breastfeeding as Headwork,” Australian materialist feminist scholar Alison Bartlett writes, “Breastfeeding is entirely unpredictable, a practice which cannot be reduced to a set of universal claims that relate to homogenous bodies ..., because a woman’s lived experiences are crucial to her body’s lactational responses” (375).¹¹³ Each woman’s body lactates in its own, peculiar way, in ways that may be predictable to each individual mother as she gets to know its responses, but cannot be subdued by a mind-in-control. The woman in Carucci’s image cannot stop the idle breast from extruding the drop. Both the image and Bartlett’s essay illustrate that the body

¹¹³ Alison Bartlett, “Breastfeeding as Headwork: Corporeal Feminism and Meanings for Breastfeeding,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 25.3 (2002): 373–382, quotation on 375.

and its mechanisms are always affected by the discourses that shape it and the material experiences it goes through.

The wayward drop of milk exerted from the body through the involuntary let-down-reflex thus invites a consideration of breastmilk in terms of what Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, has described as “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (ix). Following Bruno Latour’s concept of the “actant,” Bennett sets out to explore matter as “a source of action that can either be human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (vii). One of the political goals she formulates for her book is to “induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality” (x). Ultimately, she argues, a focus on the materiality of things allows for a focus away from a definition of subjectivity which is “too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature” (ix). Carucci’s image is a visualization of this approach: the material traces of pregnancy and breastfeeding depict a maternal body that refuses to fit into the molds of popular cultural ideals about the female body, and the drop of milk, spilling onto the infant’s legs and thus affecting both mother and child, undermines the notion of human autonomy over bodily functions.

The conceptualization of breastmilk as actant in Latour’s sense evokes an array of questions that is particularly fruitful for an analysis of the present photograph. What is the “efficacy” of breastmilk? How does Carucci’s image make this agency visible? Besides its most obvious function of nourishing the child, as depicted on the left side of the image, it connects mother and child, both emotionally but also metaphorically, as indicated by the drop hanging from the mother’s breast and dripped onto the infant’s leg. Breastmilk appears in wayward fashion, not only when breasts are exposed, thus staining clothes, and betraying the mother’s status in early maternity; it determines maternal movement; it causes thirst; it demands of the mother that she take breaks from other daily

routines.¹¹⁴ The uncontrollability of the let-down reflex can betray maternal emotional responses to, for instance, crying babies (which do not necessarily have to be one's own).¹¹⁵ In all of these ways, then, Carucci's image is well described in terms that Andrea Liss uses for a work of performance art entitled *Milkstained* by the artist/mother collective M.A.M.A (Mother Artists Making Art), of which she writes that it was a "challenging gesture toward characterizations in the Western philosophical tradition of women's and mothers' bodies as chaotic and disorderly because of our uncontrollable, hysterical fluids – blood, milk, emotions, tears" (76). Breastmilk is simultaneously part of the subject and outside of it, and thus challenges the traditional senses of boundaries that are so well protected in patriarchal modes of thought. In doing so, it alters the mother's sense of subjectivity, and it is this aspect that Carucci's image draws our attention to.

In contrast to the other two images, then, which construct notions of maternal subjectivity in relation to various versions of the gaze, Carucci's image insists that maternal subjectivity, in some ways, also results out of the disruption caused by the body's agency, i.e., embodied experiences of affective dissonance, and the effects this agency has on the maternal sense of self. That these affective dissonances occur precisely in moments of intersubjectivity with the child is significant to my inquiries into the notion of maternal subjectivity: being part of a nursing dyad, the materiality of breastmilk, and the blurring and redrawing of boundaries profoundly and uniquely alter the mother's sense of self.

In its emphasis on the embodied, material dimensions central to the experience of early motherhood, epitomized in the boundary loss of breastfeeding, Carucci's image responds visually and artistically to what feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has called a "question that [is] at the top of the agenda for the new millennium: the point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical

¹¹⁴ Bernice Hausman has demonstrated how this last point poses significant problems for nursing mothers who try to participate in a labor market that is structured around the male worker as the ideal participant (181).

¹¹⁵ For this and more examples on how breastmilk affects the mother's mobility, see *ibid.*

mode.”¹¹⁶ Carucci’s image of the drop captures the ways in which the efficacy of breastmilk destabilizes the new mother’s identity.¹¹⁷ Thus this depiction of the very material dimensions of early maternal experience suggests that the nursing dyad opens a space in which the mother un-knows herself through altered embodied experiences, creating a transformative moment in time that destabilizes an ostensibly solidified sense of self. In contrast to the other two photographs discussed in this chapter, Carucci’s image centers on the materiality of such a destabilizing experience and thus invites a view on the process of becoming (m)other as embodied.

For Braidotti, the process of becoming is one of instability, fluidity, and connection. Indeed, she argues that “becoming” is “neither reproduction nor imitation, but rather emphatic proximity and intensive interconnectedness” (8). While reproduction and imitation play a pivotal in the activity of breastfeeding which, as Hausman asserts, is a “biosocial practice” (28), one that is learned and practiced through socially situated knowledge, its destabilizing quality derives from the experience of flow (both literally the flow of bodily fluids and figuratively), nearness, and interconnectedness. Out of this experience, then, rises a new kind of subject, one that Braidotti might describe as an “affective, positive and dynamic structure, which clashes with the rationalist images traditionally projected by institutionalized philosophy” (7). This clash between the embodied experience of flow and rationalist models which presume a body that can be ruled by the mind, and the way in which this clash itself is often experienced in material ways, is precisely what I have described as affective dissonance. Carucci’s image, with its emphasis on the maternal body’s refusal to be governed by the rationalist rules of the patriarchy thus visualizes the experience of affective dissonance, by itself but also, and more thoroughly, in relation to the other two photographs.

¹¹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), quotation on 2.

¹¹⁷ While postmodernist as well as more recent trends in theory have rightfully asserted that concepts of self-identity are always provisional at best, my argument is that this precariousness becomes particularly tangible for the new (breastfeeding) mother.

Juxtaposing these three images, therefore, is insightful for a discussion of feminist approaches to (visual) representations of maternity, i.e., pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. An initial response to the three images might be that they operate on a scale of realness, with Vodianova's glossed black-and-white photograph on one end, Carrucci's depiction of maternal materiality on the other, and Opie's artfully composed double portrait somewhere in between. But Vodianova's image also depicts a mother and her baby. It may or may not be more thoroughly glossed or edited, but the extent to which this is the case is invisible (and irrelevant) to the spectator. Rather than assuming that one picture provides a more "real" window into the experience of motherhood than the others, I have emphasized the ways in which the images and the varying contexts in which they appear elicit a variety of encounters with the visual representations of nursing bodies that reflect the complexity of everyday maternal experience.

Carucci's image is one that complicates too much, is not discreet, nor particularly legible, and thus does not travel with the same ease as Vodianova's. Not only does the image contain a naked breast that is not fulfilling its presumed sexual function, but it also depicts the agency of the breast with its wayward expulsion of milk that drops on the nursing infant's lap. The milk shooting out of the breast is that which shoots out of the image, it is poignant in its emphasis on the breast's primary function; the drop of milk interferes with a sexualizing gaze at the breast. In this way, Carucci's image does "more" than Vodianova's – its transgression is more substantial – but at the same it does less. While it transgresses conventional representations of the breast, its critique is much less legible. In that way, the image does not represent, but it presents – it puts forth something that remains otherwise unseen. The way in which the image wounds, then, is much different from the way in which Vodianova's image signifies, yet both offer a "real" glimpse into the experience of early motherhood.

A consideration of these three images that draws on the notion of affective dissonance, attending to the complexity of everyday maternal experience, allows for a more nuanced understanding

of processes of maternal becoming and their relationship to breastfeeding than a pure poststructuralist critique yields. Much contemporary feminism, and many inquiries into the emergent field of motherhood studies in particular, remain deeply indebted to postmodern, poststructuralist approaches. In this context, representations (of motherhood) are frequently analyzed and evaluated in terms of their relationship to ideology. In “Invoking Affect,” Clare Hemmings distinguishes between good and bad affects, thereby suggesting an evaluative scheme that separates between artificial objects which are critical of ideology, and those who reinforce it. Looking at Vodianova’s image, then, one might conclude that her deep entanglement with cultural traditions prevents her from taking a critical stance, and thus producing “good affect.”

However, as the juxtaposition of these three images has shown, matters are much more complicated. Engaging critically with Hemmings’ distinction, renée hoogland contends that good and bad affects tend to coexist, and that it is

precisely on account of [affect’s] complexity, indeterminacy, and ultimate unassimilability, while yet pertaining to sociality on its multiply entwined levels, that we need to find ways of thinking about its processual operations outside the linearity of conceptual reason. ... [I]ts irreducible complexity and resistance to structural analysis ... requires us to think through and account for the operational potential of affect, in both its “good” and its “bad” effects.¹¹⁸

Visual representations across a variety of genres and utilized media channels offer valuable objects of exploration as they produce immediate, material encounters that allow for the coexistence of a variety of responses, thereby mimicking complex experiences of maternal subjectivity.

Taken together, the three photographs emphasize different aspects of early maternal experience – the material traces of maternity, the visceral effects of bodily agency, the difficulty of reconciling maternity and sexuality, the discrepancy between ideal and actual bodies, the need to incorporate one’s new maternal role into an already existent, if unstable, sense of self and so on. All

¹¹⁸ renée c. hoogland, *A Violent Embrace: Art and Aesthetics after Representation* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), quotation on 12.

three engage with a large cultural archive of visual representations of maternity in general and breastfeeding in particular, albeit in different ways and with varying degrees of critical visibility. All three images offer a vision of maternal experience that exceeds the ideal of the devoted and fulfilled mother, emphasizing a variety of aspects of the experience of early maternity that do not have to interfere with ideals of good motherhood. All three comment on the relationship between the gaze and maternal subjectivity, emphasizing the breastfeeding relationship as one that is pivotal to the mother's emergent and in-flux sense of self.

The way in which Vodianova's, and to a lesser extent Opie's, images are generic whereas Carucci's engages with but does not replicate the genre characteristics offers a visual representation of what I have termed "affective dissonance." While Vodianova reiterates the pillars of contemporary beauty standards, Carucci's photograph presents a body whose unruliness stands in stark opposition to the genre with which it engages. The *linea negra*, the areola, and the drop of milk all function as embodied markers of the experience of affective dissonance, i.e., a maternal experience that is structured by the discrepancy between the expectations of maternity, and the materiality of its experience. The experience of bodily unruliness and the blurring of (inter)subjective boundaries in the nursing dyad produce affective dissonances that are cornerstones of maternal processes of becoming. The triptych analyzed in this chapter thus functions together, and in some ways *only* together, to visualize the variety of experiences – desires caused by images from the cultural archive, the engagement with these images in attempts to both meet and undermine its expectations, and the very material existence of early maternity that is the trigger for such processes of becoming – to draw a picture of maternity that captures some of its complexity without resorting to oversimplified accounts of realistic or idealistic images, empowered or objectified mothers, or "good" or "bad" affects.

CHAPTER 4: “THIS IS THE WAY THAT WE LIVE ... AND LOVE!”: QUEERING MOTHERHOOD ON *THE L WORD*

A young, blond white woman – indubitably beautiful by contemporary Western standards – walks into her bathroom, picks up and looks at a white test tube, and calls her partner into the bathroom with her. In the mirror, the audience see a woman with darker hair and skin walking up behind her. The first woman spins around and shows her test. “You’re ovulating!” the second woman says. “I’m ovulating,” the blonde confirms. “Let’s make a baby!” they agree. After a brief moment of passionate kissing, the second woman pulls away, ordering, “Get dressed! I’ll drop you off on my way to work.”



Image 4. "Let's make a baby." Bette and Tina anticipating insemination ("Pilot," 1:01). Frame Grab.

This scene opens the pilot episode of the first television series exclusively centered on a group of lesbian characters, Showtime’s *The L Word* (2004–2009).¹¹⁹ Among several plotlines, including those of a blogger promoting a social network that visualizes lesbian connections by tracing sexual encounters, a tennis player succumbing to breast cancer, a transgender character transitioning from female to male, and a lesbian military member struggling with the “Don’t ask, don’t tell”-policy, Tina and Bette, the two women in the scene, their road to motherhood, and their relationship as co-mothers

¹¹⁹ *The L Word*, Showtime, 2004–2009, created by Michele Abbott, Ilene Chaiken, and Kathy Greenberg.

after they separate form one of the focal points of the series. In depicting two mothers as part of the core group of characters, the series takes into account the late twentieth century cultural phenomenon of what a 1996 *Newsweek* article referred to as the “gayby boom,” i.e., the sudden increase in families headed by lesbian and gay couples as a result of widening access to adoption, artificial insemination, and surrogacy.

