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MEDIA AND MOTHERS' MATTERS 4-2 2013

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SUPERSTRUMPS

THE CARD GAME WITH A MISSION

SYD MOORE AND HEIDI WIGMORE IN
CONVERSATION WITH OLUYINKA ESAN,
UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER
MARCH 2012

The artist interview in this dossier is an example of collaborative work between an artist and a writer. It is a showcase of how popular culture can be re-appropriated. The interviewees are the co-creators of the card game *Superstrumps* developed to address the issue of stereotyping of women. In the interview, they recount the process of creating the game involving other women from their local community. This exemplifies how a strategy for resisting and reclaiming identities undermined by negative labelling is developed. Their views are strongly shaped by their feminist principles. The interview acknowledges the complex nature of identities, the challenge of media representation and the symbiotic relationship between media and audiences is revealed.

L'entretien dans ce dossier illustre bien le potentiel des collaborations entre artistes et écrivains. On y voit comment la culture populaire peut être réappropriée. Les participants ont créé ensemble le jeu de cartes *Superstrumps* afin d'aborder la question des stéréotypes sur les femmes. Dans l'entretien ils reviennent sur le processus de création du jeu dans lequel des femmes de leur communauté locale se sont impliquées, et à travers lequel a été mis en place une stratégie de réappropriation des identités dévaluées par des représentations négatives. Leur point de vue est fortement influencé par leur principes féministes. L'entretien tient compte de la nature multiple des identités et du défi posé par les représentations médiatiques ; au bout du compte c'est la relation symbiotique entre les média et leurs audiences qui émerge.

Playing cards have long been a pastime in much of the world. Their earliest incarnations have been traced to China, but cards have travelled and morphed in their appearance since then. Once made like chips in China and then appearing as circular shapes in India, cards as we know them are products of European countries (Spain, Italy, and France). They have been a popular source of entertainment since the 14th Century and have been adopted for varied uses—diverse folk games, gambling, divination, and fortune telling. Cards have also been adopted for educational purposes and for sales promotion. Complexity of production and high cost may have restricted patronage in earlier times, as is evident in the vestiges of court life seen in standard packs—representations of king, queen, jack (knave), and the joker. With improved technology, the aesthetics of cards have improved. Mass production has helped to make playing cards more affordable and therefore more widely available. Under registered trademarks like Top Trumps (UK), and Bicycle (USA), some playing cards feature diverse representations of life in contemporary cultures. They are even collectible. Some corporations customise playing cards to promote particular brands and issues. Since social marketing also employs tactics used in product marketing, it is little wonder that Syd Moore, a writer and media lecturer, and Heidi Wigmore, a visual artist and lecturer, elected to design playing cards as a medium to address the labelling of women—stereotyping, one of society’s perennial concerns. They conceived

of the game, developed the cards, and brought it to public attention through events within their locality in Essex and then to the 2011 Women of the World (WoW) Festival in London’s Southbank Arts Centre. However, being featured on *Woman’s Hour* on BBC Radio 4 is perhaps what brought them national attention.

Fig. 1

In this interview these two creative women, Syd Moore and Heidi Wigmore meet with me in Essex, England around Syd’s kitchen table. They describe the process of developing the *Superstrumps* project, discuss the rationale behind the initiative, the process of selecting the labels for the characters featured in the game—through whom we explore some mother-figures—and appraise the success of their mission; is it being accomplished? Throughout this interview we are able to share in the empirical experiences of these women

who have been able to use the media for specified ends: to push back against established female stereotypes.

Superstrumps is the registered trademark for their playing cards meant for two or more players. The cards are dealt evenly among players. Unlike the standard pack, which has four suits, it features thirty socially recognisable (female) characters, each carrying labels used to type women. Each card outlines special powers that the character can boast of, as well as a range of other labels by which they may be known. These labels highlight particular behaviour traits to which its bearers are reduced. Each card (character) has numerical vale. This is computed based on scores assigned to attributes associated with women, though more essentially with motherhood – Nurture, Strength, Independence and Resourcefulness. The numerical values for each of these allow players to compare the hand they are dealt, by so doing, determine who wins the game. Many of the tropes featured in the game have historically defined women, and in many cases continue to do so. As stereotypes tend to do, the labels carry negative connotations, but *Superstrumps* co-creators call on players to “have fun, reclaim the labels, and ‘trump the mass media’s tunnel-visioned perceptions of women everywhere!’”

The underlying mission of *Superstrumps* is to provoke deep reflection and talking points on the labels with which women are tagged. The cards provide opportunities to challenge

and renegotiate existing values and by implication review the balance of power in gender relations. The game has focused attention on the need to reclaim the negative stereotypes that have hitherto robbed women of their esteem in society. Born out of some form of an ethnographic research process—even if the creators don’t acknowledge it as such—the game can be adopted as the basis for comparative studies of women’s experiences in different cultures and societies. Similar strategies can also be used to support a range of practical efforts aimed at tackling social exclusion of vulnerable women in particular, but also more generally. Wigmore and Moore also see the wider prospects for employing similar play and humour based collaborative strategies in tackling other forms of social injustices beyond those confronting women. The merit of *Superstrumps* cannot be measured by its very modest commercial success, rather by the wider application of its principle, which allow players a chance to reflect on the social conditions that allow for the perpetuation of traditional and ultimately limiting female stereotypes. In this battle of wits, where they are pitched against widely-circulated media representations of women, the creators of *Superstrumps* may yet hold the trump card.

Here is the story of *Superstrumps* as told to Oluyinka Esan (OE), by its creators Heidi Wigmore (HW) and Syd Moore (SM).

* * *

OE: Why do you think the mass media are responsible for the particular imaginings of women that Superstrumps seeks to reclaim?

HW: As a visual artist I am very aware of how powerful visual culture is in impacting people's perception of the world and of themselves—advertising, most of all. It is visual culture bombardment, as I perceive it, from the mass media. Consider how advertising images construct female identity, because women's images are used to sell absolutely everything. The prevalence of women's images in the visual mass media has been noted since I was at school; certainly the practice has become more pervasive in the last two or three decades.

I am sure Syd will give more details on this but, having both been lecturers in tertiary education, we became increasingly aware of the impact of the media through our young female students. In the context of Fine Art we were finding a majority of female students wanting to work on projects about eating disorders and body image, and they were themselves making the connections between that and the world of media and advertising.

SM: Consider some of the known practices during the great age of television [1950s through to the early 1980s]. As an author of ghost stories, I am quite interested in Rod Serling, who was a civil activist and also the creator of *The Twilight Zone* [1959-1964]. My research revealed that some of his

frustrations were with not being able to represent racism in the American South, or focus on women's issues. These limitations were not necessarily imposed by the TV networks, but by the advertisers and the sponsors of the programmes. They would actually read the scripts and delete anything controversial. If you had a woman in a specific role, something beyond the domestic environment, they would change that. I think this kind of shaping hasn't stopped.

There is an idea that TV reflects society. It doesn't. It reflects what the patriarchy or those in control want us to say and want us to aspire to. Consumer culture has created what we see on screens today and definitely in magazines as well.

When I was lecturing in Publishing I had to tell my students about such issues. Take the case of *Cosmopolitan*, which was going to publish an issue in the 90s on anorexia. It was pulled because of Versace, who was then going through the heroin-chic fashion style. That particular piece was pulled to keep the advertising. When you tell students this, they are shocked and they can't believe it. But as you start to reveal and draw attention to the business machinations behind media processes, students begin to realise how manipulated the public is. And certainly women's images are incredibly manipulated.

When I was researching the Essex witch-hunts, for my latest novel *Witch Hunt* (2012), one of the books I read

was *The Age of Sex Crime* (1987). The author, Jane Caputi, draws parallels between the 16th and 17th-century witch hunts and 20th-century advertising, suggesting that the ideologies of the witch hunt continue to surround us in new forms—one manifestation being advertising images of women as victims, bound and gagged, tortured, even surrounded by flames, which she links to the witch-hunts, and to the continued sexualisation and demonization of women to sell products to women.

OE: So it seems that women's images have forever been exploited in one way or the other, in different time periods, regardless of which visual medium has been privileged?

SM: Yes, I would say so.

HW: Yes I would say absolutely. From my point of view, the inter-relationship between art and advertising is a key element in understanding 20th-century constructions of female beauty and identity. Certain feminist artists have attempted to revise, take back, and re-appropriate the female body, but it seems that the female form in advertising—as far as I am concerned—has not been reclaimed, which I suppose is where *Superstrumps* comes in.

OE: Do you mean that advertising in the 20th Century keeps going back to those images, those signifiers that people can relate to? Signifiers that can re-echo images that people are familiar with, but which then seem to perpetuate those “errors” that had been made in

representing women in the past?

SM & HW: Yes!

SM: And that's what we are trying to do with *Superstrumps*, really. We want to literally say, “Stop! Let's look at these and let's reclaim them.” Take the Essex girl.

Fig. 2

The Essex girl as a stereotype is an 80s concept—the unintelligent promiscuous girl of the late-20th Century. But the definition of ‘extremely promiscuous’ is a matter of semantics! I’d hope

that socially we have moved on from that. We are in the 21st century now. Is she promiscuous or can we say she is sexually liberated? You know, it's the way you want to look at it, and *Superstrumps* is about saying "No!" to these consistent echoes, these consistent stereotypes, which follow women around. It's about reconstructing them.

OE: I suppose the other thing you are doing when you highlight the Essex girl is to call attention to other tropes. You are saying, let's look beyond Essex, and see how widespread this type of labelling can be found. Could this stereotype not be applied to someone anywhere else?

SM: Yeah, like the Jersey girl.

OE: We seem to blame the media for selling us these ideas, but how culpable is the family, since it is the primary socialising institution? How culpable is that institution in further entrenching these images?

SM: Very, unfortunately. But going back just briefly to media theory, consider the Uses and Gratifications model versus the Frankfurt School's Hypodermic Needle model of media influence. In the 50s it was all about the hypodermic needle. One school of thought was that people were sponges, and the media, the hypodermic needle, would just inject ideas and images for people to think about and people would pick them up. Then there was the Uses and Gratifications theory, which looked at how people used media—how they interacted with the media. Some

people use it for one thing and some for another. I think there is evidence of both these theories in practice. In terms of the "Hypodermic", we don't have subliminal advertising over here in the UK, but we have constant repetition. Advertising messages quickly become familiar. So if people become familiar with seeing women advertising domestic products in the context of the kitchen, nobody who sees adverts like that then stops to say, "How dare you?" anymore because we are so familiar with it. At the same time, we do pick and choose. Everybody picks and chooses. Again, it's about awareness. It's about being aware of what you are seeing.

As a mother I think it's really important to articulate and to discuss these kinds of things with my son. Last Thursday, I woke him up with "Happy International Women's Day!" So we talked about it all the way to school, and I said, "If you had to draw a picture today, to celebrate the achievements of women, what would you draw?" He said, "I think I would draw a woman going to bed early." And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yes. You always say if you go to bed early, it's an achievement."

OE, HW, SM: [*Laughter.*]

SM: Then I thought: "Well, actually, yeah." And then I said, "What about women doing something really great, what would they do?" Then he said, "Well they could be a doctor," and I said, "Excellent." And then I said, "How about a woman Prime Minister?" And he went, "Don't be silly, only men are

prime ministers!”

HW: That means we have a lot more work to do.

SM: Yet he’s my son!

OE: How old is he?

SM: He’s just turned 9. So I actually said, “Woo, there has got to be a change. But that’s what he’s picked up from the images and cultural messages in his environment.

HW: What I would say to this is that I have a massive issue with the media. My issue is the fact that we have no choice and we are bombarded with visual images, and we know that our conscious state is a minute fraction of our being. The unconscious is far, far, far greater than the conscious. So my issue is the subliminal absorption of this sort of constant drip feed of constructions of identity, that are not around and are projected on to us, and I think it’s become particularly insidious for the generation of kids that are just now coming of age.

My son has just turned 18. When I come across statistics about the amount of hard-core pornography, the violent images and the violence towards women, that boys of my son’s age will have seen and that has been and is easily available to them now via media-technology, compared to a generation ago when boys would share a dirty magazine in a school yard—sorry to use that cliché—the contrast completely horrifies me.

And what horrifies me more is our powerlessness in intercepting these pervasive messages. I can do nothing about it. I can’t stop him seeing this stuff. And, I know he has seen it because they all have, and they have done so from a very young age. We don’t yet know what damage this is doing to young minds.

OE: And where would they have seen this stuff?

HW: On the Internet. You might try to control that at home, but you can’t control what they are seeing elsewhere, and it’s so very easily accessible to them.

SM: This is something Heidi talked about at the WoW [Women of the World 2011] festival: how what’s seen as soft porn is now easily accessed in these lads’ mags, publications like *Nuts*, *FHM*. A few years ago, when my son had started to get out of his pram, these magazines were not on the top shelf. They were at his eye level. He and my nephew used to laugh when they saw a naked lady. They would laugh and say, “Look!” Now they don’t. These are familiar sights to children. It’s become the norm to see images like that in the media.

OE: So what you’ve done with *Superstrumps* — having appraised the mediascape and recognised the problem—is that you have created opportunities for dialogues, for chats with children, or with other members of a family. Was that why you opted to create the card game?

HW: That's a really interesting point. Actually, presenting the whole issue as a game is a careful path that we've trod. For it to be a game, which it is, suggests that it is fun and frivolous and having a laugh. But actually, some very serious issues are presented. I think we agreed right from the beginning that the game form would take it to spaces and places where these debates would not necessarily be had, and people might not even realise that through playing the game they were actually engaging with these issues.

SM: So it opens the debates.

HW: Yeah! We also found early on that there is an arena through play; there's an open space there. And of course it means that even quite young kids, within a safe context, can play this game at a very basic level of just playing the game and looking at the images. The level with which you engage with the game depends on your interest, your education, your understanding, and your awareness.

SM: We really didn't want to be preachy. We both feel that if people start telling us what to do and preaching at us, we are likely to be defiant or just walk off. So to open the subject of representation up to as many people as possible, we wanted to make it engaging.

HW: I grew up with 80s feminism—what some might consider hard-core radical stuff. I did my first degree in the 80s, and feminists from that era were and are sometimes accused of being overly

strident. I can totally understand. I was also like that. Sometimes it doesn't take much for me to get like that again. But I have come to recognise through certain female artists, for example Sarah Lucas, that there is an awful lot of power in humour and playfulness. And, actually, Syd and I are both humorous women. [laughter]

SM: We like to have a laugh!

HW: The people of Essex, not just the Essex girls have a good sense of humour. [laughter] And there is a particular sense of humour here in Essex that we have tapped into—both of us being from this area.

The aesthetics of *Superstrumps* is like the 1970s' girls' magazine, which is revealing. Those 70s girls' magazine were full of attitude, loads of attitude, declaring as it were that: "We're going to go out there and have some fun. We're going to do stuff. Nothing's going to stop us from doing what we want to do. We're loud, we're proud, we're colourful!"

SM: But then again, I think also in the 70s a lot of feminism, and the way feminism was discussed, was kind of alienating for a lot of women—certainly in the 60s as well. It alienated the housewives.

HW: It was very middle-class, very white middle-class.

SM: It alienated the working class as well. This *Superstrumps* initiative is

about trying to engage a broad audience, about being inclusive and just saying, “Come and have a laugh.” “It’s funny.” “Come and join in.”

OE: So, if it is as you have said, that anybody—regardless of class, age, race, nationality—can bring any number of responses to the game, is there a way that these could be collated and compared, as a way to assess the concerns different groups bring to the issues surrounding women’s representation?

HW: Well, one thing is that the whole project came together through the direct responses of women. We hosted an event. We put out an open call to women of all ages, through social networking, through email and through the local paper, to invite them to come to this event. There, we presented attendees with the idea that we had for this game. We provided visual images stereotyping different kinds of women taken from the mass media. We asked the participants to respond in a couple of ways. We gave them some time to just wander around the space to look at the images and to make responses on post-it notes. We encouraged them to write down whatever they wanted to say about these images. The reactions were very raw and very immediate and that had an influence on the images that I, as the artist on the project, ended up choosing and appropriating for these different types. We also asked the women to actually give numerical values to various attributes, which are . . .

SM: Nurture, Strength, Independence, Resourcefulness. And basically we said to them, “If 50 is the average, score the character on each of these attributes going higher or lower than the average.”

HW: We gave them the stereotypes that we had been working with as a list, but without the images in that instance. They were working in small groups around tables, and we had loads of wine; it was very, very loud. We were completely blown away by the women’s level of engagement and their very strong opinions about the way they were being represented. They really wanted to talk and there were some who were quite adamant, getting into fierce heated debates. We collected their feedback and the rankings they had given the various labels. The numerical grading was especially contentious because we had asked each small group to offer a numerical value for each of the different stereotypes. Things got really, really tricky thereafter. Getting a consensus on the final numerical value to use was tricky, yet we needed the numerical ranks for the activity that gets players actively involved in the game. That said, the ranking activity remains one of the more peripheral aspects of the game. What’s most crucial to our ultimate mission are the images and the special powers and the AKAs (the also known as). We realised early on that there were all manner of other labels that could be placed onto each stereotype, terms that are cultural and context specific, which is where the AKAs comes in. [*Superstrumps* character chart].

OE: Did the women help you with that?

SM: Yes they did—a smaller group of interested parties.

HW: We had a brainstorming exercise. Four of us from Essex, while on a train journey, tried to work out just how many female stereotypes we could think of. In an hour we came up with over 250!

SM: Just four women on an hour's journey!

HW: You try it for men and you are struggling to get over 20. So that was one of the reasons we came up with the AKAs, because we realise that some of the names overlap with each other.

SM: So the early process was a very complex activity. We felt that we were treading through a minefield. We found some women, one or two women friends, who very early on, felt very, very uncomfortable with what we were doing.

OE: Why was that?

HW: Because we were dealing with stereotypes.

SM: Their fear was that we were promoting stereotypes. That we would be propagating stereotypes by using them in the game.

HW: For instance, The Strumpet, its AKA is The Bad Girl, Slag, Slut, Bike,

Hussy, Slapper, as in Tart, Trollop, Scarlet Woman, Floozy, Lush. So obviously we are dealing with these really spiteful, very negative terminologies. But it was like lancing a boil: get everything out!

SM: We didn't want to shy away from those words because they are out there.

HW: Yes, because they are difficult to tackle. But then again, the whole thing was about looking through the stereotypes to the positive qualities that are masked, but you have to go the whole way. Some of our friends felt so uncomfortable using this terminology.

OE: Do you think the 30 characters are adequate in representing women?

HW & SM: No.

OE: So the AKAs actually expand the range of characters that can be included in the game?

HW: There could be so many more but we had to bring it down to 30 because of the logistics of making it a pack of cards and making it a game.

SM: And of course the more we got into this, the more we realised what a huge subject it was, and this can only ever be a kind of very early prototype. Actually, we just saw this as a launch pack.

We launched this project at the WoW festival, which was a fairly diverse crowd of middle-class women. What we discovered very quickly was that

a whole series of other kinds of cards was required. We have started working on the teenage pack. We have already started going into schools. We had a fantastic fact-finding afternoon where we asked young people to give us the stereotypes used for women in their generation. We opened this up to boys and girls to gain access to the teenage stereotypes and terminology.

We also had some really great conversations at WoW with women of colour and women from other cultures. Far from feeling alienated by this pack—which was one of our concerns—they were inspired and energised. We found ourselves saying we'd like to have other packs come out of this. We spent time talking to other women and asking them to tell us about the stereotypes from their cultures. We would not necessarily have come across some of the labels mentioned.

And the teens—they spoke another language. We had such a laugh! We'd never heard of most of the labels. And what we very quickly realised is that stereotypes are not only specific to different cultures but also to the subcultures within those groups. So, perhaps there will be more to come.

And we have always wanted to create an international pack.

HW: We do, yes. We've had women from other parts of the world who come across us through the website. They've emailed us from places all over the world. We write back saying, "Oh

yes, tell us the names that get thrown around." And that's been really fun to hear. I say fun, but some of them are shocking. Then there are the similarities, aren't there?

OE: Aha, that's a point I'd been wondering about. How universal are these tropes, these types that you've identified?

HW: That's tricky to answer at this stage. One thing is that being an artist I am interested in archetypes, and obviously the archetype is historic and embedded in culture. In this pack of stereotypes, you've got the ancient archetypes, so we've got the virgin, the whore, the mother and so on. I will suggest that in most cultures these archetypes exist and therefore stereotypes come out of those.

SM: From the feedback that we've had, largely from Europeans, we know that a wide audience of people can relate to many of the stereotypes featured in *Superstrumps*. If you get into Asia or other continents, I think you will uncover loads of stereotypes, but I am not sure they are going to be the same as those that we are familiar with.

OE: It might be fascinating to see how the gaps close around some of these representations that we find. It might just be that there are more similarities than differences in the experiences or prejudices against women. To be more precise, it would be interesting to see the comparison in the experiences of mothers around the world.

SM: That would be really interesting.

OE: This game also provides an opportunity for dialogue and a tool—even a research tool—for others to assess what is going on in different areas of the world. So, yes! Well done for getting this conversation going.

Shall we now look at some of the cards and the types you've created? I see some of them have been labelled as mums.

HW: Yes there are, yes!

OE: Which ones are these?

SM: There's a Yummy Mummy, The Single Mum . . .

HW: Earth Mother.

Fig. 4

Fig. 3

Fig. 5

SM: A lot of the others, as well. I would say The Battle Axe was probably a mother at some point.

HW: She is assumed to be. As for The Super Woman, one of her AKAs is Working Mum. But a lot of the other stereotypes, well, we don't know whether they are mothers or not. [*Holds up another card.*] This, The Ballbreaker might well be.

SM: I think a lot of them are wives. I think The Ballbreaker is definitely a wife, because to be a ballbreaker she has to break someone's balls [*laughter*].

OE: I think The Cougar could be a mother.

SM: Yeah, The Cougar could be, yeah.

HW: Interestingly, some of them are very resolutely single, aren't they? The Bunny Boiler, she's definitely single. Ice Queen. Essex Girl is single. It's funny, I have never thought about them like that before. This is a different way of thinking about them. Have you thought of them like that before?

SM: No.

OE: And I suppose you could think of The Blue Stocking?

SM: The thing is, quite a few of them could be mothers. The Strumpet and The Career Woman could be. The Stepford Wife could be. The Spinster's not, but The Grande Dame could be.

OE: How about The Old Biddy?

SM: Yes, The Old Biddy could be someone's mum.

HW: And Grandmother.

SM: Yes, exactly, The Feminist as well.

Fig. 6

There are a few that are definitely not, but The Bull Dyke could be a mum as well.

OE: And The Drudge?

HW: Oh yeah.

SM: I think The Drudge is probably a mum, to be honest.

[HW: *Laughter*]

OE: Why do you say that?

SM: She's just been looking after everybody.

OE: She's the carer.

Fig. 7

HW: She's one of the most interesting cards, isn't she? She has been for us. We've talked about her a lot because she really is at the bottom of the pile. We had this stereotype and we had these big contentious considerations—"Can we use this? I mean we can't have The Drudge? What can we do? This is dreadful." And then we started thinking about her and what she is. And we just very naturally decided that she's called

The Drudge because she's actually busy caring for other people, all day long and all night. So she's cleaning. She's caring. So if she's caring for other people, why is she at the bottom of the pile? Let's raise her. And when we asked women to rate her, there were some big conversations around, "Well this woman is a caregiver, and that is a very noble thing. She's actually putting her own life aside to care for other people. Why is that not respected?"

SM: There is nobility in her sacrifice, as well. She's actually got very strong statistics. When the workshop participants ranked her, she came out with a score of 95 for nurture. That's really high. And also in Heidi's drawing, look at her, this is the point that 'the Marigolds come off'. She's actually [saying], (*demonstrating the resolute posture in the drawing*) "Right, I'm going to stop here for a moment." [see image of The Drudge]

HW: All women immediately recognise—without us having to explain—that none of us are stereotypes: no one woman fits in a single box with a label on it. By contrast, we can, all of us, pick up a handful of cards at any time of our life, in fact in any one day, and see aspects of ourselves in those stereotypes. We've had jokes before, Syd and I. I'll ask, "How are you?" and she reply, "Oh, I'm a Drudge this morning, but this afternoon, I'm going to be a Ballbreaker, and by the evening a Femme Fatale." So it's become a running joke, really. Essentially these are all just different aspects of very

complex female identities.

SM: Of course now we do quite flippantly use these terms. When you say, “I am a ‘Drudge’” what you’re saying, is: “I get spent! Ninety five percent caring for everybody else in the house.” Then, you could say, “This afternoon I’m not going to be caring. I’m going to get out there. I’m going to do something different, and then this evening, I’m going to be sexual.”

