

THESIS

MOTHERHOOD, PERFORMANCE, AND MOMMY BLOGS:
THE POLITICAL POWER OF MATERNAL ONLINE RHETORIC

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ABSTRACT

MOTHERHOOD, PERFORMANCE, AND MOMMY BLOGS: THE POLITICAL POWER OF MATERNAL ONLINE RHETORIC

“If you define writing as any kind of scribble, any kind of trying to mark on the world,” Gloria Anzaldúa says in an interview with Andrea Lundsford, “And, some of us want to take those marks that are already inscribed in the world and redo them.” Language – and thus, writing – has the power to transform, to redefine reality. Autobiographical writing is a performative act that forms – not reflects – identity. Mommy blogs are autobiographical acts with dual performativity: identity and maternity. With performativity, mommy blogs have the power to, as Anzaldúa writes, “rewrite culture.” Yet, collectively, mommy blogs reify the normative motherhood narrative with gritty and sometimes profane clicktivist delusions, rather than actively work against the systemic issues that limit the lives of mothers: lack of quality child care; breastfeeding discrimination; unpaid maternity leave; wage disparity for women, working mothers and women of color. Mommy blogs emphasize a narrative of voluntary stay-at-home motherhood (SAHM). The SAHM narrative is essential to capitalism, which only thrives when a certain percentage of adults are removed from the workforce. Mommy blogs use narrative to keep women content while they are being forced out of the workforce through lower wages and lack of child care choices.

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INTRODUCTION

In September of 2009, Penelope Tuck – a multi-platform blogger who writes about motherhood and career at BrazenCareerist.com – tweeted this to her nearly 100,000 followers: “I’m in a board meeting. Having a miscarriage. Thank goodness, because there’s a fucked-up 3-week hoop-jump to have an abortion in Wisconsin.” Mommy bloggers like Tuck complicate our notions of motherhood with both her uncensored narrative and her willingness to share with a wide public audience. Her public candor is not unique. MomOMatic.com’s writes:

“Sometimes...my kids are assholes . . . Of course they are amazing, beautiful creatures with souls filled with cotton candy, rainbows and roses. Their kindness blows me away more often than not . . . But sometimes...they are just assholes” (July 12, 2010). Mommy bloggers attempt to invert the taboo and publicize the private. More than that, mommy blogs – complete with interactive audiences – create a rhetorical space where bloggers can virtually connect from the lonely confines of stay-at-home motherhood. Bloggers and blog audiences create a sense of community without the physical community.

The Internet, and more specifically Web 2.0¹, conjures up utopian visions of a global human community. Applications like blogging and social networks are interactive, and thus, appear to humanize technology. Part of the Web 2.0 mythology, mommy blogs are seemingly tools of female empowerment: an opportunity to give voice to the private realm of motherhood; and an act of resistance against slick magazine images of parenthood. Because mommy blogs are a performative forum, they offer the potential of personal empowerment.

¹ Web 2.0 refers to web applications designed to be participatory, collaborative and interactive, including: blogs, wikis, social networking, crowdsourcing, mashups, video/photo sharing sites, etc.

Yet, collectively, mommy blogs reify the normative cultural script of motherhood based on domesticity and separation of parental roles.

As I enter this conversation about the political impact of mommy blogs, I must define my own perspective. I am a mother of three children, ranging from ages 4 to 12. Like many mothers who blog, I voluntarily left the workplace – an executive job with a local arts-based nonprofit – when I struggled with child care choices. My youngest child, at 9 months, broke his collarbone in an unlicensed child care setting, but I was forced to keep him there because I had no other child care options. I eventually quit my job when I could not adequately resolve my child care issues. Like many mommy bloggers, I became a stay-at-home mother who spent naptime writing – both professionally and for graduate school. Thwarted as a mother in the work world, I entered graduate school with a mission to explore motherhood through writing and memoir. My explorations led me to this thesis. But, scholarship also taught me to accept my personal multiplicity. With this new understanding, I chose to run for political office. The research for this thesis – along with other local political factors – urged me to move beyond the computer screen of the writer and the Internet-mystification of clicktivism² toward tangible political action. As I write this thesis, I am running for our local City Council³. And, from union

² Clicktivism is when people confuse their online socially conscious activity, such as “liking” a Facebook page or reposting an article that promotes awareness, with actual activism and social change. Clicktivism, at its root, is polluted by the “logic of consumerism” or the “ideology of marketing” (clicktivism.org), focusing on increasing participation or audience numbers rather than mobilizing social change. It also confuses increasing awareness, or signing online petitions or letting your friends know that you support something with the kind of action necessary to create social change, and, in fact, thrives on our tendencies to protect the status quo from scary uncertainties that may upset our daily lives.