The L Word received mixed reviews. Initially, the arrival of the show on screen was accompanied by much excitement at the depiction of a group of almost exclusively non-heterosexual characters. Many noted what Australian media studies scholar Rebecca Beirne has called the “pedagogical impulse” of the series, i.e., its gesture towards educating straight audiences about lesbian life.¹²⁰ This impulse is underlined not least in the lyrics of the opening segment from the second season onwards, which proclaim that “this is the way that we live... and love” (2007). However, as Dana Heller observes in the introduction to her edited collection *Loving The L Word: The Complete Series in Focus*, critical assessment of the show quickly swung in the other direction.¹²¹ The series was criticized for catering to the mainstream audience – particularly with its frequent sex scenes presumably enacting popular male sex fantasies –, for depicting only a small segment of lesbian culture, and for frequently framing the relationships among its main characters in heteronormative terms. Throughout the show, the writers and producers responded to some of these criticisms, for instance, by introducing a more diverse cast of characters in the later seasons and by critically reflecting on its own representational processes when one of the characters, Jenny Schecter, turns a memoir, the plot of which overlaps entirely with that of the series itself, into a movie called *Lez Girls*. Nevertheless, the setting of the series remains firmly located in the trendy parts of West Hollywood, and the show rarely looks beyond the

¹²⁰ Rebecca Beirne, “Lesbian Pulp Television: Torment, Trauma and Transformations in *The L Word*,” *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media* 11, 4 September 2007, <http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2007/09/04/lesbian-pulp-television-torment-trauma-and-transformations-in-the-l-word-rebecca-beirne/>.

¹²¹ Dana Heller, “Introduction,” in *Loving The L Word: The Complete Series in Focus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 1–13.

main group of mysteriously wealthy, mostly white, beautiful lesbians. These contradicting gestures illustrate why some critics welcomed its theme and the dedication of an entire series to the lives of lesbian women, while others were unhappy with the way in which the series was bound by the demands of a commercial endeavor and desired more transgressive content.

The mixed criticism further illustrates the conflicted relationship between heteronormative mainstream culture and the depiction of non-normative lives. In many ways, it mirrors how lesbian motherhood has been perceived and discussed in academic discourse as well as in lesbian communities. As many scholars have pointed out, lesbian motherhood is often understood through an evaluative framework of assimilation and transgression.¹²² In other words, a lesbian mother might find herself rejected from lesbian communities who charge her with assimilating to the dominant, heteronormative ideal that equates femininity with motherhood, while mainstream culture views her decision to become a mother outside of the confines of a heterosexual relationship as transgressive. Much academic criticism of *The L Word* has similarly evaluated the depiction of Tina and Bette's experiences as lesbian mothers as either assimilating to or transgressing heteronormative conceptions of femininity.¹²³ Drawing on the concept of affective dissonance, however, this chapter argues that in depicting the road to lesbian motherhood as traveled by Tina, Bette, and some additional characters, the series offers multiple models of embodied maternity that refute simplified engagements with heteronormative ideology and complicate discussions of maternal experience and behavior in the dichotomic terms of assimilation and transgression. Instead, *The L Word* foregrounds lesbian

¹²² See e.g., Amy Hequembourg, *Lesbian Mothers: Stories of Becoming* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2007); Ellen Lewin, "Negotiating Lesbian Motherhood: The Dialectics of Resistance and Accommodation," (1994), repr. in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2007), 370–389; Róisín Ryan-Flood, *Lesbian Motherhood: Gender, Families and Sexual Citizenship* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); and Julie M. Thompson, *Mommy Queerest: Contemporary Rhetorics of Lesbian Maternal Identity* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). See also Kawash, 981–982.

¹²³ For an assimilative reading, see e.g., Kellie Burns and Cristyn Davies, "Imagining Queer Community in *The L Word*," in Heller, *Loving The L Word*, 173–190. The transgressive argument is made in Lenora Perry-Samaniego, "Other Mothers: Looking at Maternal Desire in *The L Word*," in Podnieks, *Mediating Moms*, 358–375.

motherhood to illustrate the multiple ways in which contemporary motherhood, queer and straight, is experienced as an embodied, affective force that encounters ideological models of heterosexual motherhood.

In many ways, *The L Word* marks a watershed in the history of televisual depictions of non-normative sexuality. In her groundbreaking article “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1984), which posits that sexuality is as much a valid topic of research as race, class, and gender are, American cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin addresses the unilateral depiction of sexual minorities in the popular cultural imagination: “According to the mainstream media and popular prejudice, the marginal sexual worlds are bleak and dangerous. They are portrayed as impoverished, ugly, and inhabited by psychopaths and criminals.”¹²⁴ *The L Word*, hitting the screen two decades after Rubin made these observations, certainly breaks with this tradition. The imagery of the show is intensely colorful, quite the opposite of the bleakness that Rubin describes. Rather than psychopaths or criminals, the women in the show are well-established and beautiful by the standards Hollywood dictates. A museum curator, a writer, a blogger and radio show host, a cook, and a hairdresser among them, they can all be considered artists who are successful enough to maintain the living standard attached to residing in West Hollywood. The characters thus differ from the characters of other popular Hollywood shows mainly vis-à-vis their lesbianism, effectively introducing such non-normative identities into the popular cultural mainstream.

This introduction into the mainstream, however, is not without its limitation. In the discussion of media representations of non-normative sexualities cited above, Rubin goes on to describe how “attempts to counter negative propaganda with more realistic information generally meet with censorship, and there are continuous ideological struggles over which representations of sexual

¹²⁴ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1984), repr. in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (London: UCL Press, 1999), 143–178, quotation on 162.

communities make it into the popular media” (162). It is this aspect that the more critical viewers of *The L Word* have contended – the fact that the women represented in the show feature a rather small spectrum of lesbian identity, specifically one that coincides with mainstream standards of white, heterosexual femininity. Some critics, for instance, have seen the series as part of a larger “trend of popular culture representations that heterosexualize lesbians by consistently producing the femme body—a body that is White, upper middle class, and embodies a hegemonic femininity.”¹²⁵ Thus, while the series re-envisioned the heretofore prominent image of lesbians as what cultural critic and writer Hannah Rubenstein has described as “frumpy, anti-male, often angry, desexualized women” (cited in Perry-Samaniego 360–361), it does so at the expense of the representation of lesbian diversity. Some critics have argued that this limitation is best explained with reference to the demands of catering to a mainstream audience. Indeed, in presenting a limited scope of lesbian identities, *The L Word* fails to fulfill its own pedagogical promise, as Lenora Perry-Samaniego claims: “While lesbians have enjoyed more visibility, [this visibility] has not necessarily culminated in a better understanding of lesbian culture. ... the visible lesbian has been heterosexualized to be more palatable for the straight viewer” (361). Thus, while the series played a prominent role in introducing images of lesbian women into the popular cultural mainstream, these women, for the most part, feed into heterosexual norms of femininity.

This impulse of the show both to depict non-normative sexual identities and at the same time to make them “palatable” for mainstream audiences is representative of a larger cultural trend in which non-normative lives are viewed with ambivalence. As feminist rhetorical theorist Julie Thompson

¹²⁵ Jennifer Esposito and Bettina Love, “The Black Lesbians Are White and the Studs Are Femmes: A Cultural Studies Analysis of *The L Word*,” *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 23 (2008), accessed 19 May 2016, <http://www.genderforum.org/issues/face-to-race/the-black-lesbians-are-white-and-the-studs-are-femmes/>. *Gender Forum* no longer offers open access to the essay, but a PDF is available on Bettina Love’s academia.edu profile, accessed 22 February 2017, https://www.academia.edu/4135769/The_Black_lesbians_are_White_and_the_studs_are_femmes_A_cultural_studies_analysis_of_the_L_word?auto=download.

argues in her book *Mommy Queerest: Contemporary Rhetorics of Lesbian Maternal Identity* (2002), the lives of lesbian mothers in particular are surrounded by a rhetoric of ambivalence. In her analysis of legal, academic, and mass media discourses, Thompson finds that the cultural climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is characterized by the “simultaneous cultural attraction to and repulsion from lesbian mothers and others inhabiting nonnormative identities” (9). The heterosexualization of lesbian mothers on the *The L Word* mirrors this ambivalence: rather than taking an ideological stance, such as endorsing or criticizing non-normative family formation, the series depicts its lesbian mothers in ways that both invite fascination and cause discomfort. These ambivalent views allow the show not only to take into view the embodied dimensions of pregnancy and motherhood, but also to reconsider heteronormative conceptualizations of kinship and family formation.

In opening with the scene of two lesbian women embarking on the journey to motherhood, *The L Word* foregrounds a combination of identities that was long perceived as oxymoronic in American culture. Following claims made by psychotherapist Suzanne Slater in *The Lesbian Family Life Cycle* (1995),¹²⁶ Irish sociologist Róisín Ryan-Flood argues that there are three “generations” of lesbian women actively engaging with the question of whether to become a mother. First, there were women who became mothers in heterosexual marriages before separating from their husbands and coming out as lesbians.¹²⁷ As feminist anthropologist Ellen Lewin has demonstrated in her work, throughout the 1970s, these women were present in popular culture mostly through reports of custody cases. Frequently, judges and juries made it clear that they could not see lesbian women as “good” mothers in the sense of being “naturally equipped to place their children’s interests ahead of their own, [and] to be selfless in a way that precludes or overshadows their own sexuality” as these qualities

¹²⁶ Suzanne Slater, *The Lesbian Family Life Cycle* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

¹²⁷ American poet, feminist, and foundational motherhood scholar Adrienne Rich is one such example. She explores the impact of heteronormativity on her experience of lesbian sexuality in her famous 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (repr. in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], 130–143).

contradicted stereotypical images of non-heterosexual individuals as self-centered and immature (Lewin 371). When publicly identifying as lesbians, the women on trial were often reduced to their sexuality and thereby prevented from exuding the desexualized selflessness prescribed by American ideologies of motherhood. The women thus found themselves in a bind that was constituted by the perception that maternal and lesbian identities are mutually exclusive.

In a similar vein, a second group of lesbian women, namely radical feminists, viewed motherhood as incompatible with lesbian identity. For them, the childless lesbian existence marked the ultimate challenge to the heteropatriarchal order. In turn, being or becoming a mother as a lesbian implied that one was complicit with the hegemonic order of a heteronormative society.¹²⁸ As Australian sociologist Kellie Burns writes, “for radical feminists, lesbians represented the vanguard in reproductive choice and social freedom; they chose to opt out of the heterosexual matrix and this refusal disrupted the normalizing link between gender, sexuality and family.”¹²⁹ Both examples – the radical feminist lesbians and the public view of lesbian mothers in custody cases – exemplify the popular cultural view that the “phrase ‘lesbian mother’ conveys a logical implausibility, an oxymoron ... While lesbians are excluded from legitimate maternity because of their ostensibly reprehensible erotic desires and practices, heterosexual mothers are excluded from the enactment of a non-procreative sexuality lest such activity be construed as immoral” (Thompson, 6). While the legalization of gay marriage has increased lesbians’ access to a variety of reproductive choices, legal discourse and legislative discourse, until very recently, took part in the perpetuation and reinforcement of such a view. For instance, many of the ways of impregnation that are accessible to heterosexual women who

¹²⁸ Leading among the early radical feminists was Shulamith Firestone, whose *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970) implored women to strive for a society in which they could be freed from what she perceived as the tyranny of their reproductive biology. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* from 1969 (repr., Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), if to a lesser radical extent, equally attempted to unlink women’s socially disadvantaged position from their reproductive function.

¹²⁹ Kellie Burns, “Lesbian Mothers, Two-Headed Monsters and the Televisual Machine,” in *Queer and Subjugated Knowledges: Generating Subversive Imaginaries* ed. Kerry H. Robinson and Cristyn Davies (Bentham Books, 2012): 56–81, quotation on 59. doi: 10.2174/97816080533911120101.

are struggling to conceive, such the use of sperm banks, were inaccessible to lesbians by way of legal restrictions. As late as 2009, Ryan-Flood wrote that, “Lesbians are actively discouraged from parenting by legislative prohibits that restrict them from access to adoption, fostering and assisted reproduction” (43). In this way, legal practice can enforce the view that lesbians cannot *be* maternal by preventing them from *becoming* so.