HW: And if we meet in the evening and Syd’s wearing too much lipstick, I feel quite free to tell her she’s looking like a complete Strumpet.

SM: Which I really celebrate. I love it. I celebrate that because, if she calls me a Strumpet, I know that I am [*and she begins reading from the qualities listed on the Strumpet’s card*] “defiant, generous, liberated sexually, self-determined, and I have loads of charisma.”

OE: So what you’re doing is, in a fun way, reclaiming the positive aspects of those labels by which we have been known and saying to women that indeed it’s all right and inevitable to be a little bit of all of these things at the same time.

SM: And also, part of the purpose of the game is to make women feel positive about these labels: to be able to reclaim these identity tropes and to have a retort, have good reason to celebrate what they are doing.

HW: Absolutely! And the response is in the special powers. They are the most important aspects of the cards, aren’t they? We thought long and hard, we really did, and we worked so hard with the language. We really focused on creating positive attributes—special powers—for every single one of these characters, no matter how denigrated they are in common cultural discourse. In other words—empower them!

OE: Which seems to be the entire aim of the movement—the feminist movement—let’s empower the women, not just for the sake of the women, but for the sake of society as a whole.

SM: Absolutely!

OE: If you had to pick one card to represent women at this stage in time, which would it be?

SM: I’d probably go for The Essex Girl. For me, in the climate that we are in at the moment, I’d pick The Essex Girl to represent women’s condition. She’s denigrated. She’s seen as a sex object. She’s put down and she’s held down through class hierarchies—she’s perceived as low class. This stereotype is imprisoning. However, in response, she is defiant. And actually this is how I see, or hope, women are at this stage—that they are defiant! That they are coming out like the image Heidi has used to represent the Essex Girl—with one finger in the air, saying, “I don’t care what you think, I am going to do my own thing.” Women are starting to come out of the kitchen, to speak out.

That's what The Essex Girl is about. The Essex Girl calls us back. She plays hard. She works hard. She's sassy and she's sociable. She's still denigrated but she's doing her own thing with pride!

OE: Go Essex Girl!

[*Laughter*]

HW: I would feel duty bound to pick The Feminist. We are all talking about reclaiming the *F-word*. The number of strong young females I meet, who in everything they are saying and doing, as far as I am concerned, are proclaiming their feminism, but then they say, "Oh but I'm not a feminist." That's quite tricky for my generation. I think that's really sad that young women are no longer interested in exploring feminism. But again, of course, maybe it's just a label. Maybe we don't need that label anymore, if we just remind ourselves of what we determined the special powers are for The Feminist—egalitarianism, idealism, tenacity, determination, resolve, liberation, rebelliousness, The Sword of Truth.

We had a great conversation with Bidisha, the writer and broadcaster, at WoW 2011. She was talking about Joan of Arc and interestingly I had used an iconic image of Joan of Arc from the early 1930 or 1940s movie as inspiration when I was designing the image of The Feminist. I considered what to use. A bra burner? That is out of date. So, Joan of Arc, looking very cool in a suit of armour and a breastplate, seemed more appropriate. She's holding a banner, she's got her hand raised in the air, she's a revolutionary in this image.

And Bidisha was saying Joan of Arc had been claimed by the Christians as a Christian symbol, but Bidisha didn't see it that way. She said Joan was just a very clever, very sassy young woman, who realised that if she said she was hearing voices from God, she'd be given a suit of armour. Bidisha said, "Who knows if she was really hearing voices from God or not?" But Joan used that as a way to supersede the limitations placed on her by the patriarchal rulers of her day. I thought that was a brilliant take on Joan of Arc. My only reticence about using Joan of Arc had been that she was this very Christian icon and that didn't fit with the agenda of the game.

OE: I thought maybe you would have selected The Drudge. Even though we celebrate The Drudge, we know that that's where we started from, but you're saying The Essex Girl and The Feminist better represent where women are now. So there is evidence of some progress.

SM: The thing is, maybe The Essex Girl and The Feminist are our generation, but I think if you ask my mum, she might actually choose The Drudge.

HW: Yes, it might be a matter of generation. Feminists in the 70s were asking for equality—equality of pay, equality of opportunity. You could say if you wanted to be slightly controversial about it, The Essex Girl does embody those two things. She's got disposable income, earns her own money, she does as she wants, is very threatening, of course, and she's sexually active. She expresses her sexuality, she drinks like a man [*laughter*], she has fun like a man.

In many ways, isn't that what feminists were asking for? I'm not saying I necessarily hold that position.

OE: So there has been some ground shifting, which brings me to the last section where we consider how well the *Superstrumps* mission has been accomplished. It seems to me that you have managed to generate some support for the game, some high-profile champions. Do you want to talk about that?

HW: Our greatest champion has been Jude Kelly, the Artistic Director at the Southbank Arts Centre, London.

SM: We've had a fantastic response, which has been really overwhelming. I mean, that we've been able to attract the attention of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, is fantastic. But also, we've had responses from people like Lynne Franks, Annie Lennox, Bidisha, Jenny Murray, and Maggie Semple. Kathy Lette has been a right champion. She took the cards with her on to a peak-time television show and she wore our rosettes saying Feminist.

HW: Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty, and Rosie Boycott, who were early-wave feminists in this country—early 70s.

SM: Yes, the cards have gone down fantastically well. We have lots of celebrity champions and well-wishers. Just shows you that these people, who you think, "God, you're at the top of your trade," people who you think,

"They must have achieved it," still see this as really important to push. Obviously they are still experiencing prejudice as well, so they want to move the game forwards.

HW: We've had some conversations around this game possibly being used as a tool in raising awareness about domestic violence.

SM: Well, not just raising awareness, but actually having victims of domestic violence playing it. So there is no judgement about them, but actually getting them to have some fun and to look at the stereotypes and reclaim those stereotypes that had been used to label them. Maybe get the rosettes to improve their self-esteem as well, just get them to be positive about the stereotypes that they had lived with.

OE: So the cards become a means to get them to see where they've been and what positive values they can take away from these; to help people move on without regret. Do you foresee any danger of a backlash to the *Superstrumps* and the strategy informing it?

SM: Sometimes what we are doing is really challenging to people and they become frightened. They see the images and become worried that the game will encourage a new breed of women. Perhaps men of a certain generation are quite fearful. They don't want the status quo changing because it has been good to them. And that's where we come in and rock the boat.

This reminds me of something that happened at End of Term, which is another festival that evolved as an aspect of *Superstrumps*, where we actually had women dress up in different fancy dresses to create new superheroes. We'd then photograph them. I was The Essax, the hybrid of The Essex Girl and The Battle Axe. I had white stilettos, white handbag, Viking helmet, and a breastplate. On the whole, we had hundreds of people aged between 4 and 86 come to this festival and dress up. We had some young girls who were completely transformed, and I am not talking about what they were wearing.

HW: We were dressing up as a great masquerade, so you can express yourself through reinvention.

SM: So they were saying what their secret powers were. The mother of a particular 17-year-old said, "Look, it's as if she's had a complete personality change." This particular girl, who was visiting from Ireland, wouldn't take her outfit off, so we just let her walk around in it. Lots of people loved the event. But then, getting back to your earlier question about backlash, there was one guy who came up with his wife. I think he must have been in his 50s or 60s, and he said, "What's this about?" I explained to him that it is about rejecting negative female stereotypes and reclaiming the positive personality attributes of those same female tropes. And he said, "That's crap! What you're doing is shit. You should be ashamed of yourself." He maintained this stance, even when he had been told that the

event was not to make the women emulate the stereotypes. He was looking at the images on the cards and he didn't want to understand what this was about.

HW: That sort of thing doesn't bother me at all because it sounds like that person had some bizarre issues of his own. I'd be more concerned about a backlash from other women. We did have one or two at WoW where obviously there were hundreds and hundreds of women. Again, I can understand why some women will have a gut reaction against the idea, thinking that we are just promoting stereotypes. What has happened, when we get that reaction, is that we've had conversations. We've asked them to look at the cards properly and to avoid reacting until they have taken the time necessary to understand the game and its aims. But then again, I think that due to many reasons—advertising, mass media, the instant gratification of contemporary consumer lifestyles—some people make immediate and very strong value judgements without a full understanding of this endeavour as feminist resistance.

SM: Out of the WoW festival we talked to over one and a half thousand people, not to mention the fact that I went to BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* in front of a live audience of thousands. The programme was thereafter available on the catch-up service on BBC Radio iPlayer. But out of all those thousands of people that we spoke to, there was only one woman who still felt offended.

Her issue was that we shouldn't be engaging with words like slags or slut. Our position is that we have to engage with them to explain them, to address the related issues, and then we can move on. Basically what we are doing is asking people to engage. That's it. But she maintained her position, even after we had spoken with her for about three quarters of an hour.

HW: Another common reaction that comes to mind, when you ask about backlash, is the questioning we field about male stereotyping. It is not a backlash, per se, but a fairly consistent reaction for people to ask about the male equivalents—which is loaded, for a variety of complex reasons. We are not saying there are no male stereotypes. There are certainly many. We looked at this, because we knew the issue would come up and we knew we had to be able to talk about this. And when we looked at the stereotypes about men, what was overriding is that male stereotypes are about sexual prowess, and they are about boastful, swaggering, macho. So in other words, they are actually about high esteem rather than low esteem. The worst thing you can call a heterosexual man is anything that pertains to him being feminine. So a man dressing up in women's clothing is hilarious and it is demeaning. So it still comes back, really, we think, to the same subject: the value of women.

SM: Some women have come back to us saying we should do these for men, because men too are now struggling to find their place with the changes in

society, perhaps relative to the changing roles of women.

HW: We are both mothers of boys and we know there are huge issues with underachievement for boys. There is mass youth male unemployment, so it is actually a subject close to our hearts.

SM: We are completely sympathetic to this, but we just think, "Hey, come on, guys, if you want to do this, you can do this for yourselves very easily." We must have a focus and know our limits—be aware of how much we can take on. We are both feminists, and feminism and women's issues are really our driving force.

* * *

No doubt, negative labelling affects more people other than women. This game inspired by the feminist principles of its creators is a strategy that can be used to address other situations of social injustice involving other identity groups. Perhaps the use of negative labels is inevitable in media representations, so this becomes a battle of wits. There must be a struggle to rethink, reclaim and integrate! Those who are undermined can still be empowered to rethink their worth, reclaim their esteem, assert themselves, and thus be encouraged to contribute their quota to society. That is the logic and the merit of *Superstrumps*.

Our sincere thanks to Syd Moore, Heidi Wigmore and the many women who collaborated with them on this project. We are also grateful to Syd and Heidi

for sharing their time and thoughts in March 2012, and for the permission to reprint select cards from the *Superstrumps* game. Visit the following websites for more on the game and their other works:

<http://www.superstrumps.com/>
<http://www.heidiwigmore.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syd-Moore/118216464935269>

Images Notes

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Bios

Syd Moore is the author of *The Drowning Pool* and *Witch Hunt*, novels which explore Essex witch hunts. She is currently working on her third book, *The Sacrifice*. Before embarking on a career in education, she worked extensively in the publishing industry, fronting Channel 4's book programme, *Pulp*. She was the founding editor of *Level 4*, an arts and culture magazine, and is co-creator of *Superstrumps*, the game that reclaims female stereotypes. When she is not writing Syd works for *Metal Culture*, an arts organisation, promoting arts and cultural events and developing literature programmes.

Syd Moore est l'auteure de *The Drowning Pool* et de *Witch Hunt*, deux romans qui centrés sur les chasses aux sorcières d'Essex. Elle travaille actuellement à son troisième livre,

intitulé *The Sacrifice*. Avant d'entamer une carrière en éducation, elle a œuvré longuement dans le monde de l'édition, en dirigeant notamment l'émission sur la littérature de *Channel 4* : « *Pulp* ». Elle est fondatrice du défunt magazine sur l'art et la culture *Level 4*, et co-créatrice de *Superstrumps*, un jeu axé sur la réappropriation des stéréotypes de la féminité. Quand elle n'écrit pas, Syd œuvre auprès de *Metal Culture*, un organisme pour la promotion d'événements culturels et artistiques et le développement de programmes en littérature.

Heidi Wigmore is a visual artist and fine art lecturer. She studied at Norwich School of Art and completed an MA at the University of East London in 2001. Her practice is drawing based but multidisciplinary, incorporating installation, props and film. Her imagery is overtly figurative but dislocated, she is interested in the (imperfect) imitation of the human: the doll/mannequin/dummy, the human simulacrum. Heidi's public art projects include a temporary billboard artwork in central London, 'Independent Free State', that explored the female form as map/territory and customized beach huts at The South Bank Centre for the Festival of Britain in 2011. She has lectured for University of Essex and Anglia Ruskin University. She currently runs workshops with English National Ballet and is an artistic assessor for Arts Council England.

Heidi Wigmore est artiste visuelle et *lecturer* en Beaux-Arts. Elle a étudié à la Norwich School of Arts et obtenu une maîtrise de la University of East

London en 2001. Ses travaux sont basés sur le dessin mais demeurent multidisciplinaires en incorporant l'installation, ainsi que des accessoires et des extraits filmiques. Son imagerie est à la fois figurative et disloquée, et elle s'intéresse aux imitations toujours forcément imparfaites de la figure humaine telles que la poupée, le mannequin et le pantin. Parmi ses projets publics on trouve notamment « Independent Free State », un détournement temporaire de panneau publicitaire au cœur de Londres qui explorait la forme féminine en tant que carte/territoire, ainsi qu'une série de cabines de plage transformées au South Bank Centre pour l'édition 2011 du *Festival of Britain*. Elle a été *lecturer* à l'Université de Essex et à la Angela Ruskin University. Elle dirige actuellement des ateliers en collaboration avec le English National Ballet, et occupe la position d'évaluatrice artistique pour le Arts Council England.

Oluyinka Esan is a Reader in the School of Film and Media at the University of Winchester UK. Her research focuses on media production practices and reception of media messages especially by women and children. This is informed by her interest in social relevance of media messages and their impact on society. Through her empirical studies in non-Western contexts, Oluyinka Esan offers fresh perspectives which enrich conceptualisations of media and film practices. Her recent works offer insight into audience pleasures and the valuing of films (Nollywood). She is the author of *Nigerian Television, Fifty Years of*

Television in Africa (AMV Publishers Princeton NJ, 2009). Her current project is *Watching Television: What Nigerian Children Want*. Dr Esan convened the roundtable event on "Media and Mothers' Matters" (October 2011) at which earlier versions of papers in this dossier were first presented.

Oluyinka Esan est *reader* à la School of Film and Media de l'Université de Winchester, UK. Elle mène des recherches sur les pratiques de production médiatique et la réception des messages médiatiques, en particulier chez les femmes et les enfants. Ces travaux s'inscrivent dans le cadre plus large de ses intérêts pour la pertinence et l'impact sociaux des messages médiatiques. À travers ses travaux empiriques en contextes non occidentaux, Oluyinka suggère des perspectives neuves à même d'enrichir nos conceptions des pratiques médiatiques et filmiques. Ses travaux les plus récents examine la notion de plaisir spectateur en lien avec différents échelles de mise en valeur des pratiques cinématographiques (Nollywood). Elle est l'auteure de *Nigerian Television, Fifty Years of Television in Africa* (AMV Publishers Princeton NJ, 2009). Elle travaille actuellement à l'écriture d'un nouveau livre intitulé *Watching Television: What Nigerian Children Want*. Elle a organisé la table-ronde « Media and Mothers' Matters » (Octobre 2011) dans laquelle ont été présentées les premières versions des articles du présent dossier.

FROM SOAP OPERA TO REALITY PROGRAMMING

EXAMINING MOTHERHOOD, MOTHERWORK AND THE MATERNAL ROLE ON POPULAR TELEVISION

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Representations of motherhood dominate the television landscape in a variety of popular genre texts, and as such it is important that we consider the ways in which these women are being constructed and circulated on the small screen. Indeed, although much work has been done to investigate the depiction of women on television, little research exists to account for the portrayal of mothering, motherhood, and the maternal role. With this in mind, this article introduces extant literature concerning the representation of motherhood in the media and then examines ways in which this research might be understood in relation to the depiction of mothers in soap opera, situation comedy, teen drama, dramedy and reality television. It considers the ways in which popular television texts form a consensus as they negotiate the idealized image of the 'good' mother in favour of a more attainable depiction of 'good enough' mothering which stands apart from the romanticized image of the ideal mother that dominates the broader entertainment arena.

Les représentations de la maternité pullulent sous différentes formes génériques dans le paysage télévisuel; il est important d'examiner leur construction et leur circulation sur leur petit écran. En dépit d'une littérature fort chargée s'intéressant à la représentation des femmes à la télévision, il existe peu de travaux sur la mise en scène corollaire de la maternité. Cet article retrace dans un premier temps les travaux existants, puis explore les applications possibles de ces recherches quant à la représentation des mères dans les *soap-opera*, les comédies de situation, les séries pour adolescents, les comédies dramatiques, et la télé-réalité. On y voit émerger les façons dont un consensus se forme dans le paysage télévisuel alors que chaque représentation cherche à négocier la différence entre une maternité idéale, et une « maternité acceptable » qui pour sa part se distancierait de la perfection inatteignable prônée dans le domaine plus vaste du spectacle en général.

Introduction

Women make up 52 per cent of the world's population, and yet men continue to outnumber women on the domestic medium of television by two-to-one. Moreover, when women are seen on screen they are seldom seen in positions of power, authority, experience, or maturity (Thorpe). It is no surprise then that extant literature from such fields as feminist television criticism, media communications, and gender studies deem it crucial to explore those representations of feminism and femininity that exist in contemporary popular programming. However, although much of the work to date seeks to investigate the depiction of women on television, little exists to account for the portrayal of mothering, motherhood, and the maternal role. Even though motherhood has developed as a central issue in feminist scholarship, as evidenced in the wealth of texts committed to exploring mothering practices—in relation to sexuality (Ferguson), peace (Ruddick 2007), disability (Thomas), globalisation (Cheng), work (Gatrell), and health (Clark)—these texts do little to account for the portrayals of motherwork presented on television. Yet the maternal figure is portrayed in a wide range of television texts; these cut across genres and are scheduled at different points for a variety of audiences. Closer examination of these representations in a broader consideration of the maternal role remains a valid pursuit, justifying further attention within the growing field of motherhood studies.

Although this article seeks to introduce and examine a number of popular television genres in order to consider the ways in which they adhere to or debunk the ideology of intensive mothering, readers will no doubt question the inclusion of some television categories and the exclusion of others. I look to justify my choice of case studies by stating that the genres introduced here depict women as mothers and appeal to this same demographic. Moreover, this article chooses to work across the televisual genre spectrum since this is akin to what viewers do and how audiences engage with the small screen. This work does not and cannot offer an exhaustive overview of the history of each genre or the minutia of each representation, but rather, it stands as a broad introduction to existing representations of motherhood as they exist on the small screen. It is my hope that the genres presented here will act as the first point of entry for a reader who will then look to unmask ways in which those themes, theories, and representations are also evident in a broader range of texts, be they in the UK or the US, daytime or primetime, long running or pilot programmes. I argue that contemporary popular programming presents a myriad of strained and struggling maternal figures, which appear in stark contrast to the ideology of intensive mothering, but which constitutes a relief considering the demands inherent in wider entertainment

Extant literature argues that a serene and selfless image of 'good' motherhood

dominates the cultural landscape, and women today are struggling to live up to this. Given that television is so pervasive, its role in circulating this image can be reasonably assumed. It is therefore important to look at the representations of motherhood on contemporary television programming and consider the ways in which popular texts either adhere to the image of the intensive mother or negotiate such motherhood practices in favour of a more attainable depiction of 'good enough' mothering. This article will introduce extant literature concerning the representation of motherhood in the media before looking at the ways in which this research might be understood in relation to the depiction of mothers in a wide range of popular television genres such as soap opera, situation comedy, teen drama, dramedy, and reality television. It is my point that these television genres can be seen to form a consensus in the ways in which they present mothers struggling to construct and maintain appropriate mothering behaviors. Although one might choose to critique such texts for deriding those mothers that dominate the small screen, I suggest that the sheer volume, scope, and reach of such struggling maternal figures goes some way towards exposing the expectations of a 'good' mother as a romanticised myth that women are purportedly striving to emulate. This analysis is crucial, not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality, but because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations and define maternal

norms and mores for the contemporary audience.

The 'good' mother myth

A myriad of research from within the fields of motherhood studies and feminist media criticism informs us that the 'good' mother is a woman who, even during pregnancy, observes appropriate codes of style, appearance, attractiveness, selflessness, and serenity (Pitt). The ideology of intensive mothering suggests that after the baby is delivered, this woman takes sole responsibility for the care of her children; she is fully responsible for their emotional development and intellectual growth (Green 33). Most importantly however, she is a full time mother who is always present in the lives of her children (young and old), she remains home to cook for them after school, and if she works outside of the home she organises such responsibilities around their needs (Chase and Rogers 30). Deborah Borisoff makes the point that in order for mothers to adhere to this maternal image, mothers, and only mothers, must supervise each childhood activity. They must lovingly prepare nutritious meals, review and reward every school assignment, seek out educationally and culturally appropriate entertainment whilst maintaining a beautiful home and a successful marriage (7). This 'good' mother finds this intensive maternal role to be natural, satisfying, fulfilling, and meaningful; she feels no sense of loss or sacrifice at her own lack of freedom, friendships, financial independence,

or intellectual stimulation (Green 33). The concern here is neither that a new mother might want to sacrifice her own wishes for her newborn's welfare nor that she seeks to provide an exhaustive range of educational play dates and activities. Rather, if a woman does not emulate this image then "she risks the accusation of being a bad mother" (qtd. in Wolf 50).

If one considers that myths function to regulate society, then it is worth noting that the 'good' mother myth emerged in response to women's growing "social and economic independence: increased labour participation, entry into traditionally male areas of work, rise in female-initiated divorces, growth in female-headed households, and improved education" (O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws* 10). While women were making social, sexual, financial, and political progress, this maternal backlash developed to ensure that "women would forever feel inadequate as mothers [and to make certain that] work and motherhood would be forever seen as in conflict and incompatible" (O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws* 10). In short, the ideology of intensive mothering serves as a discourse that attempts to return women to their earlier domestic place on the back of the second wave and postfeminist agenda. Since the ideology of intensive mothering presents mothers as effective consumers whilst giving them the sole responsibility of childcare without financial recompense for their labour, patriarchal society remains the chief beneficiary of traditional gender role assignments and the 'good' mother

myth. One might extend this argument by suggesting that the whole of society stands to lose if women's feelings of maternal inadequacy continue to be perpetuated. After all, the burden of welfare states are increased with rising numbers of stay-at-home mothers who have internalized the ideology of intensive mothering demanded of the 'good' mother.

The contemporary media environment is saturated by idealised and conservative images of selfless and satisfied 'good' mothers who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering. Susan Douglas informs us that the landscape "is crammed with impossible expectations ... dominated by images of upper-middle-class moms, both real and fictional, who "have it all" with little sacrifice, counterposed by upper-middle-class women who have fled the fast track for the comforts of domesticity" (285). More recently, the seminal work of Douglas and Michaels informs us that films, radio and advertising, print, broadcast news, and the magazine sector raise "the bar, year by year, of the standards of good motherhood while singling out and condemning those we were supposed to see as dreadful mothers" (14). These authors describe the 'good' mother, who saturates the popular media environment, as being selfless, serene, slim, and spontaneous and above all else, satisfied by her maternal role (Douglas and Michaels 110-39). So too, Kitzinger makes the point that entertainment texts "bombard" women with advice about

how to construct and maintain socially appropriate motherhood practices, be it tips on health, relationships, surface appearances, or maternal practices (qtd. in Maushart 464). Advice literature and child-rearing manuals are also said to play a part in constructing and circulating the ‘good’ mother myth due to the fact that the women in these texts are asked to “serve as a constant comforting presence, to consider the child’s every need, to create a stimulating environment exactly suited to each development stage, and to tolerate any regression and deflect all conflict” (Thurer 336). Moreover, constructions of acceptable mothering demand that these women conform to traditional gender roles, with cooking, cleaning, and domestic chores being “embraced” by the “good” mother (Kinnick 12). Katherine Kinnick goes on to say that:

[T]he media idealize and glamorize motherhood as the one path to fulfillment for women, painting a rosy, Hallmark-card picture that ignores or minimizes the very real challenges that come along with parenthood. Second, media narratives often cast motherhood in moral terms, juxtaposing the “good mother” with the “bad mother,” who frequently is a working mom, a lower-income mom, or someone who does not conform to traditional gender roles of behavior, ambition, or sexual orientation. (3)

When the entertainment and news media present motherhood in moral terms by contrasting what they deem to be the socially acceptable ‘good’ mother with what they believe to be the reprehensible

‘bad’ mother, they are “both prescribing and proscribing norms for maternal behavior” (Kinnick 9). Douglas and Michaels make the important point that the mass media has been and continues to be “the major dispenser of the ideals and norms surrounding motherhood” with the popular cultural landscape collaborated in constructing, magnifying, and reinforcing the new ‘momism’ or what I refer to here as the ‘good’ mother myth (11).