³ An update: As I finalized this thesis, I was ultimately unsuccessful in my bid for City Council, losing by 152 votes. A week after the election, a voter – an older woman – left me a voice mail to tell me that I lost because I “talked too much about mothers and families.” She said, “The only young mothers who live in this District live in the projects, and they don’t vote. Only the older people vote, and we don’t care about young mothers and families.” The caller was referring to my campaign discussions of child care issues, which noted that in my community that there are only licensed child care slots for less than 10 percent of children, ages 0-2. And, in my Council district, 55 percent of families with children under the age of 18 are single-mother homes with high-levels of poverty. But perhaps the caller was right: The analysis of the

halls to economic development offices, I am talking about the needs of mothers and the child care crisis in our community. While this message has been well-received, I still face an uphill battle as I am the only mother with young children to run for political office in my community – at least in recent memory, and my candidacy is an affront to several powerful men in leadership positions. My thesis work is integral to my political venture. But, it must also be noted, that my external political activities have molded my thesis.

It is difficult to define “mommy⁴ blogs” – possibly because they are unfairly named. Mommy blogs encompass a variety of blogs written by women who happen to be mothers or who are attempting motherhood⁵ – even if the bloggers write about diverse topics that also include parenting. According to eMarketer, “In total, there are 3.9 million women with children under 18 who write blogs, covering a wide variety of subjects, including parenting, couponing, travel, automobiles and technology. While they share one thing in common—having children—they are a diverse group, which is a benefit and a challenge for marketers.” They estimate by 2014 the number of blogging mothers will reach 4.4 million. Furthermore, eMarketer estimates that 39 million mothers are online and 54% of these women visit blogs each month – making moms more likely to visit blogs than other Internet users. In an examination of the Top 50 Mommy Blogs of 2010 – as determined by a panel at Babble.com, the top mommy bloggers include these demographics: 1) 90% are white; 2) 68% of the top mommy bloggers work from home – as bloggers and stay-at-home moms; and 3) 32% work outside the home. One of these top mommy bloggers is a stay-at-home dad.

demographics of voters in my Council race showed that 77 percent of the voters were over the age of 55 – mostly women and mostly registered Democrats.

⁴ I use the term mommy blogs throughout this thesis. The label “mommy” is viewed as derogatory in public and political realms. I use the label, not to diminish the bloggers in this analysis, but to reclaim the word – using this private-sphere word in an academic setting in an effort to complicate the ways we require mothers to code-switch between the private and public spheres.

⁵ Infertility blogs are a subset of mommy blogs, including: alittlepregnant.com, “Maybe If You Just Relax,” or “Dead Baby Jokes.”

Corporate marketing plans have defined mommy blogs as a successful commercial conduit. In a recent report on NPR (July 27, 2011), McDonalds has revised the contents and calories of the Happy Meal based on market research from mommy blogs. Rick Wion, director of social media for McDonald's, told NPR, "Mom bloggers are very networked and very linked in. They spread information very, very quickly." He continues, "Moms listen to other moms more than they listen to other folks." He considers mommy bloggers to be "key influencers" and notes that mommy bloggers are viewed more than city newspapers. And, McDonald's is not alone. According to eMarketer, advertising dollars spent on blogs has more than doubled in the since 2007. And, the Federal Trade Commission instated new guidelines in December of 2009 that require disclosure of sponsorships and advertisers in seemingly word-of-mouth endorsement on blogs. This ruling indicates the blurring of personal communication space with commercial space.