The view that maternity and non-normative sexual desire are incompatible is so pervasive that many women have internalized its implications. In her empirical research spanning much of the 1970s and the 1980s, Lewin found that many of the lesbian participants were convinced that they could not be appropriate mothers: “Lesbians reported that they had often thought of themselves as not being suitable mothers, having internalized images of homosexuals as self-serving, immature, or otherwise not capable of the kind of altruism basic to maternal performance” (Lewin, 374). During much of the twentieth century, then, the ideological stance that lesbians could not be (good) mothers was not simply a limitation lesbian women were up against, but materialized in their sense of self, of who and what they could be, and in the decisions they made about their lives. As Ahmed asserts, the various ideological narratives of heteronormativity, which include homophobia, “do not, of course, simply exist ‘out there’ to legislate the political actions of states. They also shape bodies and lives, including those that follow and depart from such narratives in the ways in which they love and live” as well as “in the decisions that they make.”¹³⁰ Heteronormativity, Ahmed continues, “shapes what it is possible for bodies to do, even if it does not contain what it is possible to be” (145). The lesbian women in Lewin’s study illustrate the ways in which the discursive framework of heteronormativity impacted their lived experience, either by suppressing desire for motherhood, by not providing a framework in which such desire could be made sense of, or by prohibiting action based upon it.

¹³⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), quotation on 145.

The “gayby boom” of the 1990s challenged both heteronormative mainstream culture and non-normative subcultures to change their view on the subject. The ability to become a mother, fueled by advances in reproductive technologies and the legal option of adoption, was perceived by some of Lewin’s study participants as allowing them to overcome these internalized stereotypes of what it meant for them to be a lesbian, theretofore precluding maternity. For Lewin, the route of being a lesbian first and then becoming a mother, taken by this third group of women, is not only more complicated than the other two, but also more radical. In her research, she finds that “for lesbians who become mothers through insemination or some other method, then, conscious resistance to rigid formulations of ‘the lesbian’ seems to be central to their intentions” (377). Whether or not women indeed make such a major life decision as becoming a mother for the sake of being radical, the experience of deciding how to become pregnant and the subsequent struggle to do conceive, adopt, and provide a home for a child certainly confronts women embarking on this journey with the social and legal limitations imposed by a heteronormative environment.

During its first few episodes, *The L Word* explores the implications of choosing lesbian motherhood. After a first attempt at insemination fails due to the donor’s low sperm count, Tina and Bette renew their quest with a party at their house to which they invite a wide range of possible donors. Their wish list includes the donor’s affinity towards art, but they are also concerned with other factors such as his mental and physical health. The show utilizes conversations between the two women to indicate the touchiness of this subject, i.e., the discomfort caused by the thought of inquiring about anything like a health record. Highlighting the various possible roads toward motherhood, institutionalized and not, the show reflects on the lack of support lesbian couples faced on their road to motherhood in the early 2000s. Heterosexual couples, in contrast, could easily access information such as health records when they sought pregnancy through insemination since the clinics and sperm banks they rely on would keep a record of the donor’s mental and physical health history.

Another choice that Bette and Tina must make concerns that of donor involvement. While Tina suggests that she would like the donor to be involved in the child's life, the ever-so-pragmatic Bette points out that he would have to sign a contract, relinquishing his parental rights while at the same time committing to the agreed-upon level of involvement ("Pilot," 1:1). *The L Word* thus takes into view the complications lesbian women experience on their road to motherhood as well as the range of choices they have to make. The couple has to answer questions that do not pose themselves for straight couples, such as: Which partner will go through the pregnancy? What are the possible routes to insemination and which should be taken? How is a donor selected? What level of involvement is desired from the donor? The breadth of these choices is a central subject of the first few episodes, during which Tina and Bette face quite a few challenges before Tina finally carries a baby to full term. First, one potential donor refuses to participate when he realizes that there will be no actual intercourse involved. Then, when the couple change their approach, another potential father withdraws when he realizes that the "fucking sexy" lesbian couple with whom he is about to have a sexual encounter is merely "using" him for his sperm.¹³¹ When they finally agree on one of Bette's friends, a black artist, as a donor in order to create a sense of biological similarity between Bette as the non-biological mother and the baby, they use a syringe and inseminate at home without medical or other assistance. However, Tina suffers a miscarriage and does not become pregnant again until the beginning of the second season.¹³²

¹³¹ The young man's indignant exclamation, "Why is it that whenever dykes want to have sex with a guy it's only because they're trying to steal his sperm?" offers one of the series' moments of metacommentary, likening the man's apparent sense of entitlement to become part of a lesbian liaison with the voyeuristic mainstream audiences who – presumably – watch the sex scenes with the mixture of fascination and repulsion discussed above.

¹³² The fact that Tina's second pregnancy was not initially intended by the writers, but was rather included in the show after actress Laurel Holloman announced her own pregnancy is noteworthy because it illustrates that the pursuit to become pregnant might have been more interesting to the writers than lesbian motherhood itself. Indeed, the second season still focuses centrally on Tina's pregnant body – as I will discuss – but once Angelica is born, the topic of motherhood receives less attention, although it does not completely vanish from view.

Some scholars have argued that the various choices and stages in the process to insemination represented in these first few episodes emphasize the ways in which lesbian motherhood challenges heteronormative family formations. For instance, Perry-Samaniego claims that the many options that are available to non-heterosexual couples striving to become parents “have the potential to drive ruptures along the binary categories of male/female, queer/straight, mother/father, and dominant/subaltern, ultimately changing the way we view motherhood” (359). It is important to note the neoliberal context, in which the available choices are reconfigured as a way for the lesbian characters to position themselves as ideal, heterosexualized mothers through the consumption of products and services that allow them to enter motherhood and become “good” mothers.¹³³ Ranging from hosting a party for potential donors to purchasing a tub for a home water birth attended by a hired doula and midwife, and from employing a nanny to investing in expensive pre-schooling for Angelica, most of the choices they make allow the two to fashion themselves as “good” mothers in accordance with dominant contemporary ideology.¹³⁴ Nonetheless, the depiction of Tina and Bette’s struggles challenges mainstream assumptions about the attainability of pregnancy and motherhood. With their desire to become mothers and their ability to do so without almost any male interference, the two women fundamentally challenge the idea that the “lesbian mother” is an oxymoron. The fact that they continue to co-parent even after they separate challenges common conceptions about the lack of attachment experienced by non-biological parents and heteronormative notions about proper family formations.

In other ways, however, *The L Word* remains firmly rooted in heteronormative discourse. For instance, the relationship between Tina and Bette is conspicuously gendered, as many critics have noted.

¹³³ See Burns and Davies for an exploration of the ways in which the show frames its characters as ideal and idealized neoliberal citizens.

¹³⁴ At one point, they donate a brand-new crib “when it became apparent [they] weren’t going to use it” due to their decision to practice attachment parenting (“Labia Majora,” 3:1). The social worker’s rejection (“I say anything that is attached can be detached!”) betrays her lack of awareness of new trends, while Bette and Tina are embracing motherhood as a fashionable lifestyle.

Sociologist Leandra Smollin, for example, argues that Bette and Tina’s relationship is conceptualized via a “heteronormative frame.”¹³⁵ Throughout the first few episodes, Bette is depicted as rather “masculine:” she is mostly dressed in pantsuits, always on her phone in what appear to be business-related calls, and decidedly career-oriented. In the early episodes of the second season, after the two separate, it transpires that Bette has been the primary provider, and Tina continues to depend on Bette’s financial support as she struggles for independence. Except for a brief moment of weakness in season three, when she is threatened with the loss of Angelica (a moment I will discuss at length later in the chapter), Bette is also presented as less emotional and emotionally available. Tina, on the contrary, has quit her job and is doing everything to “prepare for the pregnancy.”¹³⁶ Even prior to the baby’s conception, she is taking on the role of the stay-at-home wife and mother. The fact that this decision was made extradiegetically, before the beginning of the plot-line, produces a sense of inevitability. The audience is excluded from the process in which it is decided which of the two women will carry the child, thus being encouraged to accept as fact the idea that Tina is naturally more suited for the role. The series inscribes the relationship between the two mothers – one biological, one “social” – through the heteronormative genderedness of the characters, to the effect that the question of who should be the biological mother is never actually a question.

Bette’s masculinity is linked to her biracial background which further highlights Tina as the ideal biological mother. The link between Bette’s masculinity and her blackness doubles her status as “Other.”¹³⁷ During the pilot episode, Tina and Bette get in an argument during which Tina explicitly

¹³⁵ Leandra Smollin, “‘You Want Fireworks? I’ll show you Fireworks!’ Or Not – Woman-to-Woman Violence on *Sex and the City*, *The L Word* and *The O.C.*,” *Sexuality and Culture* 20.2 (2016): 214–235.

¹³⁶ The implications of this are vast: Not only does it position pregnancy and thus the process of becoming a mother as an all-consuming activity that leaves no room for tending to other aspects of the woman’s identity, such as work-related ones, but it also firmly positions the couple in a social stratum where they can afford to forfeit one income.

¹³⁷ The superimposition of butch and non-white identity is repeated throughout the show, e.g. with Tasha, the African-American soldier who dates one of the main characters in season five and six, and the highly evocative basketball game scene, during which the main characters face off with a team of mostly non-white or lower-class butch lesbians (“Layup,” 4:4). See Burns and Davies for further analysis of the basketball game.

labels Bette as Other because of her biracial identity. This scene also gestures toward potential difficulties Tina might experience as the mother of a biracial child, although these are quickly brushed off and do not resurface later in the show. After Bette arranges for the donor, Marcus Allenwood, to drop off his sperm at the house while only Tina is there, Tina confronts her about the fact that Bette did not mention that Allenwood is black. In the ensuing conversation, Bette reiterates that an African-American donor would make the child “more like our child,” but Tina expresses her concerns about raising a biracial child since she does not “know what it means to be black. ...And don’t you think, on top of everything else, to also have two moms, that is a lot of otherness to put on one child?” (“Pilot,” 1:1). In her masculinity and blackness, Bette is positioned as the opposite of what renée hoogland, in *Lesbian Configurations*, refers to as the “whiteness of normative female heterosexuality,”¹³⁸ which Tina embodies throughout the series.¹³⁹ Positioning Bette, by extension of the child, as Other solidifies Tina’s position as the “good” mother grounded in her femininity and whiteness, even if she may later break with some of the ideals this implies.

Thus, while the series breaks new ground by making two of its main protagonists a lesbian couple becoming mothers, it remains firmly embedded in heteronormative and racialized conceptualizations of the family, gender roles, and monogamy. In doing so, the series can be seen as part of a larger cultural context, which also includes academic and legal discourses regarding lesbian motherhood. In *Lesbian Mothers: Stories of Becoming*, sociologist Amy Hequembourg writes that these discourses, which run the gamut from qualitative sociological studies about lesbian motherhood to second-parent adoption legislation, “merely expand the boundaries around acceptability rather than challenging them. In other words, these discourses and practices seek to include lesbian mothers

¹³⁸ renée c. hoogland, *Lesbian Configurations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), quotation on 80.

¹³⁹ Toward the end of the first season, Bette cheats on Tina with another butch character – a Latina carpenter – leading to the momentary separation between the two. This affair temporarily destabilizes racialized dichotomic constructions of butch and femme lesbians. This relationship doesn’t last, however, and neither does Bette’s status as non-other.

within existing structures without fundamentally altering those structures” (7). In this vein, one might conclude that Bette and Tina’s decision to become mothers allows them to fulfill ideals of heteronormative femininity despite their lesbian identities. Certain elements of the show, like the gendered construction of the relationship between Bette and Tina, thus present an example of what Lisa Duggan has called “the new homonormativity,” that is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). An acceptable life, in this context, is one that resembles the heteronormative paradigm of mainstream culture despite its specific markers of non-normativity, for instance by striving towards an institution such as marriage with its implication of monogamy and reproduction, rather than truly challenging the ideological frameworks outside of which it might otherwise be situated.

Evaluating *The L Word* and its plotline about lesbian motherhood in dichotomic terms of expanding boundaries or reaffirming heteronormative frameworks, as I have done above, follows a trajectory that much academic scholarship about lesbian motherhood has taken in the past: namely, to appraise depictions of lesbian mothers in terms of affirmation and resistance. Lewin summarizes this approach as follows: “At the same time that some outsiders may see their [lesbian mothers’] behavior as transgressive (and thereby label them resisters or subversives), others perceive lesbian motherhood (along with other indications of compliance with conventional behaviors, such as gay/lesbian marriage) as evidence that lesbians (and other ‘deviants’) can be domesticated and tamed” (Lewin 385). This puts lesbian mothers in what Ryan-Flood has described as an “uncomfortable place in academic work, torn between the pressure to be ‘normal’ in order to challenge homophobic critics, and the subversive imperative of queer theory” (2). Indeed, the pressure to prove “normalcy” motivated a whole range of early research on lesbian motherhood. According to sociologist and

LGTBQ parenting expert Rachel Epstein, this research appeared in the context of custody battles and aimed to “prove” lesbian women’s ability to be “good” mothers.¹⁴⁰ Such studies, then, searched for evidence that there is no statistical danger of sexual abuse emanating from homosexual couples, that the gender identity and performance of children growing up in such families does not differ from children growing up with heterosexual parents, and that lesbian mothers provide ample “opportunities for their children to develop ongoing relationships with men” (Epstein, 95). This research, then, was very much invested in proving that lesbian mothers affirm heteronormative ideals about family formations because it was politically salient to do so.