The mass media has a long history of presenting the ‘good’ mother archetype, and this mediated image is depicted as the ideal figure of maternal care which women in the audience are asked to embody. As I have already noted, this figure of womanhood is exhausting, physically, emotionally, socially, and financially. Therefore one might expect mothers to speak out against this unrealizable myth or rally against what must be seen as a rather limited and limiting version of maternal care. However, this is not the case.

Mumsnet, Britain’s most popular website for parents receives 570,000 site visits and over 30 million page views each month, with over 25,000 posts each day (Google). Although this site gives parents space for peer-to-peer support, there is a sense that these forums support a narrow and privileged notion of the ‘good’ mother. The website set up by two media professionals turned stay-at-home mothers encourages intensive mothering practices as part of a desirable identity. Even a cursory glance at the site gives the impression of an upper-

middle-class maternal environment, and the content confirms this even through the pattern of consumption that is emphasized. Under a banner entitled “Money Matters” there is little about tax credits, child benefits, and school meal entitlements. Rather, a helpful list informs mothers on the following: “Why you should save, Ethical savings, How to give to charity, and Mortgage calculators.” Moreover, the style and beauty pages dispense advice on “Hair care, Skin problems, Botox and filler, Home pedicures, and Fake tans.” Under the title “Lunchbox Tips and Ideas” we are reminded that “what you pack is open to scrutiny—not just by other kids but by other mums. So if your child’s going to a friend’s house after school, make sure that’s not the day you give in to Fruit Shoots and Greggs sausage rolls. Stick a few stray aduki beans/arugula leaves/seaweed sachets in the lunchbox” (“Packed lunch ideas”). When the topic is education, the forums are peppered with conversations about the differences between private and state schooling (mumsnet). Savings, charitable donations, home pedicures, seaweed sachets, and private education speak for and about a privileged notion of contemporary family life that appears in keeping with a socially acceptable, culturally appropriate, and romanticised image of motherhood. The bloggers on Mumsnet can be said to uphold the notion of the serene, selfless, and satisfied mother. Indeed, rather than critique its hectic nature, it is these mothers who contribute to and help to circulate this ideology of intensive mothering.

The media are keen to remind us 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” (Douglas and Michaels 4). And yet, even though this image of motherhood is far removed from the lived experience of many women in society, this figure continues to be presented in the popular entertainment environment as the epitome of perfect mothering that women in the audience should all aspire to and strive for. Indeed, viewers are told that the ‘good’ mother is “the ‘legitimate’ standard to which mothers are compared [...] she becomes an ideal to believe in, and one that people both expect and internalize” (Green 33). Shari Thurer echoes this point when she states that “[m]edia images of happy, fulfilled mothers, and the onslaught of advice from experts, have only added to mothers’ feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety. We are told that mothers today cling to an ideal that can never be reached but somehow cannot be discarded” (340). Thurer continues by commenting that:

[T]he current standards for good mothering are so formidable, self-denying, elusive, changeable, and contradictory that they are unattainable [...] the current Western version is so pervasive that, like air, it is unnoticeable. Yet it influences our domestic arrangements, what we think is best for our children, how we want them to be raised, and whom we hold accountable. (334)

One might look to question why it is that mothers who themselves might be struggling to live up to this ideology of intensive mothering put on a mask of ‘good’ motherhood or speak with an appropriate yet inauthentic maternal voice. Douglas and Michaels seek to address this point when they suggest that as mothers we “learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother and wear it at all times” to save maternal shame or humiliation (6), and their argument is compelling here.

Susan Maushart makes the point that the “gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, has resulted in a peculiar cultural schizophrenia about motherhood” (*Mask of Motherhood* 7). After all, even though mothers know that the ‘good’ mother is an exhausting ideal, “the ideal of motherhood we carry in our heads is so compelling that even though we can’t fulfil it and know that we probably shouldn’t even try, we berate ourselves for falling short of succeeding” (Warner 721). It has been suggested that the “ideology of natural-intensive mothering [...] has become the official and only meaning of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering polices *all* women’s mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or can not practice intensive mothering” (O’Reilly, *Motherhood to Mothering* 7; italics in original).

The problem here of course is that few mothers are capable of upholding this idealized image of maternal care. Indeed, working mothers are automatically deemed “poor” or “bad” caregivers due to the time that they spend apart from their children (Borisoff 8). Yet, stay-at-home mothers also struggle to attain the ideal due to the intensely exhausting physical and emotional demands of such maternal practices (Held 11). The fact that many mothers are unable to mother within the ideology of intensive motherhood does not seem to lessen the power of this maternal model, rather, it means that many expecting, new, and existing mothers present what Susan Maushart refers to as a “mask” of appropriate motherwork which further reinforces the dominance of the ‘good’ mother myth (*Mask of Motherhood*). This, in turn, has an impact on gender stereotypes and maternal mores in the wider society.

With the popularity of its texts, television can be understood as a battleground for contested maternal ideologies. As such, it is important to look at the ways in which popular television texts present motherhood and motherwork. We should pay attention to the ways in which a diverse range of fictional and factual genres either adhere to or challenge the romanticised myth. In the following section I provide a brief overview of the ways in which motherhood and motherwork are currently being presented on some of television’s most popular texts. What is presented here is by no means an exhaustive list of maternal depictions;

rather, it attempts to demonstrate how the medium of television helps to challenge the ‘good’ mother myth that is in evidence in the wider media environment. Readers are invited to consider how such depictions might speak to audiences, advertisers, or the wider entertainment environment. In short, this article seeks to encourage future research on the maternal representation by exposing existing representations.

Soap opera: challenging the ‘good’ mother stereotype

Soap opera is routinely understood as a woman’s genre. Perhaps it is more fitting to refer to it as a maternal genre, due to the importance of motherhood, the significance of the maternal role, and the acknowledgement of motherwork in the weekly narratives. The soap opera appears committed to presenting a number of poor, single, teenage, homeless, bipolar, abusive, and drug addicted mothers, not to mention a diverse range of sexually, socially, and financially independent mothers and ‘other’ mothers who each in turn confront and confound the ‘good’ mother archetype because they destabilise “patriarchal representations of motherhood and family structures” (Reyes). Based on the formal demands of the genre, Soap opera can never depict a ‘good’ mother in line with the maternal ideal. Rather the genre is dominated by those women whose maternal identities and motherwork practices negotiate the culturally appropriate and socially acceptable image of the stay-at-

home mother. The characteristics and expectations associated with the ‘good’ mother set women up to fail, and this pattern of failure is played out in minute detail in the soap opera. However, rather than critique the genre for its depictions of ‘bad’ mothers, one might consider the ways in which these women are merely presenting a more candid version of motherhood that exposes the role as “wearing, boring, and, at times, infuriating” (Douglas 284).

Early British radio soap operas such as *Mrs Dale’s Diary* (1948-69) were presented as “narratives of maternal sacrifice and redemption” (Plant 42) and when new television soaps were introduced, they were based around a myriad of mothering roles. While *Coronation Street* (1960-) presents Elsie Tanner/Patricia Phoenix as the archetypal struggling working-class single mother, *Crossroads* (1964-88) gave us the epitome of middle-class working motherhood in the character of Meg Mortimer/Noele Gordon. However, although the matriarch has always been integral to the soap opera narrative, the figure of the housewife has become less prevalent and more troubled in recent examples of the genre (Brunsdon 81). Peter Buckman states that “the problems of motherhood” (67) are crucial to soap opera, Christine Geraghty argues that the mother figure is the undisputed “heroine” of the domestic text (81), and Dorothy Hobson notes that “child-rearing” is one of the genre’s principal story-lines (9). The soap opera does not merely represent motherhood, but rather, it represents the “power of

motherhood” within the family unit and such maternal power is most evident in the ways in which the genre foregrounds “the needs of children for their mothers” in the weekly narratives (Hobson 93). Tania Modleski’s work on the soap opera suggests that two of the most fundamental and oft repeated narrative devices revolve around unwed mothers and the difficulties of balancing a career and motherhood in these domestic dramas (31).

It is important to remember that soap opera presents female characters as more than mere stereotypes due in part to the sheer volume of time spent following their stories, and perhaps this is why the audience can see the women struggling to adhere to the ideology of intensive mothering. Successful intensive mothering is only available to a small number of privileged women, and even then, these women can find such maternal care exhausting over the period of time that we spend with the women of soap opera. From this perspective then, female viewers in general and maternal audiences in particular are empowered to doubt the attainment of the mothering ideal. Perhaps they can take solace in witnessing the struggles of others whose experiences compare with theirs.

Situation comedy: maternal fulfillment and motherwork frustrations

While the soap opera has, since the outset, presented a variety of maternal images and motherwork practices, the situation comedy has witnessed

a dramatic shift in representations of the family in recent decades. While programmes such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-66) made it clear that women were entirely satisfied with their role as full time wife and mother, and *I Love Lucy* (1951-6) offered a partial challenge to traditional gender roles (Feasey 32-36), the impact of the second-wave feminist movement encouraged titles such as *Maude* (1972-8), *Murphy Brown* (1988-98), and *Roseanne* (1988-97) to depict more controversial images of divorce, single parenting, and the working mother. Indeed, the situation comedy has presented such a myriad of family units since its emergence on commercial radio in the 1930s that the most daring and unique representation in recent years seems to be that of the traditional, nuclear, middle-class family, with shows such as *My Family* (2000-2011) and *Outnumbered* (2007-) being presented as “plausibly novel” in their depiction of the patriarchal unit (Hartley 66). After several decades of divorced, widowed, working-class, quasi, and queer representations, the middle-class nuclear family has returned to our screens, and what is interesting here is the ways in which representations of motherhood in this seemingly traditional format challenge the ‘happy housewife’ stereotype by reflecting both the pleasures and comedic frustrations that come with modern day mothering.

Although caring for children might

Fig. 1, Fig. 2

at times be pleasurable, fulfilling, and emotionally rewarding, the contemporary sitcom makes it clear that “the burden of caring for children can become routine drudgery or emotional torment when it is done constantly, repeatedly, because of one’s obligations, and when it consumes nearly all of one’s energies and time” (Held 11). Even though today’s sitcom mother feels demoralised in the home and despondent at the lack of care or attention given to the domestic space by the rest of the family, she clearly defines herself as a mother and homemaker. Indeed, these mothers routinely want to remove themselves from the domestic role and yet cannot help but continue to define themselves in it. They are often frustrated with the day-to-day workings of family life yet struggle to let others take over these responsibilities. This desire for domestic control reminds us of the ways in which earlier generations of the ‘happy housewife’ were granted power, albeit in limited form, based on their position in the family home. It is as if these women understand that any respect or gratitude that they earn from their family is based on their position in the home, thus they continue in this role, even though motherwork frustrates rather than fulfils them.

The contemporary sitcom makes it clear that we should sympathise and potentially identify with the harried and hard working mother figure, even when they are not necessarily depicted as the most efficient or organised figure of maternal authority. Rather than judge these women in line with

the ‘good’ mother myth we are asked to acknowledge, as Diane Speier does, that mothers “are human and flawed, and are learning on the job,” and since “mothering is a trial and error experience, we need to respect that at best it will be ‘imperfect’” (149). Indeed, these shows are not presenting the unhappy mother and housewife in order to critique the institution of family or traditional family values, rather, they are simply trying to critique those unrealistic and unrealisable ideals of middle-class suburban domesticity that have historically dominated the genre. Therefore, it is not the family unit that is of concern. On the contrary, it is the feminine mystique of the contented homemaker that is being challenged. In this way the comedy continues to foreground the importance of motherhood and motherwork to the family, suggesting that this role might be frustrating rather than fulfilling for the woman in question. It is this final point that separates the early family sitcom from its more recent counterpart.

Teen television: toxic and intoxicated mothers

Teenagers and the teen experience have been a staple element within both soap opera and the situation comedy since the 1950s. However, the adolescent lifestyle tends to be presented from the point of view of the adults, particularly that of the maternal figures in the aforementioned television genres. It was not until the mid ’90s that audiences were asked to view the teen experience from their point of view in a range of quality small screen

productions. Although routinely absent or overlooked in “must-see” teen dramas such as *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), *Party of Five* (1994-2000), and *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003), parents and guardians have taken on a highly problematic role in contemporary teen drama. The genre shows parents as weak and irresponsible, be it socially, sexually, or financially, and in many cases it is the mother who is delinquent. Even a cursory glance at contemporary teen programming makes it clear that parents are either problematic forces in the life of the teenager or entirely absent in their lived reality. Sherri Sylvester makes the point that “fictional adolescents without parents are a trend [and] parenthood is out of the picture” in teen television. Likewise, Joyce Millman tells us that “parents are mostly dead, absent or background static” in the genre in question.

Contrary to the squeaky clean image suggested in the ‘good’ mother myth, teen programmes often feature mothers as troubled alcoholics and drug addicts first and maternal caregivers second. Future research would be welcome to garner just how frequent these images are in the genre, but in the first instance it is worth noting that *Beverly Hills 90210* introduced us to an alcoholic and drug addicted former fashion model who routinely ignored, berated, and abused her daughters. *Popular* (1999-2001) presented viewers with two alcoholic, abusive, and emotionally unavailable mothers. In the *O.C.* a teenage boy had the painful experience of living with an alcoholic mother and

was eventually kicked out of his family home. Though adopted into another home, his nightmare was relived as he watched his adoptive mother take to alcohol as well. Likewise, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001-) depicts a young woman having to create a life with her alcoholic mother while her father is fighting in Iraq. *Veronica Mars* (2004-7) presented a teen investigator selflessly sacrificing her college tuition to put her mother into an alcohol rehabilitation clinic, only to discover that the woman is clandestinely drinking and stealing from her own family. In *Beyond the Break* (2006-09) a young girl is seen running away from home to escape from her alcoholic mother, while *Hellcats* (2010) focused much of its drama on the turbulent relationship between a young pre-law student and her unreliable alcoholic mother. Likewise, *90210* (2008-) presents a broad range of toxic and intoxicated mother figures including a glamorous “yummy mummy” who is more interested in her appearance than her daughter’s well-being, a hippy who believes in free love and legalised drugs and who sleeps with her daughter’s teacher, classmate, and boyfriend, a secret drug abuser-in-denial and emotionally unavailable Hollywood mother, a bipolar drug addict and abusive alcoholic, and a young heiress who refuses to compromise her life for her new baby.

One might suggest that these representations of motherhood belong firmly within the tradition of teen television as one way in which we can enjoy the trials and tribulations of the youth

experience without the teen characters or adolescent audience being impeded by a controlling voice of authority or a civilising figure of maturity. However, this is less about a lack of parental figures or guardians of authority and has more to do with an absence of mothers—potentially problematic for a teen audience during their formative years as these narratives of maternal abandonment and indifference might be seen to signal accepted and expected norms of mothering. Several of the aforementioned programmes make it clear that fathers and male guardians are to be respected because they alone “provide structure, guidance and authority” for those teens under their care (Banks 19). Teen drama goes to great lengths to debunk the ‘good’ mother myth, demonstrating instead that maternal feelings and motherly instincts are not natural, fixed, or innate for all women. As such, one might suggest that the genre is picking up on early second wave feminist writing which attempted to denaturalize motherhood and theorise the maternal without recourse to those “natural or biological explanations” that inform the ‘good’ mother myth (Miller 56). That said, the fact that we experience the teen drama from the adolescent rather than the adult viewpoint means that the mothers in question tend to be demonized as toxic figures of failed maternal care rather than feminist icons challenging idealized images of intensive motherwork.

Dramedy: single, sexual and sisterly motherhood

The dramedy, like the teen drama, is a relatively new television genre that has received much critical and commercial success since its emergence in the late 1980s. Although the classification is relatively broad, recent examples of the genre tend to focus on a number of alternative family codes, conventions, and complications. Indeed, although one might suggest that the mother figure is not herself the focus of the genre in question, many of these programmes seem committed to the presentation of the family unit in general and the alternative, non-nuclear, and non-patriarchal family unit in particular, be it stepfamilies, single parenting, surrogate parenting, or homosexual partnerships. *Moonlighting* (1985-9) presented pregnancy and miscarriage, *Northern Exposure* (1990-5) depicted a phantom pregnancy, and the underlying narrative of *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) seemed to grow out of the central protagonists concern over her biological clock and the subsequent discovery of her 10-year-old daughter. *Six Feet Under* (2001-05) depicted accidental pregnancy, abortion, and the death of a young mother, *Weeds* (2005-) focuses on a suburban widow resorting to desperate means to support her children, while the *Gilmore Girls* (2000-07) was dedicated to the relationship between a teenage mother and her daughter. *Parenthood* (2010-) revolves around the trials and tribulations of one extended family, focusing on the pain of divorce and the financial, social,

and educational struggles surrounding single motherhood while *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) presented a number of fascinating representations of ‘bad’ motherhood and ‘poor’ maternal care, through a myriad of medicated, murderous, “stepford,” and single mothers. In short, the dramedy appears keen to debunk both the traditional nuclear family and the romanticized ‘good’ mother.

We are told that there are still very few representations of single mothers on the small screen, be it due to a right wing political agenda (Skipper 82) or the lack of necessary escapism for the audience (Benfer), and yet the dramedy routinely depicts this particular maternal figure, in part because of the genre’s interest in contemporary social issues. Angharad Valdivia informs us that on the rare occasion when a single mother is presented in contemporary popular culture, she tends to conform to negative discourses that suggest that she is failing her children and falling short of parenting ideals (272). Much of this negative discourse is associated with the woman’s desirability and sexual availability. It is commonly understood that those representations of motherhood that are the most sexual and alluring are also the same representations that are the most dysfunctional (Kenner 56). Abby Arnold makes this point somewhat bluntly when she tells us that “conventional wisdom dictates that a mother who is truly sexy must be [...] a slut and [...] a bad mother” (3).

Although characters such as Susan Mayer/Teri Hatcher from *Desperate Housewives* are svelte, fashionable and fun, the fact that they are both incredibly glamorous and inconceivably clumsy goes some way towards taming the potential power of the sexual single mother. The fact that Susan “can barely walk across the street without falling over” (Knowles) may appear endearing to some, but it speaks to the infantilisation or more general incompetence of the sexual figure. In short, this comedic device is merely a “trait thrown in to tone down the sexuality of a television mom” (Kenner 54). Likewise, cultural commentators seek to question the appropriateness of a mother who cannot pay her own bills, arrange custody conflicts, or orchestrate romantic unions without the help of her teenage daughter. Alice Hart-Davis makes this point when she tells us that the “blurring of generations can be the social equivalent of a car crash” because, although these mothers may suit their daughters’ youthful attire and want to be seen as young, fashionable, and on trend, they are failing to “respect [the] healthy boundaries” that parenting demands. Hart-Davis concludes by telling us that “[i]f your child likes you at the end of the parenting process, great. But that’s best if it comes about by being a good role model for them to look up to, rather than being too pally.” From this perspective then, Susan may be a desirable and desiring single woman, but she cannot be a desiring, desirable, and appropriate single mother, because being presented in such a way detracts from the selfless nature of the ‘good’

mother who is said to sacrifice her own desires for those of her children.

Parenting documentaries and reality television: maternal shame, scandal and humiliation

While the dramedy presents fictional women as selfish, sexual, and scarce mothers, a growing number of documentaries, docu-dramas, reality shows, and celebrity formats seek to expose a range of salacious and scandalous images of real, lived motherhood practices. Such programming offers some of the most conservative distinctions between the ideology of intensive motherhood and real examples of ineffectual mothers. By purporting to highlight the aberrant, the genre invites its viewers, and asks mothers, daughters, and grandmothers in the audience, to judge these women and find their maternal practices wanting.

Celebrity reality shows that feature the new breed of accessible, available, and candid celebrity such as Kerry Katona's *The Next Chapter* (2010-), Katie Price's *Katie* (formerly known as *What Katie Did Next*) (2009-), and Alicia Douvall's *Glamour Models, Mum and Me* (2010) present mothers who struggle to maintain the mask of perfect motherhood, or rather, who are unwilling to adhere to the rules of intensive mothering. Katona, Price, and Douvall are examples of recognisable women who are currently challenging these maternal myths by letting audiences view their day-to-day

mundane, and otherwise, motherwork practices on the small screen. These programmes do not shy away from showing these women as sexual, selfish, and unfulfilled by their maternal role, and as such, we are asked to view these texts as a more believable, albeit still privileged, example of contemporary motherhood. The fact that these women appear happy to demonstrate their motherwork on camera makes us question whether they are either unable to uphold the mask of perfect motherhood, or uninterested. Either way, celebrity reality television can be seen to provide one more challenge to the 'good' mother myth that dominates the wider media environment.

In the broader televisual landscape, reality programming continues to exploit the image of the struggling mother. *Help Me Love my Baby* (2007) focused on the traumatic journey of a maternal mother who only bonded with one of her twin girls, while *Cotton Wool Kids* (2008) allowed us to condemn one particularly anxious mother for wanting to have a chip implanted in her daughter for the purposes of safety, security, and surveillance. *The World's Oldest Mums* (2009) focused on a number of women who had chosen to use fertility technologies in order to have babies long after the menopause, *Octomom: Me and My 14 Kids* (2009) detailed the daily motherwork of Nadya Suleman, the woman who gave birth to the world's only surviving octuplets, leaving audiences to question the appropriateness of an unemployed single mother who uses artificial

insemination to produce her children and uses media contracts to provide for them. The programme thus called attention to those who used motherhood as an excuse for ‘scrounging,’ living off charity, or the largesse of the state. Such practices are generally associated with mothers from low-income groups. This genre tends to deal with real social issues, like the case of gender preferences. *8 Boys and Wanting a Girl* (2010), examined the psychological condition of “gender disappointment,” whereby a mother who has a number of sons is desperate to have a daughter. Viewers are left to question the appropriateness of those women who are unhappy with or unfulfilled by their existing children. These preferences have serious cultural undertones, therefore the programmes help viewers confront and challenge the cultural practices which value one particular gender over the other. *Four Sons versus Four Daughters* (2010) questioned the gendered mothering taking place in two family homes, whilst also condemning what they set up as hypothetical maternal practices. Even from their titles, the regulatory mission of these programmes is evident. *Misbehaving Mums to Be* (2011) focused on a number of mothers whose pregnancy practices do not adhere to the ‘good’ mother myth, while *Fast Food Baby* (2011) was committed to showing the ways in which ‘bad’ mothers failed to provide the correct nutritional food for their children, and witnessed their efforts to shift their inappropriate eating habits and maternal practices.

Documentary representations of

motherhood are at best conservative and at worst critical of real mothers and the lived maternal role. And while parenting documentaries depict biological and other mothers as problematic and pathological, their reality televisual cousins routinely depict mothers struggling with the maternal role, emphatic on the attainability of the ideal. Programmes such as *Supernanny* (2004-) *Nanny 911* (2004-) and *Extreme Parental Guidance* (2010-) routinely emphasise the mother as the primary caregiver in the nuclear family, even if she works outside of the domestic space. Mothers are portrayed as the domestic manager, in charge of meal times, bath routines, bed-time stories, school runs, grocery shopping, household chores, and general children’s entertainment planning and activities. In short, mothers are portrayed as the primary parent even when the contribution of fathers is acknowledged. As such, mothers are also depicted as being responsible for existing behavioral problems. Indeed, several of the infants, toddlers, and older children who swear at, kick, punch, and spit at their mothers tend to act very differently when their fathers are present in the home. Indeed, it is often clear that the “men in the families are peripheral to these titanic struggles, as the mothers are ultimately left with the burden of raising the children” (Tally 21).

Parenting documentaries and reality programming hold up the ideology of intensive mothering as the only model of motherhood to aspire to. That said, rather than critique or condemn these programmes for exposing shocking

maternal practices or for exploiting fragile mothers, these shows might be understood as a powerful, necessary, and real voice for negotiating the constraints involved in contemporary motherhood practices. Indeed, if one considers that contemporary mothers are said to bring inaccurate or ill-informed, disabling, and delusional expectations to motherhood and the maternal role (Maushart, *Mask of Motherhood* xviii), one might suggest that reality television shows on parenting which feature strained and struggling mothers serve to bridge the gap between expectations and lived experiences.

Conclusion

Although television is an entertainment driven medium that lends itself to extreme representations for the sake of audience escapism, the sheer scope of struggling maternal figures on the small screen cannot, and indeed should not, be dismissed in the name of amusement or distraction. I would argue that the fact that the domestic medium is understood as mere entertainment and the fact that the genres outlined here address in the main to the woman in the audience means that these depictions must be taken all the more seriously for the ways in which they speak to, inform, or frustrate the viewing public. In short, representations of motherhood have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations, and as such, it is crucial that we examine those representations of motherhood and motherwork that dominate the contemporary media landscape.