Marketeers see mommy blogs as authentic space – honest, autobiographical summations of everyday life with an interactive audience. Thus, some mommy bloggers have been able to capitalize on blogging as an entrepreneurial endeavor – turning uncensored confessions into advertising dollars. Heather Armstrong of Dooce.com earns between \$30,000-\$50,000 a month, according to an estimate from the *New York Times*, in advertising to her 1.5 million monthly blog visitors (23 February 2011). When contemplating authenticity in mommy blogs, it is important to note the increasing prevalence of advertising on blog sites and within blog text. Many mommy blogs include disclaimers that note: "Every now and then I have the opportunity to attend events and review various products. I am either paid in cash money, product or free tickets to events in return for writing about them. Regardless of that, you can be absolutely sure that the opinions expressed herein are my own . . . If you are interested in working or advertising with Momma's Gone City, please contact me for rates and information"

(Shyba). Such disclaimers underscore the covert nature of product placement on mommy blogs, and the complicit role of bloggers.

Beyond these market and demographic definitions, mommy bloggers prefer to define themselves. And, despite, the diversity of mommy blogs, many revolve around the idea of: "I'm not a perfect mother, and this is why that is OK." Mayhem & Moxie.com even has the tagline: "Because Perfection & Motherhood Simply Cannot Co-Exist." Mommy bloggers attempt to use the Internet to give voice to the once-private topics of motherhood, as the blogger for *Girlsgonechild.com* writes: "A woman's fear of motherhood and childbirth, body changes/life changes is something, even today, we must whisper about amongst friends at the risk of being blasted by peers, or worse; friends." Blogging is an attempt to transform these whispers. Many mommy bloggers also seek to use irreverence to interrupt the pervasive loving and proper image of motherhood. At *thebloggess.com*, she defines herself as a blogger: "I needed an uncensored space to say the f-word and talk about ninjas so I started this blog. If you know me in real life you might not want to be here." The bloggess' definition points to the multiplicity of mommy bloggers who seek a rhetorical space to speak differently about motherhood than they do in "real life."

The rhetorical space of mommy blogs combines gritty language with technology, creating an aura of cutting-edge written expression. Yet, mommy blogs are a modern incarnation of a long tradition of women who write in alternative venues and engage in extracurricular writing. Women writers have historically been marginalized. While men's writing has been categorized as art and/or professional, women's writing has been considered a craft, a hobby and with an overtly personal focus. This comparison can be further extended to public vs. private. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas describes a "world of letters" where "privatized individuals in their capacity as human beings communicated

through critical debate . . . about experiences of their subjectivity,” compared with the “political realm” where “private people in their capacity as owners of commodities communicated through rational-critical debate . . . concerning the regulation of their private sphere” (55-56). Historically, women were legally excluded from the political realm, so they occupied and formed the “world of letters,” such as the salons of the Bluestockings or the epistolary. Bluestocking women’s correspondence sometimes justified this exclusion from the public sphere – extolling the private sphere as the virtuous choice. Bluestocking Hester Chapone in correspondence with Elizabeth Carter, wrote, “There is very little virtue, and a great deal of iniquity and corruption to be found among those who are engage in public life” (Guest 68). This exemplifies the continued use of a private realm for women writing, and the use of words to rationalize the involuntary exclusion from the public sphere. Chapone’s words connect directly to the maternalism that fostered the Cult of Domesticity and the Cult of the True Woman, and to the new maternalism that underscores mommy blogs.

New Maternalism

Mommy blogs can be seen as a resurrection of the Victorian-era “cult of domesticity” or the “cult of the True Woman.”⁶ This era was marked by new innovations in media – magazines, print and mass distribution. As with the birth of the novel during the Industrial Revolution and the earlier Bluestocking era, women were at the forefront of both consumption and creation of text. Within the cult of domesticity, women used these new media avenues to rejoice and reify their roles in society – offering rationalization for their exclusion from the public sphere. With industrialization, men increasingly found their work outside of the home and women found

⁶ For more information on historic and current forms of maternalism, read: “Rethinking the New Maternalism,” by Naomi Mezey and Cornelia T.L. Pillard, Georgetown University Law Center, September 2010.

themselves further relegated to private domesticity. The Cult of Domesticity sought to reinforce woman's domain as the home by promoting the virtue and industriousness of domesticity. The narrative blended recognition of the weaker female nature with immense praise of a true woman's unique talents – creating a maternal preciousness in need of devotion and protection. Women used the narrative of virtuosity to explain their desire to remain in the private realm – even if they were involuntarily excluded from the public/political realm. Not only did this narrative create psychological boundaries between women and the public sphere, but it also wove a rhetorical noose around women, deeming them morally superior, and thus, framing a script where women are eager for sacrifice and submission. Within the Cult of the True Woman, women used their words to reinforce their roles as protectors of motherhood, guardians of man's virtue, and examples of patience and mercy. The True Woman, through women's own narrative, was idealized into powerlessness.