At the same time, lesbian mothers are faced with the expectation that their lives contribute to a successive dismantlement of heteronormative conceptualizations of gender and the family. Indeed, as Ryan-Flood argues, “lesbians who choose parenthood face a new form of criticism from within the LGBT community – they may be viewed as conforming to prevalent notions regarding the importance of biological kin and children to what constitutes a ‘real’ family” (152). If, as Ahmed writes, “the term ‘queer’ is ‘defined not only as anti-heteronormative, but as anti-normative [and] queer theory ‘advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms’” (*Cultural Politics*, 149), then lesbians are held to a standard according to which their lives must be led in subversive ways. If we consider motherhood an institution within the patriarchal framework of contemporary American society, as Adrienne Rich suggests, the queer imperative of subversion does indeed appear to reject lesbian motherhood merely based on its reiteration of heteronormative ideology (*Of Woman Born*, 13–14). However, as I will illustrate below, such a view loses sight of the materiality of lesbian motherhood as well as the affirmative and transgressive ways in which it encounters ideology.

¹⁴⁰ Rachel Epstein, “Queer Parenting in the New Millennium: Resisting Normal,” in *21st Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 90–104.

The difficulty arising from this dichotomy between assimilation and transgression is evident in the scholarly debate surrounding marriage equality. Queer theory of the 1990s saw a proliferation of this debate, in which proponents of marriage equality faced stark opposition by those scholars and activists who rejected gay marriage because it took the heteronormative ideal as a standard and suggested that non-heterosexual couples should be equally interested in fulfilling this ideal. In “Is Kinship Always Heterosexual?” Judith Butler discusses the relationship between the struggle to have gay marriage recognized by the state and the limitations such legitimization is bound to carry for other kinds of non-normative family formations.¹⁴¹ Addressing the way in which gay marriage proposals around the turn of the millennium, both elsewhere and within the United States, excluded rights to form larger kinship connections, such as the right to adoption, Butler illustrates that while gay and lesbian communities might desire recognition from the state in some areas, fulfillment of this desire entails the exclusion in others: “we ask for an intervention by the state in the one domain (marriage),” she writes, “only to suffer excessive regulation in another (kinship)” (17).

The gay marriage debate thus reveals a complex relationship between normative discourse and non-normative experience. Drawing on Butler’s essay, Epstein asks, “how do we struggle for recognition of our relationships and families while struggling at the same time to transform what is recognizable?” (100). When it comes to questions of politics, then, matters are often more complicated than the dichotomic evaluative framework suggests. When considering the lived experiences of lesbian and gay parents, scholars find that the life of these parents is often characterized by a negotiation between varying demands, many of which have little to do with politicized intentions about resistance and affirmation; rather than describing her research subjects as either transgressive or affirmative, Lewin proposes the use of the term “strategists” (385). Lewin asserts the ways in which lesbian mothers make decisions about their everyday lives are best thought of in terms of strategies to navigate

¹⁴¹ Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” *Differences* 13.1 (2002): 14–44.

between these varying demands. It is the focus on the lived experience of lesbian mothers that interests me here. In what follows, I consider the depiction of Tina and Bette in such terms, asking not whether they reaffirm ideological conceptualizations of motherhood, but how they encounter and strategically engage with these conceptualizations – physically, emotionally, and politically – as well as how these encounters impact the way they experience their journey to motherhood.

In order to do so I draw on more recent scholarship on lesbian motherhood which challenges this dichotomic view of transgression and assimilation. For instance, Amy Hequembourg claims that “poststructuralist efforts to better understand the fluidity and multiplicity of subjectivity often fail to make the practical leap between theory and people’s everyday experiences” (51). The idea that poststructuralist arguments fail to account for the embodied dimensions of contemporary motherhood is part and parcel of this dissertation, and it applies to the depiction of lesbian motherhood as well. As Hequembourg writes, “lesbian mothers’ subjectivities are not completely constituted by normalizing discourses, nor are they radical examples of resistance” (51). Nor are the choices they make expressions of an impulse toward either. As Ahmed writes, “assimilation and transgression are not choices that are available to individuals, but are effects of how subjects can and cannot inhabit social norms and ideals” (*Cultural Politics*, 153). In other words, the encounter with ideological constructions is an embodied experience of a capacity to act in certain ways in one’s surroundings. Whether the actions deriving from such encounters are transgressive or assimilationist is an effect, rather than a cause, thereof. In addition, no matter how transgressive or affirmative, lives are always entangled with ideological frameworks, experiences, and events. Experience cannot be thought independently from ideology. Thus, a lesbian woman’s experience of desiring maternity, while produced by and reinforcing ideological conceptualizations of femininity is no less “real.” Rather, ideology materializes and becomes traceable in the lesbian woman’s body through her experience of maternal desire, by which I mean her desire to have a baby.

Hequembourg suggests that the focus should be on the everyday material experiences that shape lesbian motherhood today. Drawing on the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Hequembourg argues that the lives of lesbian mothers can be viewed as processes of becoming, in which experiences that enforce dominant structures of society coincide with those that undermine or challenge them. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to those processes that sustain cultural and ideological expectations as “reterritorialization,” while more “fleeting and unstable ... movements are associated with processes of ‘deterritorialization’” (Hequembourg, 54). What is important in her reading of the French philosophers, is the fact that their “conceptualization of deterritorialization and reterritorialization reveals a greater complexity of processes than merely resistance and/or assimilation” (55). This complexity includes the possibility that certain destabilizing moments, or actions that are intended as such, in fact lead to the reinforcement of ideological structures and vice versa. It is precisely the persistent negotiation between the stable structures and the “lines of flight” that produce processes of becoming which hold the promise of change.¹⁴² Similarly, drawing on feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s concept of nomadology, Burns suggests that we not ask who the lesbian mother is, but “what the lesbian body *does*” (62, original emphasis). In doing so, Burns argues

We are still able to offer a critique of the ways in which normative discourses attempt to keep certain bodies marginalized or otherized, only we do so from a different starting point, at a different speed and on a different line of flight. Categories of identity such as ... “lesbian mother” are ... understood to be in constant collision with a variety of discursive forces in multiple, irregular ways. (63)

I am particularly interested in the embodied, material, and affective dimensions of such “lines of flight,” i.e., the way in which bodily experiences reveal a frictional encounter with ideological notions of “good” motherhood. It is this moment of friction that I describe as affective dissonance.

¹⁴² Deleuze and Guattari use “lines of flight” and “deterritorialization” interchangeably, and each term indicates that what is affected “undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 21).

There are several instances of *The L Word* tending to these moments of friction. One scene that is particularly revealing in this context is the one in which Tina and Bette conceive a baby via the syringe. In the episode titled “Let’s do it” (1:2), the two women incorporate the moment of conception into their sexual play, which begins with two glasses of wine, a diaphragm, a syringe, and a tube containing Allenwood’s sperm. This scene deserves some attention as it negotiates the complicated relationship between lesbian motherhood and heteronormative ideology in a way that illustrates the inadequacy of the transgression/affirmation paradigm.



Image 5. “Let’s Do It.” Tina and Bette engaging in a procreative sex act (“Let’s Do It,” 1:02). Frame Grab.

The expression, “Let’s do it,” which interrupts their sexual play to start the insemination, functions as an appropriation of the heteronormative procreative sex act, which, as Rubin has shown, stands at the top of a cultural hierarchy according to which particular forms of sex are more valued and respectable than others. In “Thinking Sex,” Rubin writes that, “modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. ... Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid” (151). This pyramidal structure is based on an ideological context which posits that “sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home” (152). Rubin shows that these criteria serve to distinguish between

“good” and “bad” forms of sex. While homosexual encounters generally prevent one from being perceived as having “good” sex, fulfilling some of these other criteria offer a way to move up in the pyramid, that is to approach the standard of “good” sexuality.

Where exactly the line between good and bad sex is drawn is constantly under negotiation through discourse, conflict, and social (re)construction. Rubin observes that, “unmarried couples living together, masturbation, and some forms of homosexuality are moving in the direction of respectability. Most homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line. But if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of human interaction” (152). In other words, the more criteria for “good” sex one fulfills, the more one’s life is perceived as respectable. Based on this argument, one might suggest that despite their lesbian relationship, Bette and Tina climb this hierarchy by way of their monogamy and long-term commitment, distinct gender roles, imitation of the heterosexual family, and, in this scene, through their engagement in a sexual encounter that serves procreative purposes.

However, this scene can equally be read as an appropriation of the heterosexual act in more subversive terms. The scene suggests that lesbians, too, can have procreative sex. In doing so, it affirms that Bette and Tina do not need active male involvement to conceive a child and dismantles the idea that a sexual act between two women is “unnatural” because it cannot be procreative. As Ryan-Flood asserts, “procreation/reproduction often remains linked to heterosexual sexual activity in the popular imagination” (43). Challenging this connection, *The L Word* invites its audience to reconsider what is “natural” about reproduction and motherhood. As Hequembourg claims, “lesbians choosing to parent pose a direct challenge to the patriarchal foundation of hegemonic ideologies about what sorts of relationships constitute a family. Lesbian parenting challenges the definition of female reproduction as natural and undermines the foundations of patriarchy by deleting the male role and making childbearing a choice by and for women” (Hequembourg, 106). The scene discussed here brings this

deletion into plain view: the audience witness a sex act without a male participant that nevertheless results in a pregnancy. The scene thus counteracts the delegitimization of homosexual acts due to their lack of a utilitarian teleology, i.e., their lack of reproductive potential, as outlined in Rubin's essay discussed above. At the same time, the camera's focus on the tools needed to achieve the pregnancy, located at the center of the image, uncouples the "natural" link between sexuality and female reproductivity. Thus, while the scene asserts lesbian women's reproductive capacities, it simultaneously challenges the reproductive imperative of straight women's sexuality. It works, in Kellie Burns' words, to "unsettle the tidy relationship between the maternal body, heterosexuality and biology by reconstituting who the mother can be (e.g. single, lesbian, infertile) and what choices she can make around her body (e.g. to conceive in the absence of a man)" (60). Considering both the affirmative and the subversive readings of this scene leaves us with a sense of ambiguity: are we to conclude that the exclusion of a male participant challenges assumptions about the superiority of heterosexuality or that homosexual encounters can be legitimized within a heteronormative frame if they follow a procreative teleology, thus affirming the validity of said frame? What if, indeed, both are true?

Affective dissonance, here as elsewhere in the dissertation, offers a theoretical framework that shifts attention away from these questions and allows for such seeming contradictions to remain unresolved. Rather than evaluating whether representation of the sexual encounter challenges or reinforces heteronormative ideology, I propose that we take into view the materiality of Bette and Tina's experience, by which I mean their embodied presence on the screen as two women who wish to embark on the journey of motherhood *together*. When appropriating the procreative sex act, Bette and Tina embody a fear of another kind of reproduction failed: that of "life as we know it." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed writes that the

reproduction of life itself, where life is conflated with social life ("life as we know it") is often represented as threatened by the existence of others: immigrants, queers, and others. These

others become sources of fascination that allow the ideal to be posited as idea through their embodiment of the failure of the ideal to be translated into being or action. (144)

The visual representation of two women engaging in a sex act that follows a procreative teleological trajectory does more than simply draw the audience's attention to the fact that not all women choose to live motherhood according to heteronormative expectations. It also shows two women desiring maternity in a way that does not correspond with usually available ideological representations of maternal desire. What we see on screen, then, is the embodiment of affective dissonance.

The show also explicitly emphasizes the importance of Bette's participation in the process of conception for her own sense of maternal connection with the baby. This sense of connection ultimately transcends the initial procreative act, since Tina suffers a miscarriage during the first pregnancy, but then inseminates herself again, with remaining sperm from the same donor, without Bette's knowing. Although Bette does not find out about the second pregnancy until after the two women separate, her status as the child's rightful mother is never questioned by either of the two women (they petition for a second-parent adoption immediately upon Angelica's birth). Indeed, there are only a few minor characters in the show who do question the legitimacy of her status as co-parent, including Bette's father and the social worker in charge of their adoption case. However, this social worker is presented in entirely unfavorable terms; her position as an antagonist suggests a clear stance on the issue of maternal relations, namely that the status of non-biological mothers as legitimate mothers goes without saying. I will further explore the implications for queer kinship relations later in this chapter; for now, what I am interested in is the relevance of the sex act for Bette's self-understanding as the baby's mother despite what the audience might perceive as her lack of biological attachment.