Although little research exists to account for the myriad representations of motherhood, motherwork, and maternal roles seen in contemporary television, this article has begun to explore the ways in which motherhood is being constructed, circulated, and interrogated in both fictional and factual programming, considering the ways in which such representations can be understood in relation to the ideology of intensive mothering and the 'good' mother myth that dominates the contemporary period.

The soap opera presents a self-serving rather than serene image of motherhood; the situation comedy highlights the pleasures and frustrations of motherwork; the teen drama introduces a number of toxic and intoxicated maternal figures; the dramedy text portrays the trials and tribulations of the single mother, while reality television positions mothers as fragile, failing, and ineffectual. Although each genre has its own repertoire of elements, thematic codes, and narrative conventions, they appear to form a televisual consensus in their representations of 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable' mothering.

Many of these televisual mothers are devoted to their children. They consider their maternal role to be a privilege and want to create happy and harmonious families. This aspiration echoes the desire to be 'good,' evidence that the 'good' mother myth continues to persist. However, the fact remains that many of the women are single, sexual, and scared, and even those within otherwise

stable familial relations still struggle to maintain authority in the home, finding little satisfaction in the routines of domestic life. This demonstrates their removal from the ideology of intensive motherhood. However, rather than condemn or critique such seemingly problematic figures for their inability to adhere to idealised maternal ideals, these expectant, new, and existing mothers should be applauded for debunking the improbable and unobtainable 'good' mother myth in favour of 'good enough' and achievable maternal practices.

Image Notes

Figs 1 and 2 Images from the TV show *Outnumbered*. In: Drew-Honey, Tyger. "What I love about being in *Outnumbered*." *bbc.co.uk TV Blog*. 8 April 2010. Web. 12 Nov. 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/posts/what-i-love-about-being-in-outnumbered>

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Bio

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MOTHERHOOD AND THE MEDIA UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

THE BACKLASH AGAINST FEMINISM AND THE MOMMY WARS

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Despite the passing of sexual discrimination legislation, the difficulty of combining work and motherhood repeatedly hits the headlines. This paper looks at the American media phenomenon known as the 'mommy wars' and asks if British mothers can expect to face the same issues and attitudes as their American sisters.

Malgré les législations contre la discrimination des sexes qui s'accumulent, la difficulté d'harmoniser maternité et occupations professionnelles n'en occupe pas moins le haut du pavé et continue de faire actualité. Cet article examine le phénomène médiatique américain connu sous le nom de « *mommy wars* » et s'interroge sur la distinction entre les défis de la maternité en Angleterre et aux États-Unis.

Surveying the acres of newsprint dedicated to the subject of mothers and mothering, it would seem, on the surface at least, that childrearing remains the most important job a woman can do. For example, women are warned that if they work post-childbirth they not only risk damaging their child's prospects (Harris; Doughty), but that their off-spring are six times more likely to be overweight (Borland); they are cautioned not to delay starting a family because of declining fertility (Borland) but, on the other hand, warned of the dire consequences of teenage pregnancy (Phillips). The media storm over Republican Party candidate Rick Santorum's views on single mothers (Murphy & Kroll) coupled with accusations that Britain's 2011 summer City riots were fuelled by the failure of single mothers to raise their children properly (Gold) are further proof of how motherhood outside of marriage is viewed negatively by many. Indeed, after studying a cross section of headlines relating to motherhood from the past decade, it should be no surprise to discover that both working and stay-at-home mothers are prone to depression (Rochman; CTV), a condition no doubt exacerbated by the plethora of media stories about how they should, or should not, be raising their children. It is little wonder then that women find themselves confused and conflicted over the demands of motherhood and how that impacts upon their relationship with their sense of self.

What follows is an investigation into whether the agenda behind these media reports is less about what is best for mothers and children and more about the needs of society. I will first provide a very brief history of the configuration of the post industrial family, paying particular attention to the role of the mother: how she evolved into being the main caregiver of the family and how both the British and American media have, in turn, monitored, commented on, and policed that role. I will then turn to the more recent phenomenon known as the "mommy wars," a discourse originating in the American media that pitched stay-at-home mothers against working ones in an alleged battle between two opposing styles of mothering. This media onslaught, I shall argue, is the latest incarnation of the backlash against feminism which, as theorised by journalist Susan Faludi, comes to the fore whenever women are perceived as making too many inroads into supposed "male domains." Faludi argues that this reaction, or "backlash" can be traced back to "the rise of restrictive property laws and penalties for unwed and childless women of ancient Rome, the heresy judgements against female disciples of the early Christian Church, or the mass witch burnings of medieval Europe" (*Backlash* 67). While we can be grateful that the burning of women has long been outlawed in both North America and Europe, I shall argue that this round of media reporting is repeatedly used to reanimate (and in some cases consolidate) old misogynist beliefs about women's perceived "place" in

the home. In addition, pitting woman against woman in a fictional battle of mothering choices obscures the real issues affecting women in the 21st century, such as the lack of maternity leave, inadequate childcare provision, and equal pay and employment rights.

A brief history of the family in the media

The way parenting has been reported in the media has had a long and turbulent history with notions of the “ideal” family changing from one era to the next. We are familiar with the concept of the “traditional” family,—a stay-at-home mother supported by a male breadwinner—but where does this notion of the family actually come from? And does this familial grouping even exist except in the hearts and minds of advertisers, politicians, and the media? In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz writes about the concept of “traditional parenting,” in which the father, a strict patriarch, commanded total obedience from both his wife and children (10). This was in the pre-industrial era when children were the responsibility of both parents, their care woven into a family and work life that revolved around the home. Journalist and writer Judith Warner describes how the family underwent a major revolution during the late-eighteenth century when industrialisation dictated that men worked outside the home and new ideals of mother “as sacred teacher and moral guide came to American shores ... from England” (134). This new configuration soon brought anxieties about the changing

nature of family life. It was at this time that the gendered division of labour gave birth to the male “breadwinner” role (“a masculine identity unheard of in the colonial days” [Coontz 10]) and the “Motherhood Religion,” which was conceived through “sermons and parenting books that made their way from England to American shores” (Warner 135). This new form of the family meant that fathers played very little part in their offspring’s upbringing, and “maternal guidance supplanted the patriarchal authoritarianism of the past” (Coontz 11).

It was this model of family life that spawned the Victorian cult of motherhood and, according to Warner, “compensated nicely for the fact that, in truth, middle-class married women simply didn’t have much else to do anymore” (135). But it was a model of domesticity that depended on legions of working-class women hired to service those households. According to Coontz, “Between 1800 and 1850, the proportion of servants to white households doubled, to about one in nine. Some servants were poverty-stricken mothers who had to board or bind out their own children” (11). The point is that the “Angel in the House” selflessly caring for her children has, since the nineteenth century, been the preserve of a privileged few reliant on numerous working mothers paid to service the households of the more fortunate classes.¹ In addition, there was an increase in child labour with children forced to work to supplement the family income, leading to calls for

a retreat from the “harnessed” family model (in which a number of families were “harnessed” together in household production) to the “‘true American’ family—a restricted, exclusive nuclear unit in which women and children were divorced from the world of work” (Coontz 13). It was not long, however, before social reformers became increasingly concerned about the effect of new family configurations as middle-class families began to withdraw their children from the working world, and “observers began to worry that children were becoming *too* sheltered” (Coontz 12; emphasis in original).

Family life in the 1920s and 1930s came under scrutiny yet again, argues Coontz, as “social theorists noted the independence and isolation of the nuclear family with renewed anxiety” (13). The Boy Scout movement was purportedly formed in the 1920s with the explicit aim “to staunch the feminization of the American male by removing young men from the too-powerful female orbit” with Chief Scout Ernest Thompson Seton fearing that “boys were degenerating into ‘a lot of flat-chested cigarette-smokers, with shaky nerves and doubtful vitality’” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 84). The Chicago School of Sociology was amongst those that believed that the traditional family had been weakened by both urbanisation and immigration. While they may have welcomed the way companionate marriage ensured an increased democracy between the genders, “they worried about the rootlessness of nuclear families and

the breakdown of older solidarities” (Coontz 13). By the time of the Great Depression and fuelled by the economic crisis, families were again forced to share living arrangements, and generations once again depended upon each other in a way lost to pre-Industrial times. One newspaper even opined that “[m]any a family that has lost its car has found its soul” (qtd. in Coontz 14). However, this rose-tinted nostalgia for a family bound together obviously hid the terrible truth of a life lived in grinding poverty as the depression took hold. Numerous accounts detail how family life all but broke down as “[m]en withdrew from family life or turned violent; women exhausted themselves trying to ‘take up the slack’ both financially and emotionally, or they belittled their husbands as failures; and children gave up their dreams of education to work at dead-end jobs” (qtd. in Coontz 14).

The dawn of the 1940s saw the popularity of psychoanalysts like Helene Deutsch who, building on the work of Sigmund Freud, theorised that good motherhood depended upon women rejecting “masculine wishes” and accepting their passive “feminine” role (Warner 73). For psychoanalysts, this notion of ideal or “complete motherliness” was crucial if children were not to be burdened by pathologies in their future lives. It was, however, a fine balancing act and dependent upon women not embracing mother love too completely—a view compounded by Philip Wylie’s now famous 1942 book, *Generation of Vipers*, in which he attacked America’s mothers for raising

a nation of sons “unmanned” by excess maternal affection (194-217).

World War II provided an opportunity to study the results of this particular brand of “smother love” thanks to testing performed by Army psychologists, most notably the Selective Service Administration which reported that “[n]early one-fifth of all the men called up to serve in the war were either rejected or unable to complete their service for ‘neuropsychiatric reasons’” (Warner 73). Of course the reason for this was firmly placed at the feet of mothers who were blamed for over-protecting their sons, at least so thought Edward A Strecker, consultant to the surgeon general of the Army and Navy, and an adviser to the secretary of war (Warner 73). Strecker added his voice to those of Thompson Seton and Wylie and based on his war-time experiences, argued that the nation’s men had suffered negatively from the behaviour of women “whose maternal behaviour is motivated by the seeking of emotional recompense for the buffers which life has dealt her own ego.” A major fault of “mom,” he added, was that she had failed “in the elementary mother function of weaning her offspring emotionally as well as physically” (qtd. in Warner 74).

It was not long before magazine articles started to echo these sentiments, and in 1945 *Ladies’ Home Journal* published an article asking: “Are American Moms a Menace?” Author Amram Sheinfeld linked national security to the way in which mothers raised their

children, arguing that: “mom is often a dangerous influence on her sons and a threat to our national existence” (qtd. in Warner 74). For Sheinfeld one way to counter the problem of neurotic mothers raising neurotic sons was for them to breastfeed “only as long as is absolutely necessary” (qtd. in Warner 74). But this was too late for many, as the author noted that Adolf Hitler was the “only son and spoiled darling of his not-too-bright mother” (qtd. in Warner 74). This sentiment was shared by authors Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F Farnham, who issued the following warning when studying despots like Hitler and Mussolini:

Biographers will, one day, we hope come to understand that their true subject is hardly the man (or woman) they have chosen to scrutinize ... but the mother or her substitute. Men, standing before the bar of historical judgment, might often well begin their defense with the words: “I had a mother ...” (qtd. in Warner 74).

The way mothers were increasingly blamed for the ills of society and negatively represented in magazine and newspapers famously came under the scrutiny of Betty Friedan in her now seminal text *The Feminine Mystique*. Arguing that there was a major change in the way women were represented between the 1940s and the 1950s, Friedan noted that the “New Women” of magazine stories published in the 1940s “were almost never housewives; in fact, the stories usually ended before they had children,” adding that these were the

days before the term “career woman” became a dirty word in America” (35). Friedan surveyed publications such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* commencing in 1949 and notes that after the end of the war there was an increase in titles like: “Have Babies While You’re Young,” “Are You Training Your Daughter to be a Wife?,” “Careers at Home,” “Should I Stop Work When We Marry?,” and “The Business of Running a Home” (38). She argues that by the time the new decade dawned in 1950, there was a marked change in the way women were represented in magazines with “only one out of three heroines” being “a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife” (39). A decade later, in 1959, and Friedan describes how she scoured “three major women’s magazines ... without finding a single heroine who had a career, a commitment to any work, art, profession, or mission in the world, other than “Occupation: housewife.” Only one in a hundred heroines had a job; even the young unmarried heroines no longer worked except at snaring a husband (39).

By the end of the decade Friedan argues that the happy heroine had disappeared from print altogether and was no longer represented as “a separate self and the subject of her own story,” but only as one half of a married couple (41). It was as if, driven from the workplace and having no independent narrative, women could only exist in the pages of publications like *McCalls*, living life

through and for their husbands and, more importantly, their children.

As the career woman was slowly subsumed under her identity as wife and mother, the notion of “togetherness,” coined by the publishers of *McCalls* in the mid-1950s, became the watchword for family life. As Friedan notes, this was “a movement of spiritual significance [used] by advertisers, ministers, newspaper editors,” (41) and it trod a fine line between marital bliss and co-dependence:

Why, it was asked, should men with the capacities of statesmen, anthropologists, physicists, poets, have to wash dishes and diaper babies on weekday evenings or Saturday mornings when they might use those extra hours to fulfill larger commitments to their society? (Friedan 42)

Of course, no such questions were raised when it came to the squandering of women’s considerable skills. In spite of the fact that only 10 years earlier women had been deemed capable of holding down jobs and enjoying fulfilling careers, by the end of the 1950s this was considered outside of their realm, in magazine land at least.

Forced to vacate the jobs that they had filled during the war and having childcare support withdrawn, in addition to being inundated with magazine articles espousing the ideals of “happy housewife heroines,” it is easy to see how women began to

compare themselves unfavourably to the domestic goddesses lauded by the popular press. If there is something familiar about the era of *The Feminine Mystique* it is because it was during this time that the image of the “traditional family” was created. According to Coontz, the idealised family that was conceived in the 1950s was formed from two opposing and, in many ways, mutually exclusive family ideals: the first (from the mid-19th century) favoured the strong mother-child bond, and the second (from the 1920s) focused “on an eroticized couple relationship, demanding that mothers curb emotional ‘overinvestment’ in their children” (9). Friedan admits that she *is* one of those female journalists that helped create this image of womanhood “designed to sell washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face-creams, hair tints” (63-4). And it should come as no surprise to learn that “the hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it” (Coontz 9).

Factor a job and childcare issues into this mix and it soon becomes clear that this romanticised ideal, so often used as an aspirational benchmark for modern mothers, was doomed to failure. It is a fact that, in the light of recent media reports, we would do well not to forget.

And then the backlash

And yet, looking back to this post World War II period, Faludi contends that while Friedan may have written about women being confined to the home, suffering from a “problem that has no name,” this bears little relation to the reality of women’s lives (*Backlash* 74), despite what books like *The Feminine Mystique* would have us believe. “While 3.25 million women were pushed or persuaded out of industrial jobs in the first year after the end of the Second World War,” argues Faludi, “2.75 million women were entering the work force at the same time” (*Backlash* 74). However, compared to the war years, women were entering more menial jobs than ever before and public opinion regarding their working outside the home had changed. Faludi contends the following:

The culture derided them; employers discriminated against them; government promoted new employment policies that discriminated against women; and eventually women themselves internalized the message that, if they must work, they should stick to typing. ... The fifties backlash, in short, didn’t transform women into full-time “happy housewives”, it just demoted them to poorly paid secretaries. (*Backlash* 75)

In fact by 1947 women had managed to recoup the number of jobs lost to them in the immediate post-war years, with more women employed “by 1952 ... than at the height of the war” (Faludi,

Backlash 75). According to media historians Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, by “1955, there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation’s previous history, and an increasing number of these were women with young children” (34). It is not difficult to see why Faludi asserts that it is “precisely women’s unrelenting influx into the job market, not a retreat to the home, that provoked and sustained the anti-feminist uproar” (*Backlash* 75). This is a claim borne out by the fact that, according to Judith Warner, “at the height of the period [which] we tend to think of as the at-home-mom Feminine Mystique years, one third of the workforce was female. About two-thirds of those working women were married, and more than half of those married women had children of preschool or school age” (137). By 1960 “40 percent of women were in the work force ... almost half were mothers of school-age children ... [and] the figures were even higher for African American women” (Douglas and Michaels 34-5). Statistics like these add weight to backlash arguments, particularly when read against stories in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Look* magazine complaining that women were grabbing “control of the stock market ... and ... advancing on ‘authority-wielding executive jobs’” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 85) presumably at the same time as they languished in their homes suffering from that “problem with no name.”

Looking at the 1980s backlash reporting it is clear that it presages the recent

round of mommy wars, even if the battle did not commence fully until the past decade. Bearing in mind the logic behind backlash reporting, it should not be surprising that in December 1980 *The New York Times* ran the headline, “Many Young Women Now Say They’d Pick Family Over Career,” particularly when employment figures show that by “1984, 59 percent of married mothers worked ...[and] 46.8 percent of mothers with a child under one worked. Black married mothers were even more likely to be in the labor force than their white counterparts” (Douglas and Michaels 56). With nothing other than the opinion of one woman, Mary Anne Citrino, a Senior at Princeton, who told *The New York Times* that “when she marries and has her children ... she plans to quit whatever job she has for eight years to become a full-time mother” (Kleiman 1), the article asserted the following:

She is not alone. At a time when young women have more job opportunities and chances for advancement than ever, many of them now in college appear to be challenging the values of their predecessors. They are questioning whether a career is more important than having children and caring for them personally. (Kleiman 1)

The report instigated a few similar stories, but this reportage died down until midway through the 1980s when another news report surfaced that seemed to confirm the sentiments of the *New York Times* missive. Promulgated

by former advertising executive Faith Popcorn, the idea that women were abandoning careers post-childbirth and choosing “nesting” or “cocooning” over working outside the home gained popularity. Based on little evidence, apart from the “improving sales of ‘mom foods’, the popularity of ‘big comfortable chairs’, the ratings of the *Cosby* show, and one statistic” that “a third of all the female MBA [Master of Business Administration]s of 197[6]” had already returned home (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 109), and Popcorn’s prediction that women were abandoning the office quite quickly became reported as the latest trend.

Familiar as we are with trend reporting it is worth re-re-visiting the notion as it goes hand-in-hand with the way the mommy wars have been written about in both the British and American press. Trend journalism “attains authority not through actual reporting but through the power of repetition. Said enough times, anything can be made to seem true” (Faludi, *Backlash* 104). For example, Popcorn’s MBA figure was taken from a 1986 *Fortune* cover story called “Why Women Managers are Bailing Out,” a story based on the “cocktail chatter” of a couple of female graduates who were overheard talking about their intention to stay home and look after their babies. The story eventually went to print claiming that “After ten years, significantly more women than men dropped off the management track” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 111). *Fortune*’s senior reporter Alex Taylor III neglected to report, however, that 10 years

after graduation “virtually the same proportion of women and men were still working for [the same] employers” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 110-111) and that even if 30 per cent of 1,039 women from the Class of ‘76 had dropped off the management track, so had 21 per cent of the men. Taylor’s “significantly more women” boiled down to very few, and given that women still bear most of the responsibility for childcare, the big news surely should be that the employment gap was so small.

Fastforward to 2001 and both American and British parents were horrified by newspaper reports of new US research, endorsed by a UK professor, arguing that even if parents chose very high quality childcare, it would be detrimental to children’s development (Summerskill and Helmore). The study involved only 1,300 children, but it caused enough of a furore in both British and American newspapers for one tabloid to proclaim that the “Mommy Wars” had broken out on both sides of the Atlantic. Two years later and, according to Faludi, the shockwaves of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre meant that America had become enfolded in an “era of neofifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood” (*The Terror Dream* 4); a perfect landscape in which to re-animate the thorny old issue of whether women should stay at home and look after their children or continue to work in high-pressure careers. *The New York Times*, with a history of this kind of reporting, was quick to publish “The

Opt-Out Revolution,” which spoke of the pressures felt by mothers in the 21st century and like the women interviewed for their 1980 article, featured a select group of well educated women (Belkin). Each had received first degrees from Princeton and some had gone on to Columbia and Harvard and yet, like the women in the article 23 years previously, once children came along all of these women had decided to “opt-out” of high-flying careers in order to stay home. Journalist Linda Belkin may assert that this is not how it should have been and that the gains of second wave feminism should have meant that women become equal partners in law firms, heads of business, and deans and Vice-Chancellors of Universities, but on the evidence of the women interviewed for this article, once they had reached a certain point in their career, no matter how long they had left it to have children and how good their careers had been, women seemed to stall.

There was an overwhelming response to the story. So many “letters to the editor” were received that for the first time in its history, the paper ran the responses over a number of weeks.² Could it really be true that another generation of women were rejecting the workplace as if it was a real option? Even if third-wave feminism told us that equality and “girl power” was all about choice, surely there needs to be some kind of an acknowledgement that this is a choice that is historically born out of privilege and not one that many twenty-first century families can actually afford to choose, especially as

the economy falters and more and more mothers must work. In keeping with the tenets of trend journalism, the “trend” that Belkin identified in her article was based on the comments of only eight Ivy League women, and despite her statistics about how many women graduated in 2003 (the numbers are unsurprisingly up on 40 years ago), and even though she takes care to outline work done by social scientists on “how the workplace has failed women,” the relentless thrust of the article focuses on how women are “choosing” to stay home after childbirth and “opting out” of the workplace.

At least, this is what we are led to believe. Going back to the issues underlying trend journalism, it should be noted that the problem not only lies in the “spin” given to statistical evidence but the way, Faludi argues, that “[a] trend declared in one publication sets off a chain reaction, as the rest of the media scramble to get the story too. The lightning speed at which these messages spread has less to do with the accuracy of the trend than with journalists’ propensity to repeat one another” (*Backlash* 104).

It is fairly safe to say that the idea of professional mothers “opting out” of the workplace was stoked by the tone of the first few paragraphs of the “Opt-Out Revolution.” Towards the end of the article Belkin goes into detail about the complexity of women’s choices, how they are not set in stone, and how mothers most often have to perform a juggling act between home and work-life.

In fact, rather than focusing on the differences between stay-at-home mothers and working ones, the article clearly articulates the real problem underlying women's choices as to whether they would prefer to stay-at-home or work post childbirth—the lack of available maternity benefits and affordable childcare. It was not long before the American media jumped on the “opt-out” bandwagon and ran a great number of stories that not only supported Belkin's claims, but also emphasized the alleged antagonisms between stay-at-home and working mothers. September 2005 and *The New York Times* added fuel to the fire with another story claiming that women at elite colleges were rejecting careers and choosing stay-at-home motherhood. The media focus on mothers rejecting good careers and embracing stay-at-home motherhood persisted and transmogrified into yet more stories about a full-out war between stay-at-home mothers and working ones.

In March 2010 it appeared as if the British media was set to go down the same route as *The Observer's* Lucy Cavendish who, writing from the viewpoint of a “self-confessed ‘slack mother,’” reported “from the frontline on why motherhood has become such a hot topic.” Cavendish argued that past mothering choices had been simpler. “Upper-class mothers farmed their children out. Working-class mothers took them in.” There was no preoccupation with the health or

happiness of children as they were “seen and not heard” and only since the Second World War had we become so obsessed with our children's health and happiness that we hold mothers to account for their offspring's psychological well-being. Indeed, for Cavendish, mothering has become “one of the most contentious issues around.” She illustrates this as follows:

Working mothers can't stand stay-at-home mothers; older ones think their younger versions are too overindulgent. Those who choose not to have children are militant about those who end up having four or more. Hothousing mothers with their endless Kumon maths classes look down on the more laid-back ones who think children should do what they want, when they want.

As a result, according to Cavendish “there's a war out there.” This is exacerbated by the fact that “working mothers ... spend most of their lives in a state of miserable guilt” looked down upon by a society that continues to laud “traditional” family groupings in which the mother stays at home and the father is the breadwinner.

Newspaper reports were beginning to sound depressingly familiar. For every story informing us that “[c]hildren of working mothers tend to have a less healthy lifestyle” (Hope), there is one reassuring us that “mothers can go back to work months after the birth of their child without the baby's wellbeing suffering as a result” (McVeigh and

Asthana). And the manner in which the press spins these reports has an increasingly negative effect on mothers who, according to Cavendish, use them to justify their own mothering choices, adding fuel to the fire of the media's mommy wars. According to family therapist, Suzanne Fleetwood: "There is a competitive streak in this generation of middle-class parents ... many women have given up highly paid jobs to look after their children, and so their child becomes their job" (qtd. in Cavendish). One of the problems with this kind of highly competitive mothering—in today's culture where mothers are held to account for their children's psychological happiness—is that "if the mother is deemed as doing a 'good job', then all of her frustration at giving up the power she held . . . is worth it. If, however, her child turns out to be not very bright . . . then her fragile confidence will be shattered" (qtd. in Cavendish).