So, can we connect the Victorian Cult of Domesticity to mommy blogs? One female blogger, who is not a mother, wrote, "Blogging was more about celebrating motherhood as a bourgeoisie, middle-class idealism than anything else – mass masturbating to a mid-century celebration of a time when a woman's identity was revolved around cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and other stereotypically feminine interests like fashion, trinkets, keeping house, consumerism, and ignoring the negative social attributes historically bred from that one-dimensional role" (lojomanifesto.com, Aug 29, 2010). Some theorists suggest that mommy bloggers maintain a cult of motherhood that extols the virtues of breastfeeding, attachment parenting, and voluntary, stay-at-home choices – much in the same way that Victorian era domesticity did. Some, like Bridget Crawford, wonder if this is a by-product of third-wave⁷

⁷ Rebecca Walker coined the term "third wave" in an article for Ms. Magazine following the Anita Hill hearings. She ends the piece with this declaration: "I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave." (January 1992). Crawford writes, "The wave metaphor positions 'incoming' women in conflict with those who came before them.

feminism that tends to accentuate female sexuality and fertility – especially because third-wave feminists view their predecessors as being anti-maternal by foisting women into a masculine sphere of working away from the home or viewing motherhood as a prison. For example, Crawford quotes Adrienne Rich, from her 1976 book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution*, on motherhood:

This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between 'private' and 'public' life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of all contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. (qtd Crawford 235)

Crawford argues that third-wave feminists seek to reclaim motherhood from the seemingly anti-maternal perspectives, like Rich's, of their mother's feminist movement. She suggests that feminists who classify themselves as third wave use personal narrative as their methodology. As these feminists have become mothers, they have increasingly focused on motherhood.

Crawford writes, "On one level, this shift in subject-matter focus is a natural consequence of the methodological reliance on the first-person narrative. On another level, this shift marks a potentially conservative aspect of third-wave feminism" (228). She suggests that these personal motherhood narratives tend to overemphasize maternity as the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood. Such narratives, like mommy blogs, tiptoe around political issues of motherhood, while remaining fully entrenched in mythologized domestic confinement. Thus, raising the question, do personal stories of motherhood – like the regular installments on mommy blogs – rewrite or reinforce the mythologies of motherhood?

'Young' women are set up in contrast to 'older' women. The fertile are pitted against the menopausal . . . feminists would do well to abandon the wave metaphor" (237). The wave metaphor also wrongly suggests that feminist work only happens in waves – rather than noting that feminist work is ongoing. I use the metaphor here because it underscores some of the generationally based resistance that forms current maternal rhetoric.

LITERATURE REVIEW

De-centering Memoir

Despite their commercial veil, mommy blogs are episodic Internet-based autobiographies. Because they capture actual experiences within text, mommy blogs are considered authentic and honest portrayals of motherhood. Autobiography appears to mirror truth; it is often assumed to be a reflection of reality or an author's identity. Yet, "while life writing used to appear as the most transparent kind of writing, perhaps because of the seductions of factuality, it now seems almost too complicated for words" (Smith 393). Contemplating the complicated relationship between truth and memoir is essential to understanding this seemingly simple genre. Autobiography does not equal truth or reality. Yet, this is what makes memoir – including the mommy blog – sexy. We prize, "not the narrative but the startling nature of the particular experience being claimed" (Egan 18). As readers, we have a desire to *know* what is true; and as writers, we have a desire to *tell* what we know is true. When readers choose to read mommy blogs and memoir, they are seeking a truth claim and an authenticity that we relate to a person who exists outside of the text. In autobiographical composition, the subject, the protagonist, the eyewitness and the narrator are all posing as the same person – the blogger, whose name is both on the byline and masthead and within the narrative, and who is represented in the flesh in blog photographs. What could be more true than the eyewitness account of an event experienced by a person and retold by the same person in her own words?