In the second half of the pilot, which the depiction of what I have called the "procreative sex act," Bette exclaims, "If we make it together, that's enough for me to know that it's our baby" ("Pilot," 1:1). The incorporation of the syringe into their sexual play thus contributes significantly to Bette's

ability to create a maternal connection with this child, and any other ones that are later conceived from the same sperm. After their separation, Bette visits Tina in her new apartment to confront her about the second pregnancy which has been kept a secret (“Lagrimas de Oro,” 2:6). When Tina became pregnant while they were still together (i.e., technically, toward the end of season one, although this is not part of the narrative) she decided not to inform Bette immediately for fear that she would not handle a second miscarriage well.¹⁴³ It is not until this visit that Tina explains how she got pregnant, namely by using leftover sperm from the same donor, Bette’s friend Marcus Allenwood. When Bette finds this out, she immediately claims ownership of the baby: “This is *our* baby, Tina.” It is clear that she identifies as the unborn baby’s mother, and she is committed to her although she is no longer partnered with the biological mother.

This sense of commitment is partially based on the history the two women share on their way to that moment of physical conception. Bette spells this out for Tina by saying, “we conceived of this baby together. We searched for a donor together. In fact, you know what, I found the donor. Marcus Allenwood is a friend of mine. And if we were husband and wife, this would be my baby.” This line of argumentation illuminates the experience of and struggle toward lesbian motherhood in several ways. First, there is the obvious ambiguity of the word “conceived.” The way the word is embedded in Bette’s sentence here – “conceived of” – initially suggests that having a baby is an idea they had together, something they thought of together. In addition, “conceiving of” something also implies a certain level of creativity, i.e., in this case, the process of creating something. This implicates in turn the procreative act, i.e., the moment of conception. Linking herself and her ex-partner in both the desire to have a baby, or the idea to have one together, and the moment of engendering the pregnancy,

¹⁴³ This plotline is clearly the result of an editorial dilemma: As explained above, Laurel Holloman, the actress playing Tina, got pregnant between seasons and the writers decided to write her pregnancy into the show. Since Tina was about twenty weeks into the pregnancy at the beginning of the season, but much less time had passed on the diegetic level, the fact that the pregnancy was unknown to everyone at the end of the first season needed to be accounted for.

Bette claims an equally valid status of motherhood despite her lack of biological connection with the unborn child. In fact, the assertion that the sperm donor was *her* friend almost sounds like an – albeit feeble – attempt to stake a superior claim to the child, as if providing the sperm donor was more important for a strong connection with the child than having carried and birthed her.¹⁴⁴ Regardless, Bette’s claim to having been part of the process of Angelica’s conception illustrates an important aspect of lesbian motherhood, namely the ways in which both biological and non-biological lesbian mothers work to establish relationships with their children.

The use of the term “conceived of” is striking, particularly because it is used repeatedly over the course of only a couple of episodes. During the confrontation, Tina seems reluctant to accept Bette’s own perceived status as equal co-parent and both Bette and the audience are in doubt about whether or not Tina will allow Bette to take part in raising the baby. The show draws on another character as Bette’s mirror image to convince Tina (along with the audience) of the legitimacy of Bette’s claims. While Bette, at this point in the plot, is still hoping not only to take on the role of the baby’s parent, but also to rekindle her relationship with Tina, Tina is already engaging in a relationship with another woman, Helena Peabody. While newly relocated to L.A. from London, Helena is in the middle of a custody battle with her ex-partner Winnie. The two women have two children together, one adopted and one Winnie’s biological child. In the episode “Luminous” (2:7), following Bette’s visit, Tina witnesses an altercation between Helena and Winnie. When she later discusses this conflict with Helena, she finds out that Winnie is the biological mother of one of the children. Confirming the common idea that biological relation creates a particular kind of proximity, and possibly also giving voice to her own fears, Tina bursts out, “You can’t separate them. They’re too close.” Helena responds: “I wouldn’t do that. Winnie and I have always said that even though she gave birth to

¹⁴⁴ Bette tries to make a similar claim at the end of season three when she considers suing for sole custody based on the fact that both Angelica and herself are black, whereas Tina is white. I discuss the implications of this claim later in the chapter.

Wilson, we both equally conceived of him. For years, we talked about it, we planned it. I helped dream this family into existence.” The scene ends with a close-up showing Tina thoughtful, presumably considering Bette’s position. Finally, following the scene, Tina calls Bette and says, “we’ve conceived of this baby together and you should absolutely be part of her life.” The emphasis on the word “conceived” in all of these conversations functions to equate the act of conception in a heterosexual marriage with the creative process of “conceiving of” in a lesbian partnership, positing that both moments are equally valid in determining who the baby’s rightful parents are.

Further, the fact that having participated in the “conception” of Angelica, as well as in the actual creation of the first pregnancy, is enough for Bette to understand and defend her status as mother. This approach to knowing her maternal relationship is revealing in multiple ways. First, it asserts the embodied, material basis of the relationship between mother and child. It is her physical participation in the act of insemination, her arousal, her sexual engagement with the baby’s biological mother, that allow Bette to know herself as rightful parent. Second, identifying as Angelica’s mother based on this bodily experience produces the kind of onto-epistemological gap which I described in chapter one as being triggered by moments in which one’s embodied sense of self does not coincide with the socially constructed version of the self available to the individual. However, while I found Sheryl Sandberg to be distraught by this gap – and suggested that she could have been politically motivated by it - for Bette, it is productive. Her epistemological sense of motherhood, known through the physical, embodied, and affective experience of being involved in a procreative sex act and later on in the relationship she lives with Angelica, is not supported by socially constructed or cultural concepts of motherhood, which privilege biological relationships over what some sociologists have described as “social” maternity (Ryan-Flood, 117).¹⁴⁵ Or, more simply put, her involvement in “making

¹⁴⁵ Amy Hequembourg, e.g., reads the fact that non-biological parents are rarely granted sole custody as a legal enforcement of the ideological understanding that biological parents are better able to act in the best interest of the child.

the baby” allows her to feel like a mother, although ideological conceptions of motherhood tend to overemphasize the importance of the biological connection for mother-infant relationships.

The onto-epistemological gap then operates on an additional level: it becomes palpable for the audience. Like the lawyer, whose curious yet intrigued facial expression and question, “How do you figure *that*?” betray her surprise when Bette suggests that she wants to sue for sole custody (“Last Dance,” 3:11), the viewer might pause or stumble over the ways in which Bette stakes claim to her maternal relationship with Angelica. In that way, affective dissonance can equally describe the encounter of a viewer with something unexpected, i.e., a presentation of maternal identity on screen that does not cohere with what is ideologically constructed and thus perceived as “natural.” This encounter with the unexpected can be viewed, in Lisa Baraitser’s terms as a “hiccup” or “unaccommodation”: a moment that disrupts one’s unreflective embeddedness in ideology. The notion of productivity drawn from the onto-epistemological gap is reversed yet again: while Bette bases her sense of maternity on an experience that, ideologically speaking, should have prevented her from doing so, audiences are invited to pause and reconsider the relationship between ideological script and embodied experience.

Returning to the scene of Bette’s visit and her claim that the baby is hers and that this connection would not be a question if the two women were a married heterosexual couple, it is worth noting that in addition to reinvisioning the non-biological maternal connection, Bette also draws attention to the difference between legally sanctioned heterosexually coupled relationships and those that are not. She resents the fact that her status as mother might be challenged because it is located outside of the confines of a traditional marriage. During the pilot, Bette makes a similar remark when the doctor suggests half-jokingly that Tina’s chances of conception will increase if she is aroused. Here Bette shows herself offended by the doctor’s sexual innuendo and speculates that she would have never said this if they were a heterosexual couple. These examples indicate that Bette is particularly

invested in the legal and social equality of lesbian couples. What is more, the repeated comparison between themselves and heterosexual married couples highlights their difference from the sexual norm as described by Rubin. These reminders, appealing to the audience's sense of justice and equality, sets the tone from the first episode on for a reflection on the ways in which lesbian mothers face particular challenges due to their inability to marry legally and the fact that there is always one biological and one non-biological mother. In doing so, *The L Word* emphasizes the way in which Bette's experience of motherhood encounters ideological constructions of motherhood as embedded within a heterosexual marriage and highlights the kind of affective and emotional responses this encounter produces.

Thus, Bette's assertion of her maternal connection with Angelica is at the core of a larger theme explored by *The L Word*, namely the reconfiguration of kinship relations. The main group of women are explicitly depicted as "family," although only two of the women are actually blood-related (actress Pam Grier of Blaxploitation fame stars as Bette's half-sister Kit). While a group of friends acting as family has been a frequent character constellation in sitcoms and dramas since at least the 1990s, ranging from examples such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends* to *How I Met Your Mother* and beyond, *The L Word* makes this new kind of kinship constellation explicit, thereby recurring on and reiterating the notion of "chosen family," a common trope in queer studies discourse. This trope has its origin partly in the idea that many gay men and lesbian women were ostracized from or rejected by their families and seek similar emotional attachments elsewhere. Thus, in the popular cultural imagination, LGBTQ individuals are forced to create new kinds of families which are forms of attachment created by choice, rather than biological tie. Bette, for instance, suffers from the rejection she experiences at the hand of her father Melvin whose approval she desperately seeks. In the episode "Lawfully" (1:5), Bette and Tina inform the conservative father of their pregnancy. He makes his disdain known by refusing to see the child as his grandchild. When Bette explains that Tina is carrying his grandchild, he responds, "That is biologically impossible. Unless there's been a medical breakthrough that I don't know

anything about, the possibility that this child will be my grandchild does not exist. ... I cannot realistically be asked to participate in this fiction of your creation.” Patronizing his daughter in this way and denying her sense of family tie, he rejects Bette’s identity as mother, attacking a core element of her sense of self.

Almost all the characters in the show have similarly troubled relations with their parents. Dana, Max, and Jenny experience rejection from their parents based on their sexual identities. Shane was abandoned as a child, but when her father reappears, she tries to rebuild a relationship with him, and as a result leaves her bride-to-be Carmen at the altar because he suggests that she inherited his desire for sexual adventure and his inability to commit. When Alice’s mother tries to experiment sexually with Shane, Alice is upset because her mother appears to believe that a lesbian identity is a mere experiment. In coming together, these women (and Max, who is sometimes part of, sometimes adjacent to their circle) form a new community that functions analogously to a traditional family. In *Families We Choose: Gays, Lesbians, and Kinship*, Kath Weston explores the ways in which groups which form such attachments have transcended traditional boundaries of the nuclear American family relying primarily on blood ties.¹⁴⁶ According to Weston, chosen families “not only ... embrace friends, they may also encompass lovers, coparents, adopted children, children from previous heterosexual relationships, and offspring conceived through alternative insemination” (3). Indeed, the term “family” is used repeatedly throughout the series to refer to the group. For instance, after Tina has rejected Bette and begun a relationship with Helena, Helena invites the group to a party (“Loyal,” 2:8). Bette decides not to go, and all the other women come over to her house, rather than following Helena’s invitation. They refer to the evening together as “family night,” stripping the term of its slightly boring, mainstream connotation: instead of “staying in” to play board games with the kids,

¹⁴⁶ Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Gays, Lesbians, and Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

they “stay in,” rather than “going out” (to the party), drinking wine, enjoying each other’s company and, most importantly, supporting and being “loyal” to one of their own.

The way in which the series reconfigures family relations has various implications. First, the difficult relationships between the main characters and their parents and, in some cases, their siblings, reminds viewers that biological kinship rarely guarantees strong emotional ties. In turn, the group of women show that biological ties are not needed as a basis for emotional attachments of various kinds. The writers make this gesture toward reinvented family formation throughout the series. For instance, after Tina loses the first pregnancy, Alice has a brief pregnancy scare during which Shane suggests that she should keep the baby and give it to Tina and Bette, creating some form of a communal family in which all of the women are involved as parents in some way. This prompts one of the minor characters to claim that the “whole DNA model of family is being reinvented. We’re making a new world that reflects the way we love and make relationships,” foreshadowing the series’ engagement with traditional and alternative family forms (“Liberally,” 1:10).