The not-so-hidden Agenda

This may well be true but it does not explain how newspaper headlines about choices made by women become translated into an outright rejection of feminism and a war between mothers. This issue is made clear in Miriam Peskowitz's 2005 publication *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* in which she argues that the mommy wars have turned motherhood into an identity issue and that this focus on "choice" "diminish[es] the parent problem by expressing it in the trivial terms of

catfights" (6). No one even questions the gender bias that is reinforced in every news report interrogating the effect working mothers have on their children while disregarding the role fathers may play. For Peskowitz, there is something deplorable at the core of the media's mommy wars as she argues that "[f]ar from helping us understand the social and political stakes of motherhood, the media's Mommy Wars ... transform[ed] parenting into a style war" (6). Moreover, it is a style war that has obscured the real issues facing working mothers—like those of the gender pay gap, the prohibitive cost of reliable childcare, and the continued reliance on women to not only look after the children, but to provide the majority of domestic support as well. A statistic evidenced by a 2002 study by Phyllis Moen, director of the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, puts the experiences of families into a wider context. Out of 1,000 married middle-class families surveyed, 40 percent had fallen back into the "neo-traditional" working pattern of mothers either staying at home with their children or working part-time and fathers taking the role of breadwinner. However, this is not because women necessarily wanted to leave their jobs once their children came along, but because, "Parents are at odds with the workplace, and mothers are bearing the brunt of this mismatch" (Peskowitz 70). In fact, as Peskowitz argues, "today's workplace makes it increasingly

difficult for two people who are really committed to their jobs to also raise a family” (71).

The *Observer*’s political editor, Gaby Hinsliff, amply demonstrates this point. Hinsliff gave up her highly pressurised role as a journalist after giving birth to her first child. This was less about a choice than it was about the impossibility of combining two equally demanding roles. Hinsliff’s account is illuminating, as she writes: “Surrender steals up on the working mother like hypothermia takes a stranded climber: the chill deepens day by day, disorientation sets in, and before you know it you are gone.” Her article makes it clear that she did not feel that she had made a free choice to give up her full-time job, or one based on a need to spend 24-hours a day with her child, but a Hobson’s choice made within the constraints of a system that “pulls fathers into the ideal worker role and mothers into lives framed around caregiving.” It is a sentiment shared by the Distinguished Professor of Law, Joan C Williams, who argues that the persistent gendered wage gap exists because the structure of the workplace perpetuates the economic vulnerability of those caring for others, particularly mothers. In fact, for Williams, the organisation of the market place and family work leaves women with only two options:

They can perform as ideal workers without the flow of family work and other privileges male ideal workers enjoy. That is not equality. Or they

can take dead-end mommy-track jobs or “women’s work.” That is not equality either. A system that allows only these two alternatives is one that discriminates against women. (39)

We would do well to heed the words of Williams when she tells us that one of the main problems facing post-feminist women this century is “less about the obstacles faced by women than [...] about the obstacles faced by mothers” (qtd. in Belkin). It is a point well made and highlighted in every news report about smart, independent women “choosing” to walk away from their careers after childbirth.

The spin in the tale

The Observer’s 2001 article warned readers not to panic about stories regarding the possible detrimental effect of childcare on their children as authors Summerskill and Helmore argue that “the research trumpeted around the world might not be right”. The story behind the story was that figures are “spun” to accommodate the views of journalists, politicians, and cultural commentators alike. It seems that even academics are not above adding an inflection of their own as many of the co-researchers involved in this particular study quickly distanced themselves from Professor Jay Belsky, the Birkbeck academic who endorsed its findings. Summerskill and Helmore argue that this is “not the first time that millions of parents have been terrified by claims from apparently reputable

researchers,” but there is some surprise that this time it is a respected academic that has “hijacked” the story and interpreted the findings “in a way that will advance his anti-childcare agenda”. Leading statistician on the study, Margaret Burchinal, goes so far as to say that “Belsky interprets the findings very differently from us ... Our results do not actually support his conclusions” (qtd. in Summerskill and Helmore.). This is a statement that should have served as a warning in the ensuing decade of “mommy wars” inspired newspaper reports and more particularly in the light of the director of Daycare Trust, Stephen Burke’s, reassurance that “based on evidence in this country, ... good quality childcare has benefits for children, not just in terms of learning, but in terms of positive behaviour” (qtd in Summerskill and Helmore).

Back in April 2007 *The Washington Post* published an article revealing that “The ballyhooed Mommy Wars exist mainly in the minds—and the marketing machines— of the media and publishing industry, which have been churning out mom vs. mom news flashes since, believe it or not, the 1950s” (Graff). The story argues that despite claims to the contrary, “75 percent of mothers with school-age children are on the job. Most work because they have to. And most of their stay-at-home peers don’t hold it against them” (Graff). *The Washington Post* went even further, however. They exposed yet another agenda behind the mommy wars, revealing that

battleground terminology, which has nothing to do with mothering, was being deliberately used to manipulate readers into buying newspapers. According to E. J. Graff, “everyone knows that a war, any war, is good for the news business,” and for author Caryl Rivers, the additional turn of the screw is that it is well known that “middle and upper-middle class women are a demographic that responds well to anxiety”(qtd in Graff). With this in mind, it is easy to see how telling women “that working will damage their marriages, harm their health and ruin their children” encourages them to “buy your magazine, click on your Web site, blog about your episode and write endless letters to the editor” (qtd in Graffn. pag.).

The *Washington Post* may well argue that the mommy wars were just a cynical ploy to sell newspapers, magazines, and books, but the truth is that it also successfully distracted mothers from the real issues at stake. This fact had been exposed in 2001 by *The Observer* when Stephen Burke stated that research like that propagated by Belsky not only causes parents to worry about the choices they are making, but he also went on to explain the following:

[It] can be used to promote an agenda which contradicts the reality of women with young children playing a bigger and bigger role in the workplace. It would be far better to provide affordable childcare which enables them to do

their job and give their children a good start in life. This issue is about dealing with the reality of life today rather than some fictional world of yesteryear. (qtd in Summerskill and Helmore)

It is a point well made, particularly in the light of differences between British and American maternity benefits. In Britain women are eligible for up to 52 weeks maternity leave, and either eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay for a maximum of 39 weeks or Maternity Allowance of £136.78 per week (or 90% of the average weekly earnings – whichever is lower) for up to 39 weeks. We may well pay more for childcare than the rest of Europe but British mothers still do well compared to America, which has the worst maternity benefits in the Western world with no paid leave for mothers in any segment of the work force and only 12 weeks unpaid leave in companies with 50 or more employees. In fact, America's maternity allowance is so poor that it is in the company of only 3 other nations worldwide—Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland. And yet despite this, both American and British mothers work because, like the majority of women with children, they cannot afford not to. Even without the devastating effects of the recent global recession, as Coontz notes, “More than one-third of all two parent families today would be poor if both parents did not work” (260). While there are, of course, women who do voluntarily choose to stay at home after childbirth and make all kinds of sacrifices in order

to bring up their children (and this paper is not a criticism of that choice), it should be clear that the rhetoric of choice used by the mommy-wars reports does little to expose the constraints placed on women that need to work after childbirth, or indeed choose to go back into the labour market, and the lived realities behind those decisions.

Conclusion: Part 1

On 8 March 2012, International Women's Day, the achievements of women and the equality they enjoy in the workplace and society should have been celebrated. The day began depressingly, however, with Polly Toynbee's column in *The Guardian* confirming that women's rights are slowly being eroded not only here, but also in America. According to Toynbee, “International Women's Day marks the first era in living memory that the equality drive has gone into reverse” (“Calm down dears?”)—a claim confirmed by leading British equal opportunities campaigner The Fawcett Society. The gender pay gap may have been reported as narrowing to 10 per cent in Britain, but this is only for women in their twenties. When it comes to British women with children that pay gap remains huge at 21 per cent (Thomas). Even if the pay gap has shrunk to only 10 per cent, should we really be celebrating being valued 10 per cent less than our male counterparts and when it comes to women with children, 21 per cent less? In bald terms, for every £100 that a man earns, mothers are paid £79. If one adds to this the increase in childcare costs in Britain and the

cut in childcare credits under the latest austerity measures, it is clear that British mothers are suffering economically. Single mothers are discriminated against even more by losing childcare “services equivalent to 18.5 [per cent] of their income” (Asthana) while, at the same time being paid even less than their male counterparts—£194.4 compared to £346 for men (Fawcett Society 2011).

Figures show that there are still an estimated 30,000 women a year losing their jobs as a result of pregnancy in Britain (Fawcett Society). Women with children are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of law breaking discrimination with “more than a third of bosses—38 per cent—worry[ing] that mothers will not work as hard as others and admitting to not employing them” (Doughty). Does it not then seem disingenuous for family expert Jill Kirby, writing for the Centre for Policy Studies (the think tank and adviser to the British Conservative Government), to argue that this “has nothing to do with discrimination,” but is due to “the fact that women become less committed to the workplace at the point in their lives when they have children, ... They want to spend more time with their children, and regard lower pay as a trade-off for family time” (qtd. in Thomas). Underlying the mommy wars and the endless newspaper reports about whether women should work post-childbirth or not, is this notion of choice—a notion that is embraced by some in their need to feel empowered against widespread economic and workplace

discrimination. But this rhetoric of choice obscures the real economic facts confronting women and mothers, particularly in the face of the recent global recession, the resulting austerity measures, and the historic gendering of childcare. The decision to be a stay-at-home mother or a working one is not black and white and not a choice for all as women struggle on unequal salaries, juggling badly paid part-time work and family, and shouldering an unenviable portion of domestic and childcare responsibilities.

In addition, policy decisions do not only impact on women and mothers, but on families and the future economy. As more and more couples delay starting a family and families increasingly choose to have fewer children, it will impact even more on an ageing population that depends upon the younger generation for support. This fact is made clear by Toynbee when she states that family friendly policies may be seen as lollipops for women voters, but are, in fact, an economic necessity (“Calm down dear?”). Governments on both sides of the Atlantic would be wise not to ignore this as, according to Toynbee, “Making it easy for women to combine work and family is essential for the nation’s standard of living: babies are a long-term economic necessity too. Countries that make combining both easy, do best” (“Calm down dear?”).

Conclusion: Part 2

Fig. 1

March 2013 and it looked like the mommy wars had leapt into action once again. Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing host of the highest-rated and most listened to talk-radio show in America, used his platform to disparage feminism and feminists (or, the feminazis, as he calls them) for having been wrong all these years. Limbaugh's outburst came directly on the heels of the publication of a *New York Magazine* article claiming that feminists are turning their backs on careers and independence once they have children (Miller). *The Daily Mail* demonstrated how trend reporting is alive and well, only this time on a global scale, when it ran a report on the *New York Magazine* story claiming that, "a new wave of feminists are giving up their careers to stay at home because they WANT to" ("Rise of the Happy Housewife"). This latest round was allegedly kicked off by the publication of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* and a *MORE* magazine poll, which strove to reveal the root cause of

the mommy wars. Unsurprisingly, this latest round of reporting obfuscates many of the facts in an almost hysterical need to decry feminism and everything it stands for. Although the *New York Magazine* makes clear that the mommy wars continue to be the domain of the privileged few that are economically able to make a "choice," this fact is skated over in the subsequent reports. While not all of the stay-at-home mothers admit to feminism, neither do they decry the movement, and yet, what is repeatedly emphasised in these articles is how women are turning their backs on feminism as they eagerly choose childcare over a career, as if feminism ever told women that looking after children was not part of the deal.

Fig. 2

We need to be evermore alert to what is being reported in the media and why. These "back to the home" newspaper reports depend upon a tradition of mother-centred childcare, but it is clear that images of the "traditional" stay-at-home mother and breadwinner father peddled in the media come straight out

of an idealised past. If it is true that the media has been in the throes of a post 9/11 reaction, a throwback to Friedan's fifties, "cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood," then it is easy to see how the notion of opting out could seem so attractive (Faludi, *The Terror Dream* 4). As appealing as this *Leace it to Beaver* style dream seems, with its longing for clearly defined male and female roles and where women do not have to juggle maternity leave and childcare with the relentless demands of paid commercial work, we have to be clear that this is exactly what it is: nostalgia for a bygone time when "unusual economic and political alignments" meant that families had real hope that their economic fortunes would improve (Coontz 263). Even so, any nostalgia for a traditional stay-at-home mother has to be based on inequality and a loss of economic and societal power for women, however much it is dressed up in the rhetoric of choice.

Image Notes

Fig. 1 Miller, Lisa. "The Retro Wife: Feminists who say they're having it all – by choosing to stay home." *New York Magazine* 17 Mar. 2013. 2 May 2013 <<http://nymag.com/news/features/retro-wife-2013-3/>>.

Fig. 2 *Daily Mail* Reporter, "Rise of the happy housewife: How a new wave of feminists are giving up their careers to stay at home because they WANT to." *Mail Online* 18 Mar. 2012. 2 May 2013 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2295236/Rise-happy-housewife-How-new-wave-feminists-giving-careers-stay-home-WANT-to.html>>.

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1 As Alison Woolf argues in *The XX Factor: How Working Women are Creating a New Society*, this is truer than ever in the 21st century where professional or "career" women depend on paid childcare provided by their less well-educated and poorer paid sisters.

2 From two to four, depending on which newspaper report is to be believe

Bio

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TEA WITH MOTHER

SARAH PALIN AND THE DISCOURSE OF MOTHERHOOD AS A POLITICAL IDEAL

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Seldom has someone emerged so unexpectedly and sensationally on to the American political scene as Sarah Palin. With Palin came what had rarely, if ever, been seen before on a presidential trail: hockey moms, Caribou-hunting, pitbulls in lipstick parcelled as political weaponry. And let's not forget those five children, including Track 19, set to deploy to Iraq, Bristol, and her unplanned pregnancy at 17, and Trig, a six-month-old infant with Down's syndrome. Never before had motherhood been so finely balanced with US presidential politics. Biological vigour translated into political energy, motherhood transformed into an intoxicating political ideal. This article focuses on Sarah Palin and how her brand of "rugged Alaskan motherhood" (PunditMom 2008) became central to her media image, as well as what this representation has to tell us about the relationship between mothering as a political ideal, US politics, and the media.

Très peu d'individus ont fait une apparition aussi inattendue et spectaculaire que celle de Sarah Palin sur la scène politique américaine. Avec elle ont surgi des traits inédits dans une campagne présidentielle : ceux de la *hockey mom*, de la chasse au caribou, de la femme pugnace mais fardée utilisés comme des arguments partisans. Cela sans oublier les enfants Palin mis à contribution : Track, 19 ans, attendant son affectation militaire en Irak, Bristol, fille-mère à 17 ans, et Trig, un bébé trisomique de six mois. Une image si orientée de la maternité n'avait jamais auparavant été impliquée dans une campagne politique aux États-Unis. La vigueur génétique s'y est vue transformée en énergie politique, et la maternité en un idéal politique intoxicant. Cet article se concentre sur la façon dont l'image d'une « rugged Alaskan motherhood » (PunditMon 2008) est devenue si cruciale dans la personnalité médiatique de Sarah Palin, et sur ce qu'une telle image peut nous apprendre quant aux relations entre la maternité comme idéal, la politique américaine, et les médias.

Rarely has anyone emerged so unexpectedly and sensationally on to the American political scene as Sarah Palin. It is August 2008, and the Republican nominee John McCain, the moderate senator from Arizona, took his most audacious campaign gamble when he named the 44-year-old mother-of-five governor of Alaska as his running mate. Everything about her *looked* different. “She’s not—she’s not from these parts and she’s not from Washington, but when you get to know her, you’re going to be as impressed as I am,” McCain told Republicans assembled in Dayton, Ohio, shortly before Palin strode onto the political platform with husband Todd, a native Yup’ik who worked for BP, and four of her five children with uncommon names including Bristol, unmarried and pregnant at 17, and Trig Paxson Van, a six-month-old infant with Down’s syndrome.

As a Christian, social conservative, anti-abortionist, and patriot preparing to see her eldest son deployed to Iraq (on September 11, 2008, no less), this “middle youth” mother from America’s last frontier seemed a shrewd (if unexpected) choice to shore up the vote among the party’s staunchly right-wing evangelical base. Still, it was the more subtle tangled ways in which Sarah Palin politicised mothering and her role as a mother that ignited passions across the political spectrum—and had feminists like me (McCabe, “States of Confusion”; “In the Feminine Ideal”) tied in theoretical knots. Palin translated the postfeminist “have it all” culture into potent, if uneasy, political currency, making history as the first woman on the Republican ticket and only the second in US presidential history to become a vice-

Fig. 1

presidential nominee. What interests me however, and the subject of this article, is how the discourse of motherhood, turned into a political ideal, was made useful—qualified and disqualified—and linked to an intensification of the feminine body. Palin's well crafted image was imbued, through and through, with tactical function and political calculation. It is discourse of the Mother and mothering, imagined *in* and *through* her image, which transmits and *produces* a formidable power; it reinforces a moral, social, and economic order, but it also reveals fragilities and the limits of that power, particularly centred on sex, sexuality, and the biological female body.

With Palin came what had rarely if ever been seen before in politics, let alone a presidential trail. Hockey moms, mama grizzlies in killer heels, and pitbulls in lipstick parcelled as political weaponry. Such a staged spectacle of female agency and power led Lacanian psychoanalyst and writer Jacques-Alain Miller to conclude, "Sarah Palin puts forward no lack: she fears nothing, churns out children all [the] while holding a shotgun ... [and] presents herself as an unstoppable force." This apparent defiance of easy definition and absolute refusal to sacrifice neither career nor children saw the disorienting collapse of what Nina Power calls the "old female dichotomies—mother/ politician, attractive/successful, passive/ go-getting." Everything about Palin appeared limitless and omnipotent, argues Power: "Both fiercely maternal and politically aggressive, ... [and

turning] maternity into a war weapon," the vice-presidential nominee "is pretending to be all women at once, and yet perfectly mundane."

Never before had motherhood been so finely paraded as political accomplishment. Biological vigour translated into constitutional ambition, and mothering transformed into an intoxicating political ideal. As she cradled Trig in her arms, a "living [testament] to herself as the model pro-life mother" (Raban), she wowed the party faithful and secured her political celebrity almost overnight. Palin was everywhere. Her ubiquitous image was featured in magazines and newspapers the length and breadth of America and beyond: "A Mother's Painful Choice" ran the poignant OK! headline, but the glossy media image of her cradling Trig told another, more compelling story of maternal pride, domestic bliss, and pro-life principles. We may *know* that the political image is highly choreographed (in which both the media and politicians are inextricably entangled), however on seeing Palin holding her handicapped baby son on stage at the GOP national convention, few could have failed not to be affected by the sight as a groundbreaking moment for women—or as Nancy Gibb saw it, "you felt the shattered glass raining gently down."

Fig. 2

Nowhere is the paradox presented by Palin more self evident than in how her image represents so seductively the personal *is* political. Michel Foucault alerts us to how dominant norms (institutions, culture) are perpetually being resisted and reconstituted by knowledge that has developed and gained momentum from elsewhere “in the power network” (95). Almost immediately, in introducing “the right

partner,” McCain identified Palin (unnamed and un-gendered at this point) as someone able to challenge power and willing to dispute privilege, before saying “proudly” that in the week “we celebrate the anniversary of female suffrage” his running mate is “a devoted wife and mother of five.” Her legitimacy to rule is vouched for by reference to the commonweal (matrimonial allegiance, parental obligations), and her role as presidential helpmate is authenticated by these traditional forms of alliance that Palin seemed obliged to endlessly pronounce about herself. But at the same time, the mother is also playing the role of adversary to power. It did in fact seem, at first glance at least, that her candidacy represented the triumph of the personal *over* the political.

Palin wasted no time in acknowledging this historic moment for women. As an ordinary working mother, she was the legacy of feminism in America—a country that emphasized equal voting rights and individual women empowering themselves (rather than through collective activism). Standing on the political stage in 2008, Palin made sense of that neoliberal feminist ideal, namely: women *had* made unprecedented gains.

To serve as vice president beside such a man would be the privilege of a lifetime. And it’s fitting that this trust has been given to me 88 years almost to the day after the women of America first gained the right to vote. ... I think—I think as well today of two other women

who came before me in national elections. I can't begin this great effort without honoring the achievements of Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 ... and of course Senator Hillary Clinton, who showed such determination and grace in her presidential campaign ... It was rightly noted in Denver this week that Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America ... but it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all. (Palin, "Transcript McCain")

No doubt these words were designed to win over the disaffected Hillary Rodham Clinton supporters, as if biology was all that mattered. Initially, Palin did what was expected of her, and opinion polls suggested that her candidacy appealed to a large section of female (mostly white) voters the Obama camp had either disregarded or simply assumed would shift allegiance once Clinton dropped out of the Democrat race (Goldenberg, "McCain Forced into Supporting Role" 20). Palin also rejuvenated McCain's sliding political fortunes, with one wavering Republican female voter saying: "She has brought youth, the female factor, the younger generation, she has brought, most importantly to me, a lot of women who were sitting on the fence" (qtd. in Goldenberg, "McCain Forced into Supporting Role" 20). Her candidacy was about visibility, of making representation on behalf of

women and bringing that constituency into the political conversation.

Feminism had arrived in the American heartland. Even so, this pro-woman tableau painted by Palin was rife with deep ambivalence and profound contradiction. Clinton may have put 18 million cracks into the glass ceiling, but did the last push really mean shattering that which protected *Roe vs. Wade* as well? Furthermore, what did it say about women in power when the first to potentially occupy the vice presidency in the history of the United States was a self-declared "average hockey mom" who "never really set out to be involved in public affairs, much less to run for this office" (Palin, "Transcript McCain")? Palin is saturated in the political meanings of her personal life. She makes visible the "Feminists for Life" mantra with her resolute refusal to choose between women and children. She mangles the vocabularies of social conservatism (anti-abortion, abstinence education) with feminism (equal rights, balancing parenting with an ambitious career). She combines aspects of "power feminism" (Wolf), where women are in control of their destiny, with what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese terms "family feminist," which involves women able to set their own agendas based on personal concerns rather than elitist ideology and communal logic. Palin is an example of the postfeminist "have it all" rationale defined by self-determinism and enterprise (linked to free market economics), a legacy of the Reagan era; she is someone who

grew up “feeling” empowered and internalizing the message of women’s progress (“Standing on the shoulders of women who had won hard-fought battles for things like equal pay and equal access” [Palin, “Transcript McCain” 28]), but disconnected from the political philosophies which had created those opportunities in the first place. “I didn’t subscribe to all the radical mantras of that early feminist era,” Palin has said (“Transcript McCain” 28), a movement she regards as irrelevant at best and suspiciously socialist at worst. Feminism is about self-reliance and personal responsibility rather than collective agendas and legal edicts, “a matter not of ideology but of simple fairness” (Palin, “Transcript McCain” 28).

Her representation, “living comfortably with paradox” (Siegel 141), in many ways enters into dialogue with contemporary feminism and its politics of ambiguity—only to stoke the flames of disagreement over how exactly to define our terms and push us to the limits of language when we talk about women and power. Here then lies one of the most complex, if unnerving ironies of Palin. She may rhetorically imitate feminism, but distorts, resists, even reverses its logic, as she translates it into a populist conversation about equality and a refusal to compromise. Social problems are no longer communal requiring collective action, but personal ones demanding individual solutions. It is an (ironically) apolitical postfeminist brand, described by Deborah L. Siegel

as “about propelling oneself forward in stiletto heels” (124).

But in this feminist paradox a crucial point has gone awry. Never mind how Palin raids feminism for its rhetoric and semiotics of empowerment, her image operates inside meticulous codes—of marriage sanctified by church and State, of motherhood integral to the bourgeois order, and of family extolled by popular media and political rhetoric. It is a lesson in unseen power whereby biological fecundity translates into political leverage. Power comes not from partisan politics (as such), but from “that [which] we no longer perceive ... as the effect of power that constrains us” (Foucault 60). No wonder we cannot help but become entranced and exasperated by her in equal measure. “She is a fresh voice” with a “new vocabulary” declared veteran Republican Pat Buchanan (“A Post-Mortem of the Debate Post-Mortem”), but she is speaking *in* and *through* a representation (the fertile mother, the faithful wife, the [re]productive female body) beset by intricate rules and intrinsic to the mechanisms of social power and control. So imbibed are we in this vital image of the feminine represented by Palin that to critique this script is almost impossible. Disclosing what should not be said, to denounce that ideal of American motherhood which discourse (institutions, culture, politics, society, the media) works so hard to promote and, as Foucault put it, “*enforce[s] the norm*” (3; emphasis mine), cannot be done.