This reenvisioning as based on something other than biological ties is most remarkably explored in the way that Bette claims a familial connection with Angelica based on their shared racial identity. Bette’s suggestion of Marcus Allenwood as the sperm donor indicates her desire to replicate her own biracial background and to achieve visual similarity between the baby and herself. While Tina is initially skeptical of carrying, bearing, and raising a biracial child, she eventually sees the advantage of using Marcus as a donor and agrees. Ryan-Flood argues that the option to select a donor based on physical appearance carries ideological weight as it “may both challenge and reproduce hegemonic ideas about biological kinship” (64). Further she shows that the attempt of some lesbian mothers “to manage physical traits demonstrates an awareness of the role of physical resemblance and similarity in communicating relatedness” (68). In a society that values biological kinship, similar traits are viewed as being in the best interest of the child, and the mothers’ ability to manipulate the child’s genetic

makeup by choosing an appropriate donor positions them as good mothers who foreground the needs of their offspring.

While the interest of the child might be what Tina and Bette originally had in mind, it soon transpires that choosing a black sperm donor is also in Bette's best interest. During season three, while Tina is in a temporary heterosexual relationship with a man named Henry, Bette consults her lawyer to explore her options about fighting for sole custody ("Last Dance," 3:11). Although her petition for adoption has yet to be approved, neither Bette nor Tina have doubted Bette's legitimate status as the girl's mother. Bette's main argument for fighting for custody is that Angelica is a biracial child, and Bette considers herself better capable of relating to that experience. Defending her point of view, she argues: "When Tina goes out in public with Angelica, people automatically assume that she's been adopted. But when they see me with Angelica, they see a mother and a daughter. I'm the one who's going to be able to give her a sense of belonging." In a strange twist, Bette discredits adoption – the only legally recognized maternal relationship she can have with Angelica – as a legitimate form of family formation while claiming a superior connection with the child. Her dreamy facial expression when describing others' view of the mother and daughter illustrate her affective investment in romanticized notions of mother-child relationships. In this moment, her biracial background disappears behind an ideal of heterosexual, white, middle-class motherhood. Nonetheless, the arguments about her connection with Angelica also disrupt facets of this ideal, namely the dependence of the mother-child relationship on a natural bond established through biological relation. What Bette posits here is that kinship is not about actual biological connection, but about the impression of connection. In other words, her maternal tie is established not through a genetic or gestational connection, but through the appearance of a biological connection, i.e., through material similarity. Material, embodied maternity, then, need not be limited to the physical signs of motherhood, such as

pregnancy, lactation, c-section scars, etc. but can also be expressed through a shared experience based on similar physical traits.

What is more, Bette takes this material connection as the basis for “good” mothering. Being able to provide a “sense of belonging,” – that is of belonging together – is at the heart of her concept of family. This sense of belonging is grounded in an understanding of “what she’s going to experience as a biracial girl growing up in a divisive world” (“Last Dance,” 3:11). In the first episode of season four – Tina has now threatened that Henry might adopt Angelica, in which case Bette would lose all legal claims to the child – the two women meet at Bette’s lawyer’s office to discuss their impending custody battle (“Legend in the Making,” 4:1). The lawyer is preparing Tina about the proceedings in court: “As you’ll know,” she says, “we’ll be playing the race card.” Bette shows herself offended by this statement, exclaiming: “It’s not a card. It’s something I know to be firmly and intrinsically true. Tina is not qualified to parent a biracial child.” Reiterating a fear expressed by Tina herself when the topic of an African-American sperm donor first came up, Bette thus opposes ideological narratives according to which the biological mother has a connection with her child that naturally endows her with the ability to be a “good” mother.” Instead, she claims a non-biological, yet material maternal social connection that supersedes Tina’s ability to mother Angelica.

The scene at the lawyer’s office is revealing in another sense, namely the fact that while Bette is otherwise figured as masculine, which is to say, strong and unemotional, the threat of losing Angelica renders her unusually vulnerable. In this scene, interestingly, there is almost a reversal of the gendered roles, with Tina being more assertive, almost aggressive, and Bette surprisingly emotional to the point of crying. Ahmed writes that “emotions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects” (*Cultural Politics*, 7). Bette’s tears and her vulnerability display a particular kind of orientation toward Angelica, but also result from a relationship she has with her. They arise from her encounter with Angelica as well as with the notion of being the non-biological

black mother while at the same time having claimed an active involvement in the process of conception. Her gendered position is altered by and through the emotions triggered in this series of encounters. Her vulnerability is not simply that of being a mother who might lose her child, but arises out of the way in which her identity as a biracial lesbian comes into contact with a non-biological baby, with whom she nonetheless feels a material connection, and a social environment which discredits not only her general fitness as a mother due to both her blackness and her lesbianism but also denies her claim to motherhood due to a perceived lack of biological connection (as represented in her father's rejection of Angelica and the social worker's skepticism about the legitimacy of their familial ties). The vulnerability Bette experiences ("I am vulnerable because I might lose you") is an effect of the encounter between ideological ideals of white, heteronormative motherhood and the institutions defending these ideals, Bette's identity as a lesbian and the suffering caused by the separation from Tina, and her relationship with Angelica which, while not biological, is nevertheless experienced materially.

As indicated in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the material experience of lesbian maternity is explored in *The L Word* through multiple maternal characters. Tina's pregnancy and the depiction of her body equally invite reflection of the embodied dimensions of maternal experience. This is accomplished through an engagement with ideological conceptions of the ideal pregnant woman. In season one, when Tina first finds out she is pregnant, she seemingly embodies a popular narrative about pregnancy: that of the ravenous yet glowing white woman. At one point, holding a pickle in one hand and a positive pregnancy test in the other, she exclaims: "Look, I'm a cliché!" ("Lies, Lies, Lies," 1:4). And she does fulfill most criteria of this popular cliché: the pickle, the

pregnancy test, and the seemingly heterosexual appearance, which is to say that her appearance as a femme or lipstick lesbian does not immediately betray her non-normative sexuality.¹⁴⁷



Image 6. "Look, I'm a Cliché!" Tina eating a pickle while holding a positive pregnancy test ("Lies, Lies, Lies," 1:04). Frame Grab.

Tina is able to look like the cliché because of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, has called, "the elasticity of heterosexist presumption", i.e., the cultural tendency to assume any person to be heterosexual unless they explicitly identify as otherwise.¹⁴⁸ Among the women in the group, Tina is the one that most fulfills heteronormative standards of beauty and thus "passes" as straight on multiple occasions, including this one where she refers to herself as a cliché. However, the audience know that being a lesbian, she is everything but a cliché. Guaranteeing her ability to "pass" and her claim to being a cliché, her bodily appearance thus allows her to stake claim to the ideological construction of "good" motherhood that otherwise excludes her solely based on her sexual orientation.

As Kellie Burns has shown, during the second season, the series zooms in to Tina's visibly pregnant body, and in particular her sexual desire, hypersexualizing the pregnant lesbian. In doing so,

¹⁴⁷ Both the term "femme" and "lipstick lesbian" describe a lesbian whose appearance matches images of traditionally feminine women. The term "lipstick lesbian" additionally suggests the use of makeup and other technologies of femininity that were frowned upon if not rejected by many lesbians throughout the twentieth century.

¹⁴⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), quotation on 68.

The L Word inserts lesbian desire into an already charged ideological dilemma: the constructed mutual exclusion of motherhood and sexuality collapsing in the image of the pregnant woman. As Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler argue in *Pregnant Pictures*, depictions of pregnant women are complicated by the sexual implications of pregnancy, which contradict ideological constructions of feminine sexuality as “hidden and internal” (13). In contrast, the “pregnant belly customarily invokes heterosexual intercourse, whether or not such activity has actually occurred” (12). In their analysis of modernist art photography, Matthews and Wexler show that when a few 1960s artists embarked on the project of representing both motherhood and sexuality, they “accomplish this by presenting but strictly separating the two within each image” (39). As discussed in chapter 3, it was not until the 1991 publication of Annie Leibovitz’s famous *Vanity Fair* cover image of naked pregnant actress Demi Moore that American culture became more used to seeing pregnant women sexualized. The photo, argue Matthews and Wexler, “mixes the representation of female productive power, for so long de-eroticized and hidden, with the syntax of an image structured and positioned for voyeuristic, scopic viewing. After decades of closeting, the pregnant woman was being represented as most other women are in our culture: as an object of the gaze packaged to create and play on the desire of the viewer” (201). Thus, the increasing visibility of pictures of pregnant women began to dismantle the opposition between motherhood and sexuality; however, the controversy surrounding the publication of the image indicate that this process was slow in the making. As argued in chapter 3, public responses to visual representations of breastfeeding illustrate that the coexistence of female reproductive capacities and sexual desire remains controversial. The depiction of Tina’s pregnant body as sexually desiring and desirable takes this discussion one step further: the sexually active pregnant lesbian is not simply a reminder of female sexuality per se, but more specifically of non-normative female sexuality.

Throughout season two, Tina’s pregnant body is remarkably visible, both during sexual encounters and elsewhere. In fact, the season opens with a close-up of Tina’s face and shoulders while

she undresses at the doctor's office, only to then switch to a full body shot of her in nothing but underwear and a bra, the pregnant belly on display to reveal her pregnancy to both the doctor and the audience ("Life, Loss, Leaving," 2:1). While she is first facing the camera straight on, she then turns to bring her belly dramatically into full view.



Image 7. Tina's pregnant body in full view ("Life, Loss, Leaving," 2:01). Frame grab.

Again, the prominent placement of the lesbian mother in the opening scene of a season indicates the importance in the series of this topic. Subsequently, Tina's pregnant body becomes a frequent sight – as well as a site – of embodied lesbian maternity and sexuality. Throughout the season, Tina is seen masturbating, engaged in various sexual encounters with both Bette and Helena, sleeping naked in Bette's bed, and, as described above, undressing at the doctor's office. According to Perry-Samaniego, this hypervisibility and deliberate sexuality trouble the audience's "gaze" in different ways: "first, [Tina's] sexual orientation disrupts the maternal connection; second, her maternal embodiment disrupts her sexuality and sexual orientation; third, her visibility affects traditional ideas about motherhood and sexuality" (368). In depicting a complex relationship between these three aspects – maternity, sexual orientation, and sexual desire – *The L Word* brings the radical dimension of Leibovitz' image combining motherhood and sexuality into the new millennium. Here, the pregnant body is not

simply a reminder of a previous sexual act. Rather, without Tina's sexual activity, the pregnant belly would mislead viewers (at least those who missed the "procreative act") to imagine such an heterosexual act, although it never took place. Tina's sexual activity, then, functions as a persistent reminder that a male presence was not necessary to bring this maternal body into being.

The emphasis on lesbian maternal sexuality can therefore be viewed as the ultimate threat to and fear of the patriarchy. As Perry-Samaniego asserts, the depiction of sexual activity between Tina and Helena "represents an aspect of cultural anxiety about female sexual activity, particularly pregnant females as property of one male only" (369). What is more, Tina's engagement in multiple sexual relationships threatens not only the heteronormative patriarchal claim to the pregnant woman's body as an object for male pleasure only, but also disregards the cultural imperative of maternal monogamy. As I have demonstrated above, to be considered a "good" mother in contemporary American culture, one must be selfless to the extent of being de-sexualized. In foregrounding Tina's experiences of being pregnant and sexually desiring, *The L Word* refuses to draw this boundary. Indeed, in a scene that reveals what Matthews and Wexler call, "one of those secrets that are hidden in plain sight" (13), the show explicitly links Tina's ravenous desire to the hormones her pregnant body produces. In one episode, Tina, who is otherwise depicted as femininely passive and even weak in both relationships, energetically – if not aggressively – attempts to seduce Helena, insisting that "I just want to fuck all night long, fuck, fuck, fuck" ("Late, Later, Latent," 2:9). Helena is turned off by Tina's forceful advances, asking, "Are you having some kind of hormonal surge here?" Explaining that Tina's "hormones are raging out of control," and that Winnie was a "monster" during this stage of her pregnancy as well, Helena exits, leaving the pregnant woman to wonder: "What am I doing?"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Helena's description of the desiring pregnant woman as a "monster," of course, invites comment as well. Kellie Burns has drawn on Braidotti's work to draw out the implications of this comparison. According to Burns, Braidotti illustrates how phallogocentric discourse has positioned the pregnant woman as monstrous, as "an in-between body that exists somewhere between ... fascinating and horrific, object of worship and object of terror" (65). The pregnant lesbian finds herself doubly marginalized in these terms: both as a lesbian and as a pregnant woman, she solicits fascination and discomfort.



Image 8. "What Am I Doing?" Tina is distraught by her own sexual desires. ("Late, Later, Latent," 2:09). Frame grab.