Family, faith, and flag define her political celebrity. Palin has always made considerable capital of her role as a mother. She has, in fact, politicised motherhood as never before, not only translating mothering into a political creed, but also using it to legitimatise her identity and affirm herself. “On April 20, 1989,” Palin declares in her bestselling political memoir, *Going Rogue: An American Life*, “my life truly began. I became a mom. ... The world went away, and in a crystallizing instant, I knew my purpose” (51, 53). Her credo is clear: In *becoming* a mother her subjectivity *is* defined and qualified. It is the way in which she conceives of power—the feminine body, the socio-political body, “by virtue of a biologicomoral responsibility” (Foucault 104). Akin to an evangelical conversion, “her” tone also authenticates what Stephanie Coontz describes as “a sentimental, almost sacred, domestic sphere whose long-term commitments and nurturing balanced the pursuit of self interest in the public arena” (43).

Presented as a “mom’s-eye view of high-stakes national politics” (or, so the book jacket tells us), Palin’s memoir begins by telling us of a visit to the Right to Life (RTL) booth at the 2008 Alaska State Fair “where a poster caught [her] eye, taking [her] breath away” (*Going Rogue* 2). “[Swathed] in pink, pretend angel wings fastened to her soft shoulders” as described by Palin, “*the pro-life poster child at the State Fair*” (*Going Rogue* 2; emphasis in the original turns out to be her youngest daughter Piper. ““That’s you,

baby,” I whispered to Piper, as I have every year since she smiled for the picture as an infant. She popped another cloud of cotton candy in her mouth and looked nonchalant” (*Going Rouge* 2). This moment of almost breathless, intimate sentimentality inspires her political ambition. “It reminded me of the preciousness of life,” recalls Palin. “It also reminded me of how impatient I am with politics” (*Going Rogue* 2). Her encounter with “the gracious ladies who put up with the jeers of those who always protested the display” typified for her “the difference between principles and politics” (*Going Rogue* 3). In this briefest of sketches—bucolic small-town American life (“I breathed in an autumn bouquet that combined everything small-town America with rugged splashes of the Last Frontier” [*Going Rogue* 1]), independent ladies (*not* women) and principled-centred grassroots activism, privately-held faith-based ethics versus East Coast elite government, and politics-as-usual—the Palin folklore about family, motherhood, and patriotism is founded. Not for the first time in that mythology do her children remind Palin of her articles of faith, of who she is, in fact. It is, of course, at this precise moment of political epiphany that her BlackBerry vibrates. “Just this one last call, baby,” she tells Piper. It’s John McCain, “asking if I wanted to help him change history” (*Going Rogue* 6).

Or, so the story goes.

Personal narratives have long played a crucial role in announcing political

ambition. There is no doubt that a good deal of Palin's appeal relies on her biography and its packaging. She looks like exactly what she says she is: not the usual politico, but a small-town hockey mom, who became involved in politics by running for city council via the parent-teacher association (PTA). Raising babies, nurturing a young frontier town—Palin initially campaigned “door-to-door asking for people's votes, pulling the kids through the snow on a sled” (*Going Rogue* 64). In 2008 she told Republicans the following:

[Todd and I were] busy raising our kids. I was serving as the team mom and coaching some basketball on the side. I got involved in the PTA and then was elected to the city council, and then elected mayor of my hometown, where my agenda was to stop wasteful spending, and cut property taxes, and put the people first. (Palin, “Transcript McCain”)

True or not, it does not matter. It is how her political brand, run from the kitchen table surrounded by toddlers, taps into an older “domestic” or “sentimental” doctrine of the “feminine” rooted in American frontier mythologies (Riley 3). The sentimentalization of family life proposed after the American Civil War (1861-65) saw, claims Coontz, “the triumph of the nuclear family ideal and the spread of private morality ... [in which] family relations became less a preparation ground or supporting structure for civic responsibility than

a *substitute* for such responsibility” (97, 98). Palin's conservative strand of feminism can thus be traced at least as far back as the “turn toward home” of the mid-nineteenth century (Coontz 96-106). Glenda Riley describes this accordingly: “As defenders of home and hearth, women would protect traditional values, but they should not interfere in any essential way with the developments that were catapulting America toward prosperity and power” (3).

Fast-forward a century and a half and Palin re-imagines this socially conservative, free-market message in the age of austerity. Our latter day frontier's mom may buy her couture from a consignment store in Anchorage and keep the “home's freezer stocked with the wild seafood we caught ourselves” (Palin, *Going Rogue* 133), but the idea of woman as an evangelical moral saviour of American capitalism and its values holds as strong as it did when first identified in the late-nineteenth century by the likes of Catharine Beecher.

Core to the Palin message is fiscal policy.

In Juneau, the one thing that's required during the session is passing a budget, and that one task is the subject of endless hours of discussion, deliberation, bartering, and whining. Again I was thankful for my training grounds as a mom [sic]. (Palin, *Going Rogue* 148)

The economy is an uncomplicated macrocosm of the family accounts. As

Jonathan Rabin put it, “What is good for the family is good for the nation, and vice versa; and the idea that the family should spend its way out of recession is an affront to common sense, conservative or otherwise.” Palin trades heavily on her experience as a busy working mom trying to make the family budget stretch as far as it can. It is an aspect of her “ordinary celebrity” (Ouellette 189) that reinvents the way in which postfeminist popular culture extols female independence and women’s powers expressed through consumption practices. In step with the financial downturn and age of asceticism, there is a revision in thinking, whereby female empowerment is about taking control of the economic well being of the family. Thrift and prudence are central to the Palin image of self-reliance and enterprise. “My family is frugal,” she writes. “We clip coupons. We shop at Costco. We buy diapers in bulk and generic peanut butter. We don’t have full-time nannies or housekeepers or drivers” (*Going Rogue* 315). These remarks were made in response to a headline story that the Republican National Committee (RNC) had spent \$150,000 “to clothe and accessorize the vice presidential candidate and her family” (Cummings). Palin was quick to set the records straight in order “to defend my ethics and my family,” as she put it (*Going Rogue* 317). It is through these subtle relays between familial alliances and the social body, that one arguably sees Palin at her boldest. Late in 2009, covering her three-week book tour of 14 states in the American heartland, Paul Harris reports on

how the “devoted” and “enthusiastic” crowds (almost all white) saw Palin as “St. Sarah of American Capitalism” (2009 32) with her message of fiscal conservatism. It is a discourse on family, modern capitalism, and the social order that “holds up well, owning no doubt to how easy it is to uphold. A solemn historical and political guarantee protects it” (Foucault 5). Palin has neither formulated anything new to say about the financial crisis nor invented any new fiscal solutions; it is about practical commonsense and hard graft. It is about liberating women through entrepreneurship. Her “intimate” staged performances may sit uncomfortably within the conventional political structure, but how her political celebrity deploys systems of alliance (parental and matrimonial) firmly linked to the economy “engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control” (Foucault 106). In a word, how the Palin (maternal) body produces and consumes makes visible a socio-economic body, which has, in turn, the function of nurturing and perpetuating.

Palin reanimates the spectre of nineteenth-century womanhood as “guardian of morality and virtue” (Riley 3) in her run for public office—with anti-abortion, pro-guns, creationism, and anti-gay marriage stances defining the new “moral prowess” (Riley 5). Mid-nineteenth-century women’s activism championed equal voting rights and economic freedoms, but temperance and religious faith were also central to the ideas of Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-

1902). The campaigning of these early feminists reveals that it was not about refuting the nuclear family, but shifting power within it. Being a wife and mother equipped women with a superior sense of morality and this echo is heard in Palin. In describing how she navigated the squabbles and machinations of the Republican primary, she wrote, “It wasn’t the last time I’d find that there’s no better training ground for politics than motherhood” (*Going Rogue* 115).

Such philosophy is further witnessed in how Palin weaves seamlessly the duty of family with the obligations of high political office, as if her responsibility to one defines her relation to the other:

Just before I left the hotel room to hit the convention stage, on the evening of September 3, I noticed that Trig needed changing. I also noticed that we had run out of diapers. After a frantic, hotel-wide search, someone found a stack, and the last thing I did before heading down to give the biggest speech of my life [accepting the vice-president nomination] was to change the baby.

It’s the kind of thing that keeps you grounded.

(Palin, *Going Rogue* 24)

Such an autobiography of individual ambition combined with domestic routine and parental responsibility not only filters the moral dilemma of a highly competitive, self-serving run for high office, but also represents a technique

of modern power relations. No longer are private and public spheres separate, with rigid divisions of gendered labour, but rather, they are deeply entangled, where power is exercised through “a plurality of resistances” (Foucault 96) in the interplay of alliances between the two—private/public; domestic/office; mother/public official.

Making motherhood an explicit part of her appeal, however, inspired less solidarity than genuine confusion, impassioned dispute, and partisan snipping. It was a debate conducted less between the sexes, than one that divided women. Websites like Mommy Tracked (“managing the chaos of modern motherhood,” reads its tagline) and MOMocrats, tried desperately to draw lessons from this historic moment. Almost immediately the debate turned away from foreign and domestic policy and into a referendum on working mothers. On the one hand there was a palpable sense of relief that at long last here was a new type of woman in politics, neither the “coiffed demure stay-at-home wi[fe]” (read: Laura Bush), nor the “angry, conflicted wom[a]n” (read: Hillary Rodham Clinton) (MommyTracked). “Sarah Palin’s uncontrollable brood, her zest for work, and her feisty tone resonate with working moms who rely on moxie to get through each and every rockin’ roller coaster day of working motherhood” (read: you and me) (MommyTracked). Stories of her balancing family, work, and the campaign trail became central to any conversation about Palin. Here

finally was “a working mom like us who juggles the messy chaos of ‘having it all’” (MommyTracked).

There was, however, a nagging suspicion that Palin made motherhood *look* far too easy. She apparently returned to work the day after giving birth to her daughter, Piper (“I took her by work when I checked in on City Hall,” [Palin, *Going Rogue* 76]). She signed legislation into law at the kitchen table with a child in her lap. She worked 24/7 while somehow juggling childcare and with a husband often away from home (Todd Palin worked for BP in the North Slope oil fields). With Trig in a sling she sat through meetings, even breastfeeding unseen during conference calls. MommyTracked sensed Republican subterfuge at work:

I can almost hear the new Republican retort to the building blocks of working motherhood: more plentiful, afford quality childcare; healthcare reimbursement for birth control; more generous FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] regulations; and incentives for companies to offer extended leaves, part-time positions, and flexible work schedules. What is the big deal, ladies? If Sarah Palin can go without those frills, then can’t all of you? (MommyTracked)

Palin *lives* the Republican message: A woman can make whatever life choices she wants because she has civil and legal equality under the law and is in no need of preferential treatment. It is

a flat refusal to see women as “victims” needing systematic protection. The flipside of not wanting to recognise women as victims, however, is a failure to understand structural causes of disadvantage as well as the collective nature of discrimination. Motherhood functions as the norm. Nothing more is required of it than to define its social value. In short, motherhood constitutes a discourse that is morally useful, socially (re)productive, and politically conservative.

Still, even Palin seems more than aware of the limits between the qualified and disqualified maternal body in politics. As reported on more than one occasion, she went “to extraordinary lengths to ensure [the arrival of Trig] would not compromise her work” (Kantor, Zernike and Einhorn 2008). Few people knew that she was expecting her fifth child until the third trimester. There is always the political to consider, as Palin told *People* magazine, “I didn’t want Alaskans to fear I would not be able to fulfill my duties” (qtd, In Kantor, Zernike and Einhorn 2008). Unfair sexism or fair game—there is no getting away from the spectacle of the maternal body distracting the political. The heavily pregnant body is saturated with sexuality, which Palin hid “with winter clothes and a few cleverly draped scarves” (Palin, *Going Rogue* 191). “[No] one saw my girth or suspected I was pregnant,” she recalls (*Going Rogue* 191). When she finally decided to announce the pregnancy to the Anchorage press, there was an uneasy slippage between the female body and social one.

“Hey guys,” I said with a grin, “I wanted to let you know that the First Family is expanding.”

They all just looked at me. Dead silence

Okay ... let me try something else.

“Remember when I promised to ‘deliver’ for Alaska?”

Nothing ...

Finally, I gave up on the jokes and went direct: “Guys, I’m pregnant. I’m having a baby in two months!”

Three mouths fell open, and three pairs of eyes dropped straight to my stomach. (Palin, *Going Rogue* 192)

True or not, the story highlights (and bearing in mind it is told in a political memoir) a perceived shift in alliances from the public sphere to the private familial space. “Delivering” for Alaska is not only about fishery policies and economic growth, but also about a female body and its fecundity. Silence shrouds it and speaks of the lingering suspicion that the pregnant woman has no place in public political life. Eyes are no longer focused on the politics, but fall silently on the swelling abdomen. No wonder Palin kept “mum” about leaking amniotic fluids during a keynote address at an oil and gas conference in Dallas (Palin, *Going Rogue* 193), but more than willing months later to tell her story of the premature birth and three-days of maternity leave to reporters while installing a travel crib on the campaign bus. The political myth embodied in the maternal ideal has more value than the corporeal reality of bodily discomfort and the difficulties of the flesh.

This intensification on Palin and the (re)productive female body as an object of knowledge and element in power relations exploded further once her candidacy was announced. Forget John McCain. As soon as Palin climbed on stage with her wholesome, hard-working family the media became *all* about Sarah. Figures produced by the Pew Research Center (2008) claim that Palin effectively squeezed out the other stories and dominated US news reports. She featured in 60 per cent of the campaign stories and received far more media attention than McCain. In keeping with Erika Falk’s findings on the media bias toward women in presidential campaigns, much of that coverage focused on feminine traits associated with “mothering, reproduction, and emotion (the private sphere)” (Falk 53). Mother of five and married to her high school sweetheart (who worked on the Alaskan oilfield, commercially fishes, and is the four-time champion of the Iron Dog, a cross-country snow machine race), her fertility and legitimate marriage were endlessly reiterated and recycled whenever Palin got a mention, as if nothing else mattered. Her sexuality took shape, conceived of as a technology of power that was firmly located in familial alliances. This is where she (her body, her fecundity) comes to have value, not only in regulating her sexuality, but also through making it useful as a new tactic of power on the campaign trail.

A central feature of the press coverage focused less on what Palin said (verbal gaffs notwithstanding), but what she

looked like. This constant surveillance and policing of her image—what she wore, how her hair was styled—corroborates Falk’s research. Stories (and always accompanied by pictures) interminably rehearsed how she had entered a local beauty pageant in her small Alaskan town of Wasilla and won it, including Miss Congeniality. The Miss Wasilla Scholarship paid her college tuition, and in the following year she was crowned runner-up in the Miss Alaska contest, plus Miss Congeniality. Political campaigns are to a large degree a high-stakes image game, but even so: the Palin image holds up remarkably well on the front covers that sell images of what Rebecca Walker calls “impossible contrivance[s] of perfect womanhood” (xxxiii). It is where her looks can be dissected in infinitesimal detail, her fashions endlessly discussed and critiqued. In a previous article I observed the following:

Intoxically presented, persuasively offered as saying something important about female accomplishment, her [objectification] is embedded in and through dominant norms defining the feminine self, her body (slender, athletic, attractive, youthful—and not forgetting that trademark smile), her lifestyle choices (wife, “hockey mom”, working mother). Never mind the lurid headlines, or that she cannot help but polarise the US electorate with her political beliefs, she *looked* perfect. (McCabe, “In the Feminine Ideal”).

Such intense focus meant that quite soon Palin became subject to another kind of objectification, translating her, as Kira Cochrane astutely observes, into something of a porn star. Images ranged from “sexy Sarah Palin” Halloween costumes to a blow-up doll and the now famed doctored picture of Palin in a stars-and-strips bikini toting a rifle (which went viral almost instantly after her nomination). This kind of sexism underlined, for Cochrane at least, “the fact that any woman entering public life runs the risk of being reduced to the most basic female stereotype that springs to mind” (17). Developing this line of enquiry further still, the fetishistic and mischievously tampered-with images of Palin also represent what often fails to be entirely controlled in relation to the female body and sex. In the way in which her body became “thoroughly saturated with sexuality” (Foucault 104)—beauty contestant, five pregnancies—her sex became at one level detached from its systems of familial alliance and jurisdiction. Instead it passed into the public sphere, which codified her flesh and pathologised her body as fantasy and erotic desire. Opened up unreservedly to endless and unremitting media scrutiny turned her body-as-image into trivial titillation and taboo. The pornification of Palin, and in particular ‘her’ wearing an American flag bikini brandishing weaponry, reveals how aspects of the Palin image (particularly centered on class and region) escape the alliances which empower her. As Patrick Kinsman wrote: “The Photoshopped Palin image is not about feminism or equality, but

sex objects with weapons—whether it is critique or not.” This ironic image aimed to parody Palin’s “abstinence-only stance and her support of the Iraq war” (Kinsman), but with its purpose no longer given over exclusively to (re)production and familial alliance, her body is deprived of its privilege. It becomes perverse and disqualifies her in the process.

Few however came to her defense: neither Republicans nor Democrats. Columnist Nick Cohen voiced his surprise about how liberal journalists almost unflinchingly and immediately turned her family into “an object of sexual disgust: inbred rednecks who had stumbled out of *Deliverance*” (34). Not even feminists could quite muster enough indignation about the misogyny aimed at Palin. She indeed proves a difficult woman to defend. From the story of how she as governor supported law enforcement agencies charging for rape kits to her pro-life values, Palin’s views stand at an alarming distance from any discernible women’s rights agenda. As Jessica Valenti put it, “Palin is alleging sexism ... while simultaneously relying on sexist notions of women in politics.”

“A race that began as *The West Wing* now looks alarmingly like *Desperate Housewives*,” declared Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian*. Rarely has a politician provoked such an avalanche of media and followed so swiftly by scandal and Internet rumour. Speculation quickly gathered momentum of a fake pregnancy and

a son that was really her grandson. However, it was not long before another, more prurient media story took its place. In the era of 24-hour cable news and social networking nothing remains secret for long. Only days after Palin was nominated as the Republican vice-presidential choice, news broke that her unwed 17-year-old daughter was five-months pregnant by her high-school boyfriend, Levi Johnson, 18. “Who wants to talk about boring policy when we can talk about teens and sex and pregnancy?” lamented Rebecca Traister (“Palin”). The Republicans immediately turned the unplanned teen pregnancy into a living testament of Palin’s anti-abortion, pro-life stance. But in the heartland of America where puritanical values are the norm and unwed mothers unpopular, the Republican message sallied forth that the young couple were in love, committed to having the baby, and would soon marry. News of the pregnancy registered widely with the public according to the Pew Research Center (2008), which reported that 69 per cent knew about it, therefore making it one of the top campaign stories—and further drowning out the other political messages. It did in fact appear, as Traister rued, that this history-making moment for women had become hijacked by the “uterine activity” (“Palin”) of the Palin clan. An image of this Alaskan family as a “hotbed of constant sexual incitement” (Foucault 109) thus emerged. It became an object of intense media obsession and (pleasurable) attraction, a site of “discovered” sexual secrets, whereby this family had to open itself

unreservedly to endless outside scrutiny. In so doing, this process called Palin's mothering into question in the analysis it made of her.

Such headlines have the potential to torpedo any political campaign. If anything, however, the news that Bristol was expecting her first child initially helped her mother's campaign. When the pregnancy was first announced it contributed to a 4 per cent Republican lead in the polls. Palin may not have personally approved the official message (according to her memoir), but nonetheless later wrote: "Todd and I were proud of Bristol's *selfless* decision to have her baby and her determination to deal with difficult circumstances by taking *responsibility* for her actions" (*Going Rogue* 234; emphasis mine). Young motherhood thus emerges as a responsible social decision that is preferable to abortion. It is presented as a wholesome alternative to termination, an ethical choice that speaks of kinship and familial values rather than family breakdown. What did emerge with the Bristol pregnancy, however, was a broader cultural attack on women's rights from both sides of the political spectrum. On the liberal left, the issue was used to highlight the value of a woman's right to choose, but also stressed the need for proper access to birth control and sex education, budgets for which had been drastically reduced because of the Bush administration policy of funding abstinence-only programmes. On the right, the teen pregnancy was exploited to promote

the socially conservative agenda of the strong evangelical base.

No critique of Palin is possible without understanding the culture wars raging in the United States. Throughout the presidential campaign (and beyond), she remained a highly visible public figure with those social conservative Republican values perceptibly inscribed across her maternal body—her handicapped son testimony to her pro-life convictions. She *is*, in fact, her pro-family, pro-life, anti-abortion convictions. So powerful is that maternal image that nothing more needs to be said. Some time ago I wrote about Palin and how her media image almost mesmerizingly represents a "feminine ideal, which is compelling enough to psychically entangle us and from which we are not entirely able to free ourselves" (McCabe, "In the Feminine Ideal"). When we talk of Sarah Palin, we cannot seem to stop talking about her gender—her procreative abilities, her pro-life choices and anti-abortion stance, her balancing motherhood with politics. It is for these reasons that she so seductively embodies, what Rebecca Traister describes as, "a form of feminine power that is utterly digestible" ("Zombie Feminists"). This power is not merely about partisan party politics (and rarely does it translate into something real), but nonetheless remains profoundly political. It is "utterly digestible" because what she represents exacts a keen normalising hold over us, shaped and "inscribed" as it is with the imprint of prevailing

historical and political forms of discursive power that manage and animate our perception and experience of what that might mean.

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Between 2008 and the following presidential cycle in 2012 one could not open a newspaper or switch on the television without seeing the many faces of Sarah Palin—politician, celebrity, TV pundit, reality TV star.

Laurie Ouellette observes the following:

More than any political figure to date, Palin translates the traditional voter-political relationship into the logic of fandom and branding. She invites her rightwing political constituents to track and consume her appearances and products across print, electronic, and digital media, and she thus directly profits from their participation in convergence culture. (190)

Palin looks comfortable sitting alongside her two daughters chatting with Oprah Winfrey, or touring the American heartlands in a bus with her family, signing copies of her book in places like Grand Rapids, Michigan, as she tests the waters for a presidential run. She even had her own reality TV show, *Sarah Palin's Alaska* (TLC, 2010-11), in which fish, family, and faith figured prominently. We may know that the Tea Party refers to the 1773 events in Boston when colonists defied the British over tea taxation, with their direct action (dumping tea into the harbour) effectively igniting the American Revolution. But, with our postmodern historical amnesia we might somehow be fooled. Tea Party gatherings look more like family picnics than political rallies, and it is where Palin reminds her eager audience “there is no greater

service than mothering” (*Going Rogue* 342). Palin may stand as an outsider, a lone voice on the edges of her political party, but she is always “inside” power. Her interchange of sexuality and familial alliance, charged with parental and conjugal obligations, speaks directly to a moral and socio-economic consciousness. Her performance of mothering and motherhood forms “a political ordering of life” (Foucault 123) while affirming the importance of that self in maintaining it. It is a discourse that transmits and is an effect of power, but it is also limited, making it possible to thwart what she represents as a consequence.

When I started writing this paper following the symposium “Media and Mothers Matters” at the University of Winchester in October 2011 Palin had yet to announce whether or not she was going to run for the presidency. Soon after Palin declared that she would not and another woman was electrifying the radical right of the Republican Party. Michele Bachmann, who announced her run for the White House in June 2011, eclipsed Palin as the new darling of the Tea Party. She was an evangelical, whose husband ran a controversial Christian counselling service. Like Palin, Bachmann also made enormous political capital from her role as mother to a large brood: five biological children and more than 20 foster children. However, Bachmann never embodied the feminine ideal in quite the same way as Palin and she soon dropped out of the race—along with her nonsensical ideas (such as

blaming President Barack Obama for swine flu).

Traditional boundaries between political campaign, media event, and celebrity become blurred with Sarah Palin; or, as she would put it: “You betcha.” Since her surprise nomination in 2008 Palin has consistently confounded pundits and set perceived political wisdom on its head. Yet her particular austerity brand of post feminism does not unite voters and her choice to combine motherhood with a demanding job failed to win the White House. It is a question of the politics of the body, subject to reproductive function, but also an entire machinery that both qualifies and disqualifies the female body dependent on its uses. She may *look* like her socially fiscal conservative agenda, but that does not translate into her *looking* like a leader. Carol Moseley Braun, who ran for president in 2004 but was knocked out in the first round, said it best when she stated: “The script hasn’t been written yet. The visual don’t exist for a woman in leadership” (qtd. In Goldenberg 43). In looking at how Palin politicized mothering and the mother as an ideal in political life, this article has offered insight into why we are still waiting.

Image Notes

Fig.1. Photograph: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images, Sarah Palin and her family at the Republican convention in 2008: Track, Bristol, her then-boyfriend Levi Johnston, Willow, Piper, Todd and Sarah, holding Trig, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/sep/03/mckinsey-nhs-sarah-palin>

[theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/sep/03/mckinsey-nhs-sarah-palin](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/sep/03/mckinsey-nhs-sarah-palin)

Fig.2. Photograph: Shannon Stapleton/Reuters, *Sarah Palin hugs her son Trig, who has Down’s syndrome, after her address to the 2008 Republican National Convention*, 2008. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2125458/Clare-Short-facing-criticism-use-word-mongol-Radio-4-interview-children-Downs-syndrome.html>

Fig. 3. Photograph: Anonymous user “am0n.” *The Girl and The Gun—Sarah Palin photoshopped*. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/97897149@N00/2818816914>

Fig. 4. USA Weekend, Cover story: *Sarah Palin and Family*, May 6, 2010. <http://www.usaweekend.com/article/20100507/HOME/100507001/>

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ADULT FEAR AND CONTROL

AMBIVALENCE AND DUALITY IN CLIVE BARKER'S THE THIEF OF ALWAYS

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This article considers the relationship between the text and accompanying illustrations in Clive Barker's children's novel *The Thief of Always: A Fable*. This tale of abduction was published in the social background of fear around the child predator of the early 1990s and incorporates ideas of monstrous villainy, loss of childhood innocence, and insatiable desires. As a fable, *Thief* is a cautionary tale that not only teaches that childhood years are precious and are not to be wished away or squandered in idle leisure, but also of the dangers that some adults pose to children. Problematically, an honest and frank discussion of adult sexual desires toward children would despoil the very innocence that is trying to be protected; thus, a lesson such as this must be sublimated within the story. Yet, it is the illustrations, and more specifically the way in which the illustrations corroborate and contradict the plot of this story that reveals an underlying ambivalence toward the figure of the child and an echoing duality present in both the child and the child predator.

Cet article analyse le rapport entre le texte et les illustrations dans le livre pour enfants de Clive Barker intitulé *The Thief of Always: A Fable*. Barker a écrit cette histoire d'enlèvement dans le contexte social de la peur du prédateur d'enfants au début des années 90. Il y a mis en scène les idées d'un méchant monstrueux, de la perte de l'innocence enfantine, et des désirs insatiables. En tant que fable, le livre est un conte de mise en garde, qui non seulement enseigne que l'enfance est précieuse, étant nécessaire pour chaque enfant qui ne doit pas la gaspiller paresseusement, mais aussi qu'il existe un danger que certains adultes peuvent poser face aux enfants. Une réflexion sincère sur les désirs sexuels adultes face aux enfants étant problématique parce qu'elle dépouille l'innocence qu'on cherche à protéger. Barker a donc dû sublimer une telle leçon dans le récit. Ce sont alors les illustrations et leur rapport au récit à la fois corroborant et contractif qui révèlent une ambivalence cachée du personnage enfant, ainsi qu'une dualité présente dans les deux personnages : l'enfant et le prédateur d'enfants.

This article undertakes an analysis of the relationship between the text and illustrations in Clive Barker's children's novel *The Thief of Always: A Fable*. By considering not only the plot and characterization presented in *Thief*, but also the accompanying illustrations, drawn by Barker himself, an interesting dynamic is revealed. While illustrations are included in children's literature to enliven the work and increase its appeal for the young reader, these additions also serve to supplement the text, introducing and incorporating new information into the work. When the author is also the illustrator, it would be expected that the text and image would work in tandem toward a common hermeneutical outcome, yet when attempting to convey a complex relation with the potential for danger, ambiguity, and ambivalence, like that between the adult and child, conflicting ideas can infiltrate a seemingly cooperative process. The significance in the text-image relationship at work in Barker's *Thief* can be best summarized by Joseph H. Schwarcz, in his book *The Ways of the Illustrator*, who writes that "the pictures let us in on a secret" (17), and given that most secrets are meant to be just that, Barker's illustrations partner with as well as betray the written word in what hidden secrecies they expose.

Barker's approach to children's literature reflects a modern trend described by Emer O'Sullivan in her book *Comparative Children's Literature*, which treats children's literature as literature as opposed to mere didactic

exercise. O'Sullivan clarifies that "this new literary children's literature is distinguished by insecurity and ambivalence instead of certainty, linear rather than circular narratives and diversity instead of simplicity" (28). With the inclusion of his own illustrations, Barker achieves a permeating undercurrent within his linear narrative in which either textual or visual forms are at times complementary, supplemental, or oppositional. As he admits, his images precede his texts: "my image making and story making are associated [...]. My sketches act as notes" (qtd. in Burke ii). Because Barker writes about his images, using them "as notes" as he says, his work can be categorized as ekphrastic. Stephen Cheeke asserts that on its most basic level, ekphrasis constitutes "'literary' prose descriptions of artwork" (4). The text and the images are inextricably linked, each explaining and referencing each other and, in the process, amplifying the "the gap between language and the visual image" (Cheeke 2). Writing and illustrations create representations; hence, it is not the image or the text itself that carries meaning but rather the signifier to which the text, image, or their ekphrastic "gap" points. Barker is both author and illustrator of *Thief*, a rare combination in which multiple threads of meaning become embedded in the literature. When discussing the composite of text and image in literature, Schwarcz affirms that "the combination of the two forms of communication into a common fabric where they complement each other creates conditions of dependence and interdependence"

(4). Barker's illustrations are highly connected with the narrative, creating what Schwarcz calls a close "partnership with the written word," one that is not necessarily complementary (11). Through their ekphrastic relationship, the text and the illustrations in *Thief* expose underlying issues of childhood not explicitly expressed in the text.

Thief is the story of ten-year-old Harvey Swick who dreams of a life free from the tedium of childhood. He wishes to exchange his chores and schoolwork for the leisure and freedom of adult life. Barker thrusts his child protagonist into a predatory realm that threatens both Harvey's childhood and life, leaving him thankful upon his escape for the re-establishment of his childhood and grateful for the time he has to grow up under the watchful eye of his loving parents. Barker imparts this lesson via a child abduction narrative. Enticed by a smiling stranger, Harvey leaves home to enter a fantasy world that promises endless fun. The fantasy world is off-set from reality by a concealing fog and can be imagined as an estate with a large house surrounded by a field, a wooded area, and a pond. The fantasy world is orchestrated by Barker's villain, Mr. Hood, who detains children with promises of abundance, indulgence, and endless leisure, but then uses them to maintain his own immortality. Appearing in two forms, first as the house itself and then later—after the house is destroyed—as a humanized form of a man comprised of debris from the ruined house, Hood is a veritable monstrous representation

of a child predator. The fantasy realm, while it promises fun, magic, and food, is essentially a prison, and predictably, Harvey must defeat Hood to free himself, as well as all the children that Hood has imprisoned within this fantasy realm over the years.

As a fable, *Thief* is a cautionary tale that not only teaches that childhood years are precious and are not to be wished away or squandered in idle leisure, but also tells of the dangers that some exploitative or predatory adults may pose to children. This second lesson is far less explicit than the first and likely only readily accessible to the adult reader, yet it is one that discourses around child protection claim is necessary to be conveyed to the child in order to reduce harm and preserve innocence.¹ Problematically, to participate in an honest and frank discussion of adult sexual desires for children would despoil the very innocence that is trying to be protected; thus, a lesson such as this must be sublimated within the story. However, as my analysis will reveal, it is not only this lesson that becomes embedded within the text-image relationship, but also feelings of adult ambivalence and fear toward the child as a figure, effectively calling into question the very notion of childhood innocence. By dissecting the camouflaging effects of magic and monstrosity, the anxieties ingrained in some of Barker's key illustrations are brought to the fore, revealing their contained dualities and contradictions when considered in tandem with the text.

Barker is best known for his work in adult horror film and literature. Beginning in 1984, Barker has published eleven adult horror and fantasy novels² and four children's novels, *The Thief of Always* (1992), and a recent five-book children's series called *Abarat* (2002, 2004, 2011).³ His literature is pluralistic, falling under multiple genre and includes great diversity in characterization, yet an overall obsession for Barker could be described as the aesthetic of the perverse juxtaposed with rhetoric to protect the innocent. Further, many of his narratives focus on the excess of carnal desire. Dissatisfied with mundane everyday life, his characters frequently travel to secondary worlds in search of augmentation: unearthly pleasures or mystical powers. With a taste for debauchery, Barker incorporates violence, horror, and sexuality in his literature with his characters sometimes becoming physically monstrous, arguably as punishment for seeking and experiencing the limits of corporeal excess.⁴ Realms of the real and the imaginary frequently collide, confront or integrate each other and surviving characters emerge with enhanced self-awareness. Barker generally imagines his literary work as fantasy with an infusion of horror, what he describes as a sanctuary for the reader, a space to safely indulge the darker sides of the imagination in the assurance that "the real world is always there to be gone back to" (qtd. in Burke 56-57). His children's books are no different.

Real Fears of the Child Predator

As with his adult novels, Barker uses the invulnerable space of fantasy to explore real-world adult fears, as he describes rather carnivorously, treating "the real world [as] raw material to be devoured and transformed within the belly of my imagination" (qtd. in Burke 55). In *Thief*, this true-to-life adult fear is of child abduction, yet while the text may create an exploratory haven, the real-life existence of child predators denies any such protective claims, intensifying these anxieties within the text. As Paula Fass maintains in *Kidnapped*, adult desires "to inflict pain on children, to get pleasure from their bodies, or to exploit them materially are not a product of our imaginations. Each story of a child lost to a predator (however that is defined) is a true horror story" (262). Published in the early 1990s, *Thief* appears in the wake of some highly publicized and extremely vicious cases of child abductions, which caused widespread social anxiety for child safety.

Historian Philip Jenkins describes the 1980s and 1990s as a climate of fear wherein the conception of the child predator in the American public imagination changed into an abstract notion of a relentless, sexual force that endangered every child. This newly conceived notion of child predators as "extremely persistent in their deviant careers [... and] virtually unstoppable" captured the public imagination and instilled an acute sense of fear for the safety of children in public spaces that is present in this literary narrative (Jenkins

189). It is against this social backdrop of concern for the preservation and sanctity of childhood that Barker's villain can and should be read. Indeed, Mr. Hood abducts Harvey via a secondary agent named Rictus who entices Harvey to accompany him to Hood's Holiday House while Harvey is on his morning walk to school (*Thief* 7). However, like the abstracted conception of the predator, Hood is initially presented not as a tangible person but as the magic of the realm itself, granting all of the child's wishes without expecting anything in return. Yet, as the narrative reveals, the Holiday House is not a fantastical anomaly that exists of its own accord, but rather, a house run by a man who seduces, controls and confines children in order to feed on their life-force to extend his own life, much like a vampire. More explicitly stated, Hood deceives, kidnaps, holds captive, and ultimately consumes children. Metaphorically and metonymically, Barker represents Hood as a monster in both text and image.

Monster scholar Jerome Cohen explains in *Monster Theory* that fictional representations of monsters need "to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event" (5). He further describes the monster as embodying "those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster" (14). While Hood's interest in the children is not explicitly sexual,⁵ such desires can be read as implicated by his predatory and consumptive nature, particularly given the similarities between his character

and a notorious child predator of the time, Westley Alan Dodd. Public opinion of Dodd was that he was essentially a monster: "the epitome of the merciless and unapologetic predator of small children. [...] evil personified, the ultimate human predator" (Jenkins 193). Hood may or may not have been based on Dodd, but Dodd's pervasive presence in the media, combined with subsequent coverage of child predators in the years following publication of *Thief*, grounds Barker's fantasy narrative in reality. Such grounding instils a sense of immediacy for the anxieties raised by Barker in this text, echoing the social concerns of the time and permeating the experiences of parents who might be reading *Thief* to their children.⁶ Of course, as Peter Hunt explains, in "children's books, it is easy to read against the implications," providing a quasi-protective mechanism for naive readers (4). This sinister narrative is loosely disguised within the text, granting reader-denial if desired. However, a close reading of the text, in conjunction with an analysis of Barker's accompanying illustrations, makes it near impossible to ignore the predatory subtext, compromising the appropriateness of this text for a child readership.

There are a number of similarities between the media portrayal of Dodd and Barker's characterization of Hood that emphasize the paralleling that I speculate is at play in *Thief*. Hood seeks children of ignorance, ones who can readily be duped into entering his realm and who will enjoy his seductive

offerings without questioning them, rather than a specific gender.⁷ Yet, Barker focuses his narrative around Harvey and another boy that he befriends within the fantasy realm, Wendell. Likewise, Dodd targeted both male and female children, but he is most infamous for the murder of three boys, aged four, ten, and eleven (Jenkins 193). Hood's realm is concealed from view by a shroud of fog with the entrance only visible to the children chosen to enter the realm. In this way, the magic fog shields, keeping him invisible and "protecting [Hood] from the laws of the real world. Safe behind the mists of his illusion" (*Thief* 130). Adults within the reality realm cannot see the house, and the children within the realm only see the house; they cannot see Mr. Hood. The mask of the House amplifies the villainy of Hood; it is both his camouflage and his transgression against children and adults alike. Similarly Dodd, prior to his capture, had encountered and successfully deceived a number of representatives from the justice and mental health communities, "most of whom failed to *detect* his lethal potential" (Jenkins 193; emphasis added). Between 1991 and 1993, as Jenkins recounts, "Dodd was at the height of his national notoriety, [...] boasting of the ruthless quality of his crimes and warning that the justice system could never *control* him should he be released" (193; emphasis added). Not only was Dodd uncontrollable by the justice system, he was undetectable by adults in positions of authority; capable judicial and psychiatric professionals were unable to

identify the danger of this man. Dodd's intentions to harm, it would seem, were veiled to officials just as Hood's realm and the actions therein are concealed by the magical fog barrier.

The Role of Magic in Deception and Denial

As if to proclaim its autonomy, the text would have the implied reader believe that the illustrations are mere supplementation, filling in what Barker claims to be an inevitable linguistic lacuna. As if to demonstrate this deficiency in communication remedied by an illustration, Barker presents a poignant scene which follows Harvey's escape from the fantasy realm wherein he attempts to explain his capture to his parents. When interrogated about his escape from Hood's house, Harvey fails to find the words to describe the house of his captor to his parents, so he draws a picture: "He did just that, and though he wasn't much of an artist his hand seemed to remember more than his brain had, because after a half hour he had drawn the House in considerable detail. His father was pleased" (*Thief* 129). Harvey's reliance on the drawing to say what he is unable to say can also be read as a metanarrative that implies the same for the illustrations that Barker included to accompany his words in the novel. Acknowledging his inability to fully articulate his narrative through text alone, Barker relies on his illustrations to provide additional information to his readers, information of which he may not be fully cognizant. Like Harvey, who is able to remember

more through the act of drawing, Barker is able to convey more through his illustrations. Conversely, this reliance on illustrations also reveals a lingering distrust in language's ability to describe traumatic experiences.

Fig. 1 Harvey's drawing of the Holiday House (*Thief* 130).⁸

Through the necessity of Harvey's drawing, the text "reflects on its own literary nature," concluding that the presence of illustrations in children's literature accounts for the linguistic and experiential deficiency in childhood knowledge to create an unassuming image that pleases adult authority (O'Sullivan 28). However, Harvey's illustration is far more sinister in subject and genesis. The allusion to the suppression of memory that follows an abusive and traumatic experience is evident but is made more explicit with Schwarcz's theory of

how illustrations reveal a hidden—or perhaps suppressed—secret. In that Barker is both author and illustrator, he is free to indulge either or both personas,⁹ allowing them to corroborate or delineate, even to the extent that "text and illustration counterpoint each other" (Schwarcz 16-17). Like the extrapolated image of the House from Harvey's subconscious, Barker's drawings reveal "a secret." "The two media reinforce each other's message" (Schwarcz 94), yet the message they reinforce may not be apparent, a secret to both author and reader, waiting to be revealed

The inclusion of magic in this narrative creates a willingness to disbelieve and allows the text to portray itself as a fun story in which a young child defeats his captors and in which the captors' motivations for the abduction is the pursuit of the fantastical aspiration of immortality. The fantastic elements, both textual and visual, like the magic within the tale, appease adult fears by concealing the realness of the narrative. Adult anxieties and fears of abduction can be momentarily forgotten just as easily as one could dismiss magic. Just as the abduction content can be suppressed by the reader, so too can the abduction-like experience of reading. While most readers would not describe the immersive act of reading as being held captive (although, many would likely describe a good book as *captivating*), Barker himself has identified this analogous relation. Reflecting upon *Thief*, Barker likens the interaction between author and reader

to abduction:

Writing the stories is a power trip—and the trip is that you’re actually possessing people for a little bit. [...] You’re actually putting this page in front of them and saying, “Right, I’m going to get hold of you and not let go. And you don’t know me, but when you’re done, you’re going to know some very intimate part of me.” (*clivebarker.info* n. pag.)

The mere creation of a fantasy realm is indicative of forced abduction for Barker. Moreover, the addition of magic enhances the fantastical nature of this narrative, as well as imposes a false sense of fictionality onto real stories of abduction portrayed in the media, allowing adult fears of child abduction or worse to be controlled and denied by the text. Such relief from reality has twofold consequences. First is the creation of space for parental denial of the realities of child abduction via an increased distinction between the untouchable child reader and the child victim in the media. The second is that space is created for the child reader to equate abduction with adventure, resulting in potential desire for such an adventure and the heroism promised at the end, or in an undermining of the potential dangers of the child predator by filtering the abduction through a magical encounter that takes place exclusively in a fantasy realm.

The existence of the fantasy realm, and everything within, is explained by magic. In *Thief*, magic is depicted at times

as real or imaginary, complicating the distinction between reality and fantasy. Problematically, the narrator repeatedly refers to the fantasy realm as “a place of illusions,” trickery, and mirage (*Thief* 59). However, Harvey faces devastating consequences after escaping from the House, revealing magic’s ability to create true change and loss in the real world. After spending a month in the fantasy realm, Harvey and Wendell suspect that they are trapped and, together, escape through the fog barrier. While both re-enter reality still in child form, they find that 31 years have passed and that Hood has stolen their childhood from them (*Thief* 117-19). Still a child, Harvey returns home but has lost the opportunity to grow up with his parents and his community (*Thief* 120). The deadly truth behind Hood’s illusions is first revealed to Harvey when he crosses the fog-threshold in his escape with Wendell, where he finds that his keepsakes from the house turn to dust in his pocket (*Thief* 117). Yet, while these physical objects reveal themselves as ephemeral, the temporal difference between the inside and outside of the fantasy realm, marked by the wall of fog, is affirmed rather than unmade as a real consequence of Harvey’s time in the House. Here lies the difficulty of this text. While the narrator would have the implied reader believe that all the effects of the House are illusions and tricks, the temporal difference is in fact very real.

Having learned the truth of Hood’s trickery while in the realm of reality and empowered by this new knowledge,

Harvey returns to the House. His newly-acquired defense against the mirages of the House is foregrounded in an encounter between him and a tempting slice of pie offered as a distraction meant to lull him back into the rhythms of the house. However, the false-image fails and Harvey, armed with his new ability to see truth, recognizes the façade as the pile of dust that is its true nature: “He looked back at the pie, and for a moment it seemed he glimpsed the truth of the thing: the gray dust and ashes from which this illusion was made” (*Thief* 161).

Fig. 2 Jive holding the illusion of pie (*Thief* 158).

In the illustration, the pie remains in pie form, yet the skull-shaped steam signifies that this pie is not food, and belief in this pie will bring only death. Harvey’s loss of innocence, acquired during his return to reality, removes his veil of naivety and allows him to see past the illusion to the death (the dust) that lingers beneath.¹⁰ Harvey is empowered by his loss of innocence, able to see more and to know more than other children. From this example of the pie, it becomes clear that truth is embedded within the illustrations, a secret adult truth made available to Harvey by entering his adult reality while still a child.

The narrative is clear in its message: adult knowledge is the only weapon against the child predator. This conclusion is rather problematic for a genre that assumes the ignorance of the child. According to children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman, the imperative of this genre is to mediate, wherein “both children’s literature and fantasy place the implied reader in a position of innocence about the reality they describe” (*Hidden* 201). With the child reader confined to ignorance and the child hero’s success contingent on the acquisition of knowledge that is distributed by adulthood—for Harvey, this knowledge is controlled by the adult author—not only is the child reader stripped of any potency, but he or she is also positioned hierarchically below the child character, who is similarly subordinate to the author. O’Sullivan asserts that children’s literature is predicated on an “unequal partnership” between author and child in terms of

“their command of language, their experience of the world, and their positions in society,” with the scales of knowledge and experience tipped toward the author (14). When combined with the contention that “children’s literature is literature that leaves things out,” this hierarchy implies the presence of an inherent subtext embedded within any children’s literature text, one that the author (or another adult reader) may follow but that the child may not (Nodelman, *Hidden* 198). This complex idea is fully explored by Nodelman, who concludes that “the texts represent as much of the truth about the world as adults assume children are capable of *knowing*,” which is reduced to “the simplicities of a text in terms of the more *complex knowledge* that sustains it and makes it comprehensible” to an adult reader (*Hidden* 199, 205). The paradoxical nature of *Thief* is thus exposed: as a protective fable, it is at once expected to present real-world problems and solutions for children and to shield the child reader from the graphic and disturbing realities of the threat it attempts to warn against.

This ambiguity is foregrounded in *Thief* in both its employment of the dual realness and unrealness of magic, as well as its emphasis on curiosity. In the fantasy realm controlled by Hood through magic (and Barker), Harvey and Wendell discuss the mysteries of the realm, beginning with the pond around the back of the house which they have discovered is full of large, ugly fish. These fish are in fact the transformed bodies of Hood’s previous victims, a

fate that awaits Harvey and Wendell if they stay at the Holiday House too long:

“Why would Mr. Hood have fish like that? I mean, everything else is so beautiful. The lawns, the House, the orchard ...”

“Who cares?” said Wendell.

“I do,” said Harvey. “I want to know everything there is to know about this place.”

“Why?”

“So I can tell my mom and dad about it when I get home.”

“Home?” said Wendell. “Who needs it? We’ve got everything we need here.”

“I’d still like to know how it all works.”
[...]

“Don’t be a dope, Harvey. This is all real. It’s magic, but it’s real.”

“You think so?” (*Thief* 43)

This scene serves multiple purposes. Most obviously, it establishes the contrast between Harvey and Wendell. While each boy asks questions, Wendell’s questions are dismissive rather than inquisitive, questions that perpetuate ignorance and rebuff truth as opposed to Harvey’s knowledge-seeking questions that request understanding.

Furthermore, this scene demonstrates the displacement of knowledge with magic; when Wendell's "who cares?" leaves Harvey unsatisfied, "magic" takes its place as the answer to "how it all works." Magic, a child's answer for the unexplained, satisfies Wendell; it provides "everything we need," since his needs are childlike: childhood knowledge and childhood desires. Wendell is content with attributing the "real" to magic, but Harvey continues to question right to the end of the discussion, finally asking "You think so?" Within the fantasy realm, something tantalizes the children and intrigues the reader, prompting this reflective scene. The realness of magic, and not the monster behind it as Cohen would argue, elicits the responses of curiosity and desire (16-7). Of course, the element of transgression underscores the experience of Hood's fantasy realm; every aspect of the fantasy—right down to the knowledge that it is a fantasy—initiates a cycle of desire and inquisition in the children. However, by soliciting questions from both Harvey and Wendell despite the lack of answers, magical realness complicates Cohen's monster, adding intellectual intrigue to its appeal.

Doubling the (Child) Monster

The doubling effect of Barker's illustrations begins to reveal itself in the dual expression of life and death, food and dust. Yet, it is the depictions of Harvey that are the most revealing of the embedded ambivalences within this narrative. Consider the first image

of Harvey, presented even before the title page for the book; it is one of clear division and duality within the child:

Fig. 3 This image appears on the third page of the book, prior to any numbering.

Harvey's face is the image of childlike innocence, appearing complacent, banal, and even melancholic; he sits in a passive stance, hands calmly resting in his lap while his head is devoured by a hideous monster. Yet, Harvey has also chosen to wear the costume of the monster and to adopt this frightening, monstrous persona. He appears

monstrous, magnified by the shadow he projects that looms larger than it should behind him and shows Harvey's ears, which should not be affected by the costume, as pointed like a creature's. Moreover, the shadow is both cast by Harvey—a projection of his body—yet it also looms over him in a threatening way. The monster costume—or perhaps more appropriately, the act of donning or embracing monstrosity—is dangerous to Harvey; it threatens and changes him; it conflates him with the monster. He is at once innocence and monstrosity combined, needing adult protection but also visibly frightening—the monster's eyes demanding or inducing fear. Schwarcz's secret contained within the illustrations of the narrative is this ambivalence: the dual conception of the child (and childhood) as both innocent and monstrous.¹⁰

Barker revisits this idea mid-way through the narrative, when Harvey is magically transformed into a vampire as a Halloween treat. Through the magic of Hood's Holiday House, Harvey is transformed into a vampire: he grows fangs, his ears extend into points, his arms become wings, and he acquires the taste for blood (*Thief* 78-85). He flies from the roof and swoops down to attack Wendell, remembering his humanity at the last minute and refusing to "*Bite him. [...] Drink a little of his [Wendell's] blood*" (*Thief* 86). Interestingly, in this representation, the predator turns childhood against itself by filling Harvey with the desire to attack another child: Wendell. Barker's illustrations of Harvey as a vampire are

dual illustrations that frame the chapter in which Harvey is transformed:

(Previous Page)
Fig. 4 Idealized (*Thief* 72).