This rather unusual scene visualizes pregnant desire while at the same time showing the woman experiencing it to be surprised by her own behavior. The idea that the pregnancy hormones make Tina act "unlike" herself, as Helena suggests, disrupts the continuity between Tina's pre-pregnant and pregnant senses of self. This discontinuity can be read as another effect of affective dissonance: Tina's helplessness at the end of the scene is an affective trace of experiencing the sexual desire that contradicts both her sense of self and of what is appropriate behavior for a pregnant woman, confirmed by Helena's rejection.

As Tina's body enacts sexuality for the pregnant woman, it does so for the lesbian as well. As queer theorist Michael Warner argues in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, the gay and lesbian political movement has used the disavowal of sexuality as a political strategy in its struggle for equality.¹⁵⁰ According to Epstein, Warner's argument illustrates that "the mainstream gay/lesbian movement, in response to the historic shame and stigma attached to gay/lesbian sexualities, has moved away from the politics of shame to a desexualized identity politics that claims lesbian/gay identities but disavows the sexuality that goes with them" (96). In Warner's own words:

¹⁵⁰ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

“As a movement we resort to a temporary pretense: ‘We’re gay,’ we say, ‘but that has nothing to do with sex’” (40, ctd. in Epstein, 96; see also Ryan-Flood, 153). The goal of such a strategy is, presumably, to draw attention away from non-normative sexualities, and instead emphasize normalcy in order to claim equality with that which is ideologically constructed as “normal.” As I have shown above, this strategy has been particularly important for gay and lesbian parents in their quest for proving their ability to be “good” parents despite their non-normative sexuality. Drawing on Warner, Ryan-Flood states that much research on gay and lesbian parents “ignores the role of sexuality in these families, effectively de-sexing the queer, who becomes a ‘safe’, asexual parent” (153). Refusing to accept this separation of parenthood and non-normative sexuality, Tina deliberately and hypervisually embodies both.

Importantly, the radical portrayal of embodied maternal lesbian sexuality is not simply a matter of transgressing ideological depictions of idealized femininity. Indeed, Tina’s reference to being a “cliché” and her comments regarding her hormones – the epitome of popular cultural stereotypes of pregnant women losing control over their bodily processes, albeit rarely in terms of sexual desire – explicate the way in which her experience very much results from an embodied encounter with ideological constructs, that which I have called “affective dissonance” throughout this dissertation. In the scene described above, affective dissonance becomes legible as humiliation. The fact that Helena, who has repeatedly indicated and acted upon her attraction to Tina’s pregnant body, is now appalled by that body’s expressive sexuality produces in Tina a sense of shame and discomfort which negate the legitimacy of her desire. In light of the humiliation she suffers at Helena’s rejection, she is unable to embrace her body’s failure to embody the ideal of de-sexualized pregnancy. In addition, her sexual desire and the discomfort it causes in this scene evoke a sense of maternal unfitness. Describing the effects of heteronormativity, Ahmed observes that “to be compelled by the narratives of ideal heterosexuality in one’s orientation to others is still to be affected by those narratives; they work to

script one's orientation as a form of disobedience" (145–146). Tina's sometimes violent orientation towards other female bodies, then, produces affective dissonance by not quite complying with either the script for de-sexualized maternity or de-sexualized lesbian identity; these scripts produce her sense of desiring not quite as she (is) expected to.

Hence, the re-sexualization of both the pregnant woman and the lesbian through a visual focus on the pregnant body, i.e., a depiction of embodied, material experience of maternity, allows for a reading of the figure of the pregnant lesbian in terms of affective dissonance in a way that parallels what I have argued about Bette. In *The L Word*, affective dissonance comes to matter both on screen and is transferred onto the audience. If it is true, as Ahmed claims, that "queer subjects may also be 'asked' not to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable by avoiding the display of signs of queer intimacy," a request which functions as a "restriction on what one can do with one's body, and another's body, in social space" (148), then Tina's active sexuality is bound to cause some viewers discomfort. Indeed, it is such a sense of discomfort that serves as the starting point for Burns' essay, which recounts a discussion in which multiple "otherwise voyeuristically-friendly queer women" expressed their unease, presumably caused by "the *sexualization* of the expectant body, more specifically the expectant *lesbian* body" (57, original emphasis). Drawing on the notion of affective dissonance, I propose that this discomfort is caused by a discrepancy between how the pregnant woman's body is expected to act and the hypervisibility of pregnant lesbian desire. If the depiction of other sexual encounters between lesbian women on the show always already walks the thin line between comfort and discomfort, fascination and repulsion, the pregnant woman engaging in lesbian sex crosses this line. Affective dissonance for the audience, then, is also about discomfort: the discomfort that is caused by viewing a body orienting itself in unexpected ways.

The depiction of queer motherhood is further complicated when the show introduces another pregnancy into the plotline in the final season: that of female to male transgender character Max. The

way in which the writers let down their most transgressive character has been much lamented; this let-down culminates in the episode in which Jenny throws a baby shower for Max (“Lactose Intolerant,” 6:6). During this event, the female guests from the friend circle refuse to accept Max’s identity, repeatedly referring to him as “she” and “mother” despite his insistence that he does not identify in those terms. While the women were supportive of his transition, albeit to varying degrees, throughout the progression of the series, it is his pregnancy that prevents them from ultimately accepting his new identity. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* Judith Butler writes that “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (2).¹⁵¹ The baby shower scene illustrates the power that discourse has over the production of a body’s materiality: the lesbian women come to embody heteronormative discourse in a way that refuses to acknowledge Max’s non-normative identity. It is not his sense of self that allows him to position his body as male; rather, it is the women’s insistence on the idea that pregnancy makes one female which holds enough power to cement Max’s identity as female.

In this scene, it is particularly Bette and Tina who assert the attainability of dominant ideals of “good” motherhood through what Burns and Davies call the “neoliberal technologies of self-management ... and cosmopolitan consumer lifestyles” (184). The couple’s reassurance that Max’s reluctance to embrace the future role as mother is simply due to hormones negates the relevance of this experience and suggests that it can be subdued. Their endorsement of breastfeeding idealizes a kind of mother-child relationship for which they strive but Max does not wish to have. Their celebration of the various products which Max is gifted suggests that the consumption of these products enhances the experience of motherhood. In this sense, it is true that the show fails at an

¹⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993).

opportunity to produce transgressive content, and instead reinforces the heteronormative, or in this case homonormative, order.¹⁵²

However, Max's storyline, read through the concept of affective dissonance, offers another example of the show's exploration of the material experience of maternity: Max's experience of being pregnant and not feeling what the other women posit as natural, maternal affection for the child because of the way this clashes with his male sense of self illustrates the way in which ideological discourse produces particular experiences. Max is struggling with coming to terms not only with his pregnancy, but also with the way in which his emotional experience contradicts that which the other women suggest he should feel as well as his sense of self. For better or for worse, then, *The L Word* depicts how affective dissonance comes into being in the encounter between a body's experience of maternity and ideological heteronormative discourses that prescribe feeling otherwise.

The depiction of lesbian and queer maternities in *The L Word*, then, invites consideration of the ways in which affective dissonance queers motherhood writ large. A consideration of the implications of my reading of the series for mothers who do not identify as lesbian is not to diminish the political potential the series has in addressing the challenges lesbian mothers face in their everyday lives and the political issue of equality deriving from them. It does, however, acknowledge the ramifications of the depictions of lesbian maternity beyond that scope. By using the term "queer" as a verb in this context, I aim to emphasize how the show invites its audience to consider the ways in which maternal experience is always shaped by the encounter between ideological discourse and embodied experience. As sociologist Margaret Gibson writes in the introduction to her edited volume, *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives*, "queering motherhood must attend, not only to motherhood as it occurs in overarching discourses and institutional restrictions, but also to everyday

¹⁵² This is argued, e.g., by Rebecca Beirne, "The T Word: Exploring Transgender Representation in *The L Word*," in Heller, *Loving The L Word*, 23–36).

activities, material inequities, and embodied relationships.”¹⁵³ To “queer” motherhood, then, is to pay attention to the ways in which the affective and embodied encounter with ideology produces experiences that are never sufficiently accounted for in terms of assimilation and transgression.

Therefore, as this chapter has shown, a queer perspective on motherhood is particularly productive when it thinks beyond this poststructuralist dichotomy. As Ahmed writes, to “define a family as queer is already to interrupt one ideal image of the family, based on the heterosexual union, procreation and the biological tie. [Thus] we can begin to reflect on the exposure of the failure of the ideal as part of the work that queer families are doing” (*Cultural Politics*, 153). As a popular cultural text, *The L Word* does this work in depicting such a queer family and the material basis of its experiences on screen. What is central to this cultural work is the creation of affective dissonance, or what Ahmed refers to as discomfort or disturbance, both on the diegetic level and within the audience. For Ahmed, this discomfort is “not about assimilation or resistance, *but about inhabiting norms differently*” (155). In other words, what “matters,” or what is interesting, is not whether particular lives practice assimilation or transgression, but rather the nature of that discomfort, i.e., queer bodies’ encounter with norms and these bodies’ capacity to act.

¹⁵³ Margaret Gibson, “Introduction,” *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Gibson (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014), 1–23, quotation on 7.

CONCLUSION

Notions of “good” motherhood remain one of the most scripted realms of heteronormative ideology. Women who “have it all” and ideals of maternal bliss continue to populate American visual and popular media discourses into the twenty-first century. These ideological formations are clearly marked along racial, sexual, and socioeconomic lines: the “good” mother is constructed as a heterosexual, wealthy, white woman. The large number of voices criticizing romanticized representations of motherhood on the internet, for example on so-called mom blogs, merely attest to the pervasiveness of this ideal. Nonetheless, a variety of cultural texts ranging from memoirs and self-help books to photographs and television series address how contemporary mothers encounter dominant ideologies of motherhood and provide insight into the kinds of experiences these encounters produce.

In the preceding pages, I have used the term “affective dissonance” to think through the friction that these maternal encounters produce. Affective dissonance, in regard to contemporary motherhood, materializes in different ways. It can manifest as an emotional discrepancy between expectations raised by dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood and what it actually feels like to be a mother. It can be a material trace on the body, registering such a discrepancy – a darkened areola, a facial expression marked by exhaustion, a pregnant body moved by sexual desire – which, in turn, implies that bodies can express, and thus live, affective dissonance. It can also be a way in which a maternal body refuses to be subdued into a proper appearance or behavior, as the drop of milk dripping from the breast in Carucci’s image exemplifies. Affective dissonance becomes visible, tangible, and legible on the maternal body as both cause and symptom of the discrepancy between dominant ideology and material experience.

Conceived as an embodied force, affective dissonance sheds light on the ways in which maternal experience is constituted in and by the encounter with ideological constructions of “good”

motherhood. For instance, it is precisely the idea that maternal bliss can be achieved, raised as an expectation by the ideology of “good” motherhood, that makes mothers so painfully aware of its absence. In this context, I have found it less interesting to ask whether popular cultural expressions of motherhood are “realistic” or “unrealistic,” and have focused instead on how they portray the materiality of maternal experience. Consequently, I have rejected the idea that certain desires, such as the desire to have a baby, can be shrugged off as not “real” because they are the effects of heteronormative ideology; rather I have suggested that such desires are worth investigating precisely because they emerge and become traceable on the body as it encounters heteronormative ideals of motherhood.

Furthermore, I have explored the ways in which affective dissonance can both be depicted in cultural expressions of motherhood and be transposed onto an audience. In this second instance, it relies on the discomfort triggered by the representation of that which is unfamiliar, causing a viewer or reader to pause and to question certain expectations of experiences which ideologies of heterosexual white middle-class motherhood present as naturally occurring, such as the absence of sexual desire in pregnant and nursing bodies. Visualizing such desire and the affective dissonance it produces in the women that are depicted, the images discussed here raise awareness of both the discrepancy between expectation and experience, and the ways in which expectations raised by dominant ideologies contribute to and produce this experience. In this sense, affective dissonance circulates between the bodies in the images and those that consume them.

At the same time, the way in which visual media cause the viewer to pause further invited consideration of viewing practices. Images that refuse to be recognizable in dominant ideological terms, i.e., images that represent something that does not adhere to sociocultural prescription or expectation, demand that viewers reflect on the practices of making sense of images that circulate within contemporary visual culture. The images discussed here resist simple readings in terms of either

reinforcing or challenging ideological formations. In doing so, they undermine learned approaches to viewing images in such dichotomic terms, i.e., as either affirmative or transgressive. Instead, they illustrate how opposing forces can both be present within an image or a text. Affective dissonance, then, is also a way of bearing ambiguity.

As an analytical tool, affective dissonance responds to an impasse in poststructuralist feminist approaches to interpretation, which, as some critics have argued, operate based on a hermeneutics of suspicion (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124). Observing such an impasse is not to diminish the fact that such critiques highlight the ways in which cultural products reproduce and reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. However, they frequently set out to prove what they already know. Suspicious of their object of study, they are dedicated to evaluating texts based on their relationship with dominant ideology, i.e., to show whether they undermine or reinforce it. However, privileging transgression, such a critical approach rarely accounts for the way in which one can be drawn towards or invested in a cultural text despite the fact that it is not exclusively transgressive, but also appears to reinforce heteronormative ideology. This is the case with some critical readings of *The L Word*¹⁵⁴ and also reverberates in the responses to Vodianova's Instagram post, which many viewers wanted to celebrate as an endorsement of breastfeeding, despite its more repressive countercurrents.

Thus, wanting to love the object of study, the critic finds herself unable to do so because of its reiteration of ideological narratives that are perceived as detrimental to women's wellbeing. Affective dissonance offers one way to retain, respect, and act upon what Robyn Wiegman has called the "love of and for the object of study."¹⁵⁵ In her discussion of Sedgwick's notion of reparative

¹⁵⁴ Take for example, Sal Renshaw's chapter, "Queering *The L Word*," which opens by celebrating the series for being "nowhere more politically edgy, more progressive, and ... more subversively feminist than when it attempted to tackle the issue of sexual identity," only to retract from this claim in the concluding sections by conceding that the "progressive, subversive potential was constantly marginalized and always at risk of being disciplined by the normative" (Sal Renshaw, in Heller, *Loving The L Word*, 57–79, quotations on pp. 57, 76).

¹⁵⁵ Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative 'Turn,'" *Feminist Theory* 15.1 (2014): 4–25, quotation on 18.

reading, Wiegman suggests that the hermeneutics of suspicion that was – presumably – at the core of “paranoid reading,” assumed that critics had the privilege of “knowing, when others do not, the hidden contingencies of what things really mean,” and that such knowing usually expressed itself in “critical attachments ... forged by correction, rejection, and anger” (7). The hermeneutics of suspicion, then, implies that the critic approaches each text skeptically, if not angrily, with an investment in exposing that which is harmful. Reparative reading, Wiegman suggests, is devoted to “displacing” these attachments with “those crafted by affection, gratitude, solidarity, and love” (7). Affective dissonance can be used as an analytical tool that allows the critic to enter such a relationship with the object. No longer implored to “know” the object, i.e., to explain to others what a text means in regard to ideology, the critic can follow her attachments, conflicting as they may be. As such a tool, affective dissonance not only explains the ways in which we love to hate certain cultural texts, but it also shifts attention away from the evaluative approach that asks what is “good” or “bad” about a cultural text, and instead asks how ideological narratives constitute particular experiences – not only of motherhood, but of identity markers across the board.

The approach to popular cultural expressions of motherhood discussed here furthermore reveals just how compelling these raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized ideals of motherhood are. As narratives of “the good life,” ideologies of “good” motherhood promise heterosexual, wealthy, white women success and happiness, both highly held values in contemporary America (and beyond). Thus, it is unsurprising that contemporary American women, regardless of the exposure to feminist discourses that they may have had, retain their affective attachment to these ideals despite their critical ability to deconstruct them as “unrealistic.” The discussion of postpartum depression memoirs in Chapter 2 shows that it is precisely the content of these dominant ideals that prevents mothers from attaining the bliss they project, producing what Lauren Berlant has called a “relation of cruel

optimism” (*Cruel Optimism*, 1). Affective dissonance materializes when maternal (and other) bodies feel “other than” discursively raised expectations.

Drawing on theories of affect and new feminist materialism, this dissertation inserts some of the concerns explored in these fields into that of motherhood studies. Emerging as an attempt to reintroduce motherhood as a subject of interest into women’s studies by asserting its feminist potential, much research in motherhood studies finds itself in the poststructuralist bind addressed above: on the one hand, it strives to assert the feminist dimension of mothering as an activity, for instance by raising “future feminists.” In this context, lesbian motherhood is often seen as the prime example: rejecting the heteronormative ideal of the nuclear family, it models a radical alternative to mainstream American culture. On the other hand, scholarship in the field of motherhood studies is faced with cultural texts that reinforce heteronormative ideology and the limited position it accounts mothers. In a similar vein, such scholarship, and criticism related to it, is often dedicated to juxtaposing ideologies of motherhood with the “realities” thereof.¹⁵⁶ Both approaches lead to the impasse outlined above. The preceding chapters illustrate how affective dissonance can mediate between the two poles of reality and representation, and of affirmation and transgression, while still allowing the critic to foreground representations of maternal experience as an object of study.

It is furthermore noteworthy that, despite the recent surge in feminist scholarly inquiry into the realm of bodily materiality, such scholarship has yet to address questions about motherhood, so obviously visceral in nature. One can only speculate why this is so. Many feminist critics, particularly those against whom motherhood scholars position themselves, continue to view motherhood with suspicion. Focusing on the materiality of the maternal experience threatens to fall back into essentialist

¹⁵⁶ One need only consider the titles of some recent publications to detect this impulse. See, e.g., Chernick and Klein, *The M Word*; Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson, eds., *Tellings Truths: Storying Motherhood* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014), and – targeting a more general audience – Avital Norman Nathman, ed., *The Good Mother Myth: Redefining Motherhood to Fit Reality* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2014).

arguments about the relationship between femininity and reproduction that poststructuralist feminism deems overcome. In this dissertation, I have shown that this need not be so. Indeed, when explored in combination with and alongside discursive constructions of motherhood, embodied maternity, particularly when expressing affective dissonance, reveals itself to be constituted through a variety of biosocial forces. It is this insight that makes motherhood a compelling topic of interest for scholars from various feminist theoretical standpoints, including those working from a new materialist perspective who have been interested in modes and processes of becoming.

Indeed, I propose that affective dissonance is an experience that is characteristic of contemporary processes of maternal becoming. In each chapter I have addressed how affective dissonance is experienced in relation to a woman's sense of self, particularly as it transitions from a prematernal self to a maternal self via a moment of multiplicity experienced in relation to one's child, first as a fetus growing inside one's body and then dependent on the mother in the first months post birth. Affective dissonance can occur at various different stages in this process and be produced by different factors. Narratives of postpartum depression illustrate that these factors can range from biological to social, and from psychological to medical. However, in all the cases presented here, affective dissonance is an embodied effect of the encounter with ideological accounts of "good" motherhood that disrupts a woman's identity and leads to an emergent sense of a maternal self, one that continues to be contested and in flux. While the order of the chapters here reverses the maternal chronology – starting with mothers of school age children and working its way back to pregnancy – the argument makes clear that affective dissonance occurs at all stages of the maternal experience.

The title of this dissertation suggests that affective dissonance is central to the maternal experience in *contemporary* America. More specifically, it is the political and cultural context of neoliberalism that produces this effect. With its emphasis on a rhetoric of choice and empowerment, its encouragement of consumption, and its celebration of individualism, neoliberalism suggests that

the experience of maternal bliss can be attained through self-management and control, rather than being contingent upon additional factors such as the social, political, and cultural environment.¹⁵⁷ For instance, in the chapter on postpartum depression memoirs, I argue that affective dissonance, when experienced in the form of postpartum depression, becomes a condition that, according to the medical establishment which institutionalizes neoliberal ideologies, can – and should – be medicalized away. Through the consumption of pharmaceutical antidepressants, the individual can manage what is belittled as her discontent and “choose” happiness. What is more, as implied in Ahmed’s notion of the “happiness duty,” it is her responsibility to do so (*Happiness*, 7).

In many ways, this context of neoliberalism has also produced and overlaps with feminist stances that diffuse the political relevance of experiences like affective dissonance. The logic of neoliberalism has produced a “sensibility” that circulates in popular culture according to which feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer needed (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 161). Within this sensibility, feminist and anti-feminist impulses often coexist and remain unresolved. The rhetoric of the availability of choices, lauded as the most important feminist accomplishment, privileges certain choices and suggests that happiness comes as the result of making correct choices, without considering the various factors, including racial, sexual, and socioeconomic belonging, that may impact an individual’s woman’s access to such choices. In recent decades, as my discussion of ideologies of intensive mothering and attachment parenting in Chapters 1 and 2 shows, these “correct” choices have increasingly come to be defined as a devoted kind of motherhood that leads the maternal body into exhaustion and is furthermore only affordable to heterosexual middle-class women, who are ideologically configured as white. Affective dissonance, then, materializes when making the correct choices does not yield the promised bliss.

¹⁵⁷ For more of the ways in which the neoliberal imperative to reinvent and improve the self affects contemporary mothers, see my essay on maternal performance on the social network Pinterest, “The Pains of Sharing Pleasure: Imag(in)ing Motherhood on Pinterest,” *JMI: Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* 6.1 (2015): 81–91.

While I argue throughout that affective dissonance is central to the experience of contemporary motherhood, it is a theoretical framework that is no less applicable in other contexts. In Chapter 1, I emphasize that Sheryl Sandberg misses an opportunity to draw from her experience of affective dissonance as well as from her position of privilege and power to instigate the kind of change that might break through the relation of cruel optimism maintained by contemporary ideologies of “good” motherhood. I suggest that her experience could provide an entry point for an ethics of solidarity that is not grounded in categories of identity. This idea is further developed in Chapter 2, in which I propose that postpartum depression as a sociobiologically produced form of affective dissonance can become grounds for a political agenda that draws attention to the ways in which ideological discourses of “good” motherhood are precisely what prevent women from experiencing one of its tenets, maternal bliss. In addition, the shared experience between memoirists and readers creates a sense of identification that does not depend on other commonalities. At a time when feminist movements appear to be increasingly dispersed, and ideologies of white heteronormativity continue to thrive – and, indeed, have regained currency in the recent political climate – a theoretical concept that facilitates the active and explicit engagement with various ideologies, the expectations they raise, and how they make their subjects feel could provide a useful tool in the political debates that are sure to lie ahead.

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ABSTRACT**AFFECTIVE DISSONANCE: (POST)FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF MOTHERHOOD**

by

JUDITH LAKÄMPER**May 2017****Advisor:** Dr. renée c. hoogland**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

In “Affective Dissonance: (Post)feminism and Popular Cultural Expressions of Motherhood,” I argue that motherhood in the so-called post-feminist age is structured by a conflicted relationship between affective expectations raised by public discourses of “good” motherhood and the material, embodied experience of maternity, inflected by race, class, age, and sexuality. While recent feminist scholarship has engaged questions of (bodily) materiality, and popular medial discourses increasingly critique unrealistic ideals of motherhood, my dissertation considers these approaches together. Juxtaposing representations of motherhood from various sources – memoirs, digital media, art photography, and television – I demonstrate how the postfeminist rhetoric of female empowerment and the availability of choices conflicts with actual affective and embodied maternal experiences, a process that produces what I call “affective dissonance.” This experience is more than mere ambivalence and cannot be explained simply by asserting that ideological representations of motherhood are unrealistic. Instead, I consider both the expectations created by popular cultural discourses and maternal bodies’ encounters with them. For instance, I show how three memoirists of postpartum depression make sense of their ostensible illness by exploring the ways in which their experience of early motherhood failed to produce the kind of maternal bliss which contemporary ideologies of “good” motherhood led them to expect. In another example, I discuss photographs

depicting the bodily materiality of breastfeeding and argue that while they may provide an “authentic” representation of early motherhood, they also present the maternal body as one that refuses to fulfill expectations raised by widely publicized ideals of young, white feminine beauty. In both cases, bodily agency interferes with discursive constructions of “good” motherhood. This results in the experience of affective dissonance, which, I argue, is pivotal to the formation of contemporary maternal subjectivity.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Judith Lakämper earned her M.A. in American Literature, Book Studies, and German Literature as well as a Master's degree in an interdisciplinary program called "Ethics in Textual Cultures" from Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany) in 2010, and a PhD in English from Wayne State University in 2017. Her essay "The Pains of Sharing Pleasure: Imag(in)ing Motherhood on Pinterest" was published in *JMI: Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*. Another essay titled "Affective Dissonance, Neoliberal Postfeminism, and the Foreclosure of Solidarity" is forthcoming in *Feminist Theory*. In addition, she has published a handbook chapter, an encyclopedia entry, and two book reviews.

During her time at Wayne State University, she received multiple awards including a summer dissertation fellowship from the Graduate School, and travel awards from the English Department and the Humanities Center. As a graduate assistant, she worked as the managing editor of *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* for two years. Currently she works as the assistant to the series editor of the *Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Gender*. She has taught several literature and composition courses at Wayne State University. Her research interests include contemporary American literature and culture, particularly affect theory and new materialism, feminism(s) and women's literature, maternity studies, visual and popular culture, and narratives of the American Dream.