Fig. 5 Actual (*Thief* 82).

The images represent an idealized and actual reality. In the idealized reality, Harvey relishes in his metamorphosis, untroubled by his enactment of a boyhood dream come to life, while in the actual reality, Harvey is a victim of this dream, fearful of his ability to harm and to instill fear in others. The duality of the child as both monstrous and innocent—a devilish victim of an imagined childhood ideal—is unveiled.

The idealized image of Harvey as a vampire is countered by the chapter title “What Do You Dream?” (*Thief* 73). The question appears to address Harvey, yet it can also be read in two ways: first, to question the aspirations of childhood and second, to question how childhood is conceived by adults. The illustration thus serves to answer both questions. The presence of the adult imaginary is augmented by an earlier conversation between Wendell and Harvey, wherein the adult voice of Mrs. Griffin, an old woman who lives at the Holiday House and acts as caretaker to the children, affirms the normalcy of boyhood morbid interests: “‘You’re monsters,’ she replied with the hint of a smile. ‘That’s what you are. Monsters’” (*Thief* 48). This affirmation suggests that monstrosity is the (fantasized) fundamental nature of boyhood. Harvey’s “dream” of being a murderous vampire is confirmed as an adult conception of the idealized child. The reality of this conception is

indicated by the closing image of Harvey plummeting to the ground with a dark shadow behind him, actual childhood, in need of protection.

Like the pre-emptive illustration of Harvey’s costumed duality, the shadow both results from and threatens the child, yet this dark shadow has its own legs and appears to be a shape independent of Harvey, one that is outside of his control. This shadowy figure is either chasing or perhaps pushing Harvey to the ground, or it is symbolic of the true threat to his innocence: the burden of the idealized adult conception of childhood monstrosity imposed upon him. The title next to this illustration reads “Falling From Grace” (*Thief* 83), which evokes the fallen angel who is expelled from heavenly grace, indicating a failure to live up to some higher (adult) expectation of divine innocence. Through his embrace of the adult fantasy in the previous picture, Harvey becomes monstrous and fearful in his embodiment of the actual rather than the idealized results of this fantasy. However, Harvey is already conceived of as monstrous prior to the commencement of the narrative, indicating adult ambivalence toward the conception of childhood that predicates and infiltrates *Thief*.

Barker’s illustrations, in conjunction with his use of the monstrous in both his villains and his protagonist, create a complex but not surprising duality, contingent on the modern construction of childhood. Nodelman explains:

They [children] are necessarily double

and divided—both that which they mimic, childhood as envisaged and imposed on them by adults, and that which underlies and survives and transgresses that adult version of childhood. The adult impulse [...] requires that children be both controllable and uncontrollable, both what adults want them to be and incapable of being what adults want them to be. [...] The divided child is the only possible child constructed by children's literature. (*Hidden* 187)

O'Sullivan conceptualizes children's literature as "a body of literature into which the dominant social, cultural and educational norms are inscribed" (13), while Nodelman envisions it as "a means by which adults teach children how to be childlike" (*Hidden* 203). The didactic imperative of Barker's fable, while it may be well-intended, is unavoidably confused, formulating conflated and contradictory notions of "childlikeness," evident in his visual representations of Harvey (*Hidden* 191). *Thief* reflects and constructs a conflated social and cultural conception of childhood.

Despite this ambivalence toward childhood or perhaps because of it, adult fears of child abduction underscore every aspect of this narrative. Harvey is simultaneously victim and saviour, beacon of childhood vibrancy and bearer of death, attacking the idea of immortality in both adulthood and childhood.

Fig. 6 Harvey as duality, white and

black, body and shadow, saviour and witness of death (*Thief* 142).

According to Margarida Morgado in "A Loss beyond Imagining: Child Disappearance in Fiction," works that engage in the discourses on childhood, like Barker's *Thief*, simultaneously address "the absence and presence of children: their absence in adult's recollections [i.e., imagination] of childhood and their presence as real individuals who either differ from or resemble adults" (245). In this statement, Morgado juxtaposes the imagined child and the real child with one conceptualized and constructed by the adult, and the other separate and knowable to the adult only by comparison. She stresses the adult's ambivalence toward their conceptions of childhood, which results in a dual status of the child as either an ideal or an actual—but in both cases,

paradoxically, an imagined figure. She claims that “adults nurture childhood as a dimension of *infinite* and immutable time, an idea of *innocence*, and a locus of *affective* investment” (246; emphasis added). Adults construct the child as immortal innocence, indisputably ignorant of both mortality and sexuality,¹² a figure who acts as a receptor of adult affection (acceptable in the form of protection and familial love, unacceptable in the form of captivity and sexual love).

It is this idealized memory that adults bring as readers or authors to children’s literature, and this desire that Barker exposes as sinister by applying the childhood notions of immortality and innocence (as a non-sexualized yet insatiable adult) onto Hood, his adult villain. Barker creates similarities between Harvey and Hood and, by doing so in combination with the duality of Harvey as monstrous and innocent, he frees Harvey from what Morgado refers to as the prison of “fictions of innocence” or what David Gurnham has dubbed the “disabling and disarming discourse of innocence” (246; 116). Once freed, Harvey may be used “to articulate [adult] fears and wishes,” including the contradictory desire for and fear of immortal childhood (Morgado 247). The ambivalence toward the nature of childhood, this conflict between what is desirable in children and what is achievable in actuality, is of particular relevance to the narrative of child abduction.

Adults are aware of the taboo sexual desires of some adults toward children, yet divulging that knowledge, propagating that adult-known fear, would result in a corruption of the very innocence in need of protection. Child protection discourses contend that a revelation of the sexual desirability of the child would despoil the child by initiating it into adult knowledge prematurely, but such a revelation would equally taint the adult since it is in the adult that this desire originates. Thus, stories such as Barker’s, which place the threat to childhood outside of the realm of familiar and realistic adulthood, prevents both the child and the adult from corruption. Bronwyn Davies clarifies that “constructing the danger as coming from the unknown Other, the stranger, saves those who are closest to the children from thinking about what dangers they themselves, or their loved ones, might be exposing children to” (ix). Hence, the child is expected to know without knowing, expected to be able to identify an unknowable threat, because of the adult decision to withhold knowledge and perpetuate ignorance, leaving the child to maneuver through a dangerous and unknowable adult world in an idealized state of perpetual innocence.

Yet, this ignorant, unsuspecting child, in his trusting innocence and total dependence, is at his most vulnerable. His susceptibility opens the door for what Morgado contends adults fear most: the monstrous child. According to Morgado, adults fear for children who, through a loss of innocence, will

“re-emerg[e] as monsters or victims of a ruthless society,” revealing the inability to control “the innocent, pure, passive, and dependent child” (251). Such fears spur the creation of literary works meant to educate (but not too much) and protect, preventing this monstrous transformation. Barker, as has been shown, allows this narrative to play through to the cautionary hindsight at its end. Given Harvey’s loss of innocence, Cohen would concede the naturalness of the monstrous child in the presence of the fictional monster (Hood): “The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographical, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself” (12). Ultimately, Harvey transgresses these intellectual, geographical, and sexual boundaries guarded by the monster and gains the knowledge necessary to defeat the predator via his encounter with reality.

Reading between the Sublimated Lines

Ironically, monsters are frequently employed to depict situations that adults fear will create monstrous children. According to Nodelman, “children’s literature is frequently about coming to terms with a world one does not understand” and camouflaging lessons on harmful adult intentions would serve to prepare without corruption by maintaining the “world one does not understand” through literary metaphor, analogy or hidden subtext

(“Generalizations” 178). To achieve this end, such texts “sublimate or keep present but leave unsaid a variety of forms of knowledge—sexual, cultural, historical—theoretically only available to and only understandable to adults” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 206). Similarly, “monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical)” (Cohen 5). In reading *Thief* as a child abduction narrative, each of these forms of knowledge is suppressed: the “sexual” implications of child abduction, the “cultural” understanding of the threat of a child predator and, the “historical” pattern of passed abductions and their consequences. Hence, the knowledge of the world and its dangers remain silent, unknown, sublimated in order to preserve the innocence of the idealized child.

During their escape, which is a direct result of Wendell’s confrontation with the (sexualized) vampire-Harvey, the boys are chased by Carna, Hood’s winged beast, who crosses the fog boundary in its blood-lust for the boys and then immediately begins to deteriorate. The parallel to Harvey’s vampire metamorphosis, in which he lets out a blood-curdling scream as he flies through the sky before swooping down to trap Wendell and suck his blood, is illuminating. Like Carna, who begins to deteriorate once beyond the fog barrier and outside of the fantasy realm, Harvey’s vampiric qualities dissipate when he refuses to follow through with the fantasy of penetrating Wendell’s neck and drawing his blood

(*Thief* 111, 87-8). Thus, it is the denial of fantasy that dissolves the monster.

Fig. 7 Carna with mouth agape, ready to receive (*Thief* 108).

The destruction of Carna when it encounters reality is symbolic of the boundary maintained by its monstrosity. Carna, “the devourer,” is appetite incarnate, and its emaciated body reveals the insatiability of this appetite as well as the insubstantiality of its objects of desire (*Thief* 111). This idea is reflected in Harvey’s revelation that the food that is meant to sustain him is in actuality merely dust, as well as in the fish transformation of the children who are meant to sustain Hood’s immortal life, leaving only an ugly fish when the child’s essence is spent.

Carna’s significance lies in its function within the narrative as representative guard of the fantasy realm. Carna is what Cohen calls the “monster of prohibition,” the monster who patrols the border created by monstrosity, maintaining the integrity of the boundary between normativity and monstrosity (13). Bodily appetites can, of course, concern food, of which there are copious amounts within Hood’s realm, but it can also apply to more sensual desires for pleasure. Contradictorily, while Carna limits, it also elicits exploration and begs for understanding: “The monstrous body is pure culture. [...] [T]he monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns’” (Cohen 4). The monster has a dual function, warning and also revealing that which it warned against in the same token.

Revealed at the end of *Thief*, however, Carna is “kept alive not by any will of its own but because Hood demanded its service” (*Thief* 170). In that Carna is Hood’s agent and driven entirely by his will, in effect, Hood is the true monster of prohibition, who “exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed” (Cohen 13). Cohen explains further: “From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes” (12). Carna reveals and warns against taboo corporeal desires on behalf of Hood, desires either experienced by

children (the children's desires—their wishes—granted by Hood) or targeted toward children (Hood's desire for children). Of particular relevance to this extension is Nodelman's comment that, given its power to construct notions of childhood, at its core "children's literature may have the unacknowledged purpose of teaching children not to reveal their sexuality to adults" (*Hidden* 201). For Harvey, the boundary that Carna demarcates is dualistic—at once the horrid border of adult sexual desire for children as well as the uncertain demesnes of childhood sexual desire. The presence of the monster foregrounds and forbids these twofold desires.

Magic obstructs this truth, making it unbelievable, even within the narrative. The predator's hide-away is a magical house hidden behind a mystic shroud of fog, a wall whose "misty stones seemed to reach for him [Harvey] in their turn, wrapping their soft, gray arms around his shoulders and ushering him through" (*Thief* 16). This romanticized, fantastical image of a child being welcomed into a magical realm, when seen through the suspicious eyes of an adult gaze, is a threatening image of a child willingly accompanying his abductor to an unpleasant fate. The illustration of Harvey passing through the wall serves this same purpose. No monstrous arms reach to grab Harvey and pull him through, but rather the fog dissolves into a yielding wall of mist that easily allows for Harvey's passage to the other side where a field of flowers awaits.

Fig. 8 Harvey travels through the wall of fog (*Thief* 10).

The path, in that it is a "Hidden Way," as indicated by the chapter heading, is uniquely reserved for children (*Thief* 11). This is the chapter in which the abduction of Harvey takes place, in which Harvey willingly follows his captor to a stranger's house, a promise-land, a "place where the days are always sunny [...] and the nights are full of wonder" (*Thief* 8). The chapter opens with this image of the fog yielding to Harvey and closes with a transitional illustration of his waiting reward, a flowering meadow to contrast the dreary February day he left behind (*Thief* 16-7).

Fig. 9 A field of flowers materialized across the two final pages of the chapter (*Thief* 16-7).

The text that accompanies his crossing the border between reality and fantasy points to the first of many sexual subtexts that charge Harvey's visit to the Holiday House with the threatening presence of a child predator. As Harvey approaches the fog, "within three steps of the wall a gust of balmy, flower-scented wind slipped between the shimmering stones and *kissed his cheek*" (*Thief* 16; emphasis added). The use of "slipped between," most commonly followed by *the sheets*, amplifies the sexual suggestion of Harvey's kissed cheek, but this kiss is perceived—if it is acknowledged at all—as innocent because its source is magical and the knowledge that supports it is childlike. Because children's literature positions the implied reader in a state of childlike innocence, the sexual subtext of the wind's kisses, made more disturbing in the knowledge that Hood controls everything in the fantasy realm, wind included, can easily remain concealed within the text.

The Predator in Two Images

Hood strives for concealment throughout the narrative, using the magical elements of his lair—the house, the fog, the pond, and the wind—to disguise his true nature. Hood is illusive to the children, appearing once as a whispered voice carried by the breeze or a faint question from the shadows. Harvey forces the encounter between himself and Hood when he returns to defeat him and save the children confined as fish in the pond. Harvey demands to meet Hood, at which point Rictus would have Harvey (and the reader) believe that "He is the house" (*Thief* 187). Yet, the illustration and the text conspire against the description, depicting Hood not as the house but of the house, a voice that resounds with the house as its source and a voyeuristic eye that spans the attic ceiling.

Fig. 10 Hood as voyeur (*Thief* 166).

Despite actively seeking him out, Harvey finds Hood only by accident.

[...] he took little care where he walked. He stumbled, fell, and ended up sprawled on the hard boards, staring up at the roof through a red haze of pain.

And there above him was Hood, in all his glory.

His face was spread over the entire roof, his features horribly distorted. His eyes were dark pits gouged into the timber; his nose was flared and flattened grotesquely, like

the nose of an enormous bat; his mouth was a lipless slit that was surely ten feet wide, from which issued a voice that was like the creaking of doors and the howling of chimneys and the rattling of windows. (*Thief* 170-71)

The description of Hood's face—its distorted formation, grotesque and bat-like—is countered by the illustration, which reduces Hood to a single eye, as if his only crime against the children he captures is as a voyeur. The illustration of Hood portrays his very disposition: a seeing eye that hides from his object of focus, a coward, camouflaged by the house, and then again by this reductive representation. Yet, this eye, when considered with the text, does more than see Harvey. The significance in this encounter is that Harvey sees the eye and not the other way around. Harvey uncovers the truth behind his abductor, but only by placing himself in a most vulnerable position: "sprawled on the hard boards" beneath Hood's gaze (*Thief* 170). Hood's raping eye is violated by Harvey, through his discovery of it, just as it violates Harvey in this most symbolic positioning.

Furthermore, Barker's depiction of the threat of a child predator as a house rather than a man makes the threat inherently fantastic, removing its association from normative society, while also problematically distancing it from society's control. Through his manipulation of time Hood achieves immortality (the unrelenting and persistent predator that adults fear), and through his use of magic he conceals

his acts, making him undetectable and thus unstoppable. The home, and by extension the parents, offers no protection for the child against the threat of abduction. Harvey's parents dismiss going to the police for help as absurd because of the fantastic nature of the tale:

"And what do we tell them?" his father said, raising his voice.

"That we *think* there's a House out there that hides in a mist, and steals children with *magic*? It's ridiculous." (*Thief* 130)

This dismissal also affirms the fantasies of childhood wherein children are able to protect themselves: in *Thief*, no adult can save the children; only Harvey can redeem and reclaim the notion of childhood to save not only himself, but all the children. In the end, each child is restored to his or her original time period. Childhood is affirmed within the realm of reality, with Harvey's parents unconvinced as to the crucial role he played in this adventure (*Thief* 227-28).

Yet, Barker complicates his narrative by doubling Hood's representation with a second form. Like the contradictory representation of magic being both real and illusion, Hood is oppositionally represented as both an extremely powerful villain, able to control and confine children without detection or intervention, and a fragile adult easily destroyed by a child. After Harvey succeeds in destroying the house, Hood

returns, rising from the rubble to take the form of a man.

Fig. 11 Hood as a man (*Thief* 206).

By individualizing the predator in the form of a single man, his threat to children becomes manageable. He becomes identifiable, traceable, and susceptible to the laws of society, all qualities that did not apply to him in house form. This transformation confirms his demise within the text: "In the high times of his evil, Hood had been the House. Now, it was the other way around. The House, what was left of it, had become Mr. Hood" (*Thief* 204). The illustrations humanize Hood, piecing together a

man's tenuous face from the debris, yet the text denies this human identity and obliterates this last attempt to construct the predator from the remains of his disguise. Harvey tells Hood "You're dirt and muck and bits and pieces [...] You're nothing!" (*Thief* 212). No longer hooded by the house, Hood is stripped of all protective concealment. Near naked and vulnerable, the child predator is defeated when Harvey pulls the last remaining scrap of fabric off his body to reveal his empty core (*Thief* 211). As Harvey proclaims, the predator is nothing but an empty construction, an impotent nothingness, defeated by a child.

Final Thoughts

Ultimately, Harvey is empowered by the acquisition of knowledge. He is able to defeat the child predator because he understands the operation of the House and the logic of the fantasy realm. By performing this knowledge by returning to the House to destroy Hood and release the captive children, Harvey vanquishes magic from the fantasy realm and dissolves the realm into reality. While the narrative places Harvey as the hero of this tale, victor over the impotent predator, the illustrations reveal another interpretation: the constructed notion of the child predator ultimately terminates Hood. When Harvey unmasks the emptiness inside Hood, the text informs that "there was no heart at all. There was only a void—neither cold nor hot, living nor dead—made not of mystery but of nothingness. The illusionist's illusion" (*Thief* 211). The illustration, however,

in its attempt to give a human shape to this illusion, counters this nothingness that the text proclaims. Like the linguistic lacuna remedied by Harvey's drawing, Barker's illustration of Hood indicates the emptiness that language imposes onto the child predator. In the public imagination, the predator is little more than discourse: an impossible to control force that "arose not from any temporary or reversible weakness of character but from a deep-rooted sickness or moral taint" (Jenkins 189). Harvey defeats Hood by exposing the void that replaces his heart, a symbolic gesture that could also be interpreted as an unveiling of the emptiness that lies at the core of his construction.

Yet, this final conclusion unnervingly leaves the predator as an illusion himself, calling into question the reality of his perceived threat. This doubt is reinforced by the return to reality at the end, wherein all of Hood's captives have been returned to their respective times and parents unharmed, effectively erasing their parent's experience of loss and negating the act of abduction save in the child's mind. In this way, Barker's text continues to locate the abduction in the realm of the imaginary, the fantastic, seeming to deny the existence of harm in monstrous desires. This comes as no surprise, given Barker's other depictions of monstrous plurality and pleasure-seeking in his other works. For Barker, our appetites, whatever they may be, are nothing to fear because of their impotence in reality:

"One of the extraordinary things about monsters is that they are over and

over again our appetites caricatured,” he says. “They’re our appetites—our sexual appetites, our literal appetites: our desire to eat more, feel more, see more. [...] They have all the *physical* attributes of things that want to have more sensual experience than people with small eyes, small noses, small teeth, small ears, small dicks.” (qtd. in Burke 98)

To caricature, as Barker promotes, monstrous desires is to ridicule through representation *ad extremum*. While this idea might be appealing in theory, such representations in children’s text minimize the realities of sexual desires for children and the potential for harm therein. Likewise, Barker’s comments are not limited to the adult realm, and while he may claim that the monster represents our appetites, his use of Carna to police the boundaries of desire forbids such appetites in children. Conflicts and contradictions, as has been demonstrated, contaminate *Thief* yet are frequently revealed by the illustrations. Like Hood, it seems, the text hides its true nature.

All these contradictions emerge in this narrative because the story that Barker attempts to tell in this children’s novel is not a children’s story. The crimes of the child predator are, in all actuality, stories that adults tell to each other and to themselves in the media and within communities. Within this children’s story, Hood’s representation conjures arguments made by James Kincaid and Gurnham that the child predator is the cultural manifestation of greater

social impulses to eroticize the child (94; 124). Following public discourse, *Thief* presents a story in which the uncontrollable and unidentifiable predator can be defeated, perpetuating the idea that dangers for children are found outside the familiar. However, in that the predator is represented as a house, one that replaces the child’s familial home through his displacement into the fantasy realm, Barker moves this threat into the home. Perhaps there is another embedded message within this complex and layered narrative, one that I have not yet considered: the potential for harm is not limited to the predator. Cohen relates that, through the conflict “between Monster and Man, the disturbing suggestion arises that this incoherent body, denaturalized and always in peril of disaggregation, may well be our own” (9). This statement brings to mind the dual depictions of Hood as both monster and man, but perhaps this is not where the tension within this narrative rests. With the establishment that the child reader cannot identify with the child hero in *Thief* because of his subordinate positioning and lack of adult knowledge, identification can only be possible for the other reader—the adult reader. Ideally, the adult reader would empathize with Harvey’s parents, touched by their loss of a child, yet Hood’s final exposure and raw vulnerability may evoke identification with a monster hidden within all of us, one that is feared and, thus, must be controlled.

Image Notes

All images are publically available to view online in the *Thief of Always* galleries provided by *Lost Souls* at www.clivebarker.com/html/visions/gallery/index.htm.

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Endnotes

1. See Robinson, Kerry. *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood: The Contradictory Nature of Sexuality and Censorship in Children's Contemporary Lives*. London: Routledge, 2013; Robinson, Kerry, "In the Name of 'Childhood Innocence': A Discursive Exploration of the Moral Panic Associated with Childhood and Sexuality." *Cultural Studies Review* 14.2 (Sept, 2008): 113-29; Bond Stockton, Kathryn. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009; or Prout, Alan, ed. *The Body, Childhood and Society*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000, among others.

2. *The Damnation Game* (horror, 1985), *The Hellbound Heart* (horror, 1986), *Weaveworld* (fantasy, 1987), *Cabal* (horror, 1988), *The Great and Secret Show* (horror/fantasy, 1989),

Imajica (fantasy, 1991), *Everville* (fantasy, 1994), *Sacrament* (horror/fantasy 1996), *Galilee* (horror/romance 1998), *Coldheart Canyon: A Hollywood Ghost Story* (horror/fantasy 2001), *Mister B. Gone* (horror, 2007).

3. The fourth and fifth books in the series have yet to be published as of September, 2013.

4. This interpretation has been argued in Daumann, Christian. *Wonderlands in Flesh and Blood: Gender, the Body, Its Boundaries and Their Transgression in Clive Barker's Imajica*. Munich: AVM, 2009.

5. Both Joseph Schwarcz and Perry Nodelman maintain that children's literature always contains sublimated sexual references. The same can be said for the portal quest fantasy, wherein the passage through the portal is said to represent a passage into sexual knowledge. See Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008; and Dean, Tim. "The Erotics of Transgression." *Gay and Lesbian Writing*. Ed. Hugh Stevens. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.

6. See Gerrig, Richard J. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. New Haven; London: Yale UP, 1993 for more on the information that readers bring to the text during the act of reading.

7. See Kristjanson, Gabrielle. "Predatory Realms: To Admire and Desire the Child in Portal Fantasy." *Monsters and the Monstrous* 3.1 (Summer, 2013): 53-64.

8. All images are publically available to view online. See Image Notes for information.

9. According to Schwarcz, in a text like *Thief*, "the illustrations are more than a decorative item or a mere extension of the text. The text, to be sure, dictates the framework, guides the illustrator and limits him to an extent, but the illustrator is quite free to interfere where and how he wishes to do so." (11). Barker is both author and illustrator, so he both limits and interferes.

10. In Barker's *The Damnation Game* (1985), dust or rather dirt and muck are also signifiers of death and decay.

11. See Kincaid, James R. *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.

12. See Bond Stockton and Robinson, *Innocence*.

Bio

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