Autobiography is personal and reflective, and "consequently, we tend to read autobiographical narratives as acts and thus proofs of human agency . . . where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories . . . expressing their 'true' selves" (Smith 54).

However, Louis Althusser's theories on ideology complicate this Enlightenment-blessed notion of an essential self. He writes, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." In other words, he suggests that our sense of reality is a mere masquerade of ideology. There is no "true" self or reality – only ideological representations of the real and the true. Beyond that, ideology is so pervasive that we are unaware that this is the foundation of what we deem real and truth. And, we consider ourselves free, as the "center of initiatives, author of and responsible for [our] actions," as we submit to the ideological authority (Althusser 1360). We are so submissive to ideology because we are interpellated before birth, transformed into subjects of ideology. This subjection of the individual – and our alleged identity – is based firstly on the lottery of birth. We are defined, prior to birth, by the ideological configuration of our family, our geography, our language. Through this Althusserian lens, what is autobiography? Is it a reflection of an individual's life or ideology? Could the recording of one's life be an action that fortifies the ideological apparatus that subjects the individual? Within this ideological confine, is truth of experience and truth of identity even possible? And, can identity shift over time, with maturity and with evolving ideology? And more specifically, in terms of autobiography, can identity shift between life experience and the act of narrating such experience?

This idea of shifting identity is at the heart of the truth matter within memoir. We, as readers, must acknowledge the multiple roles of the memoir author: writer, subject, historian, witness, narrator. While memoir may inscribe an authorial identity, identity – regardless of ideology – cannot be separated from time. Even the mini memoirs of Facebook posts – seemingly the simultaneous occurrence of life and writing – are written with a temporal divide, no matter how small, between experience and record. The story-"I" is from the past, while the writer-"I" is of the present. Thus, the autobiographical "I" that blogs is not the same "I" who

inhabits the blog entry. This can be complicated even further into subcategories of the story-“I”, such as: the narrating “I,” the historical “I,” the narrated “I” and the ideological “I” (Smith 72). Beyond this relationship, sense of identity is frozen within an autobiographical text, yet the identity of the living person will likely transform beyond the time-stamped textual representation of themselves. When we acknowledge that identity – within and beyond autobiography – is not fixed, we must also acknowledge that memoir is not a reflection of a “true” self.

As we explore the relationship between the author and the “I” of the story, we must also consider the relationship between author and text. Barthes writes that “the / which writes the text, it too, is never more than a *paper-I*” (Barthes 1330). Even if we accept this post-modern worldview of author as dead, are we ready to accept that same assertion when we examine memoir? It is harder to recognize the death of the author, when he or she is seemingly the star of the text. And, also worth consideration, as Barthes wonders, do writers seek memoir and autobiography to retain their role in the text, “the author still reigns . . . as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoir” (Barthes 1322). Is memoir merely an authorial attempt at textual immortality in a post-modern world that has murdered the author? And, conversely, is the post-modern emphasis on the “birth of the reader” simply a critic’s power play – elevating the role of critic over the author? Memoir creates a ripe environment for this author v. critic, writer v. reader tension to grow. It becomes difficult to contemplate the author’s death when she breathes within the text. Beyond that, readers demand a truth of experience from autobiographical narrative, and they “still engage in *le pacte autobiographique*, the agreement that Philippe Lejeune outlined in the 1970s, that the author, narrator, and protagonist of the autobiography are one and the same, and that the story purports to be true” (Egan 14). However, this truth lives outside the text and

can only be verified by acknowledging the life of the author. When readers fixate on the external facts, they diminish the role of the text – privileging, in author Tim O’Brien’s words, the “happening-truth” over the “story-truth” (171).

This external quest for truth becomes slippery in a post-modern world that seems most comfortable with a relative reality, yet simultaneously makes strides in scientific discovery with concrete evidence. Anecdotally, we have for centuries acknowledged the weak witness of memory. However, scientists continue to explore aspects of memory that speak to the idea of truth in life writing. For example, Nobel Prize winning economist Daniel Kahneman, along with Jason Riis, conducted several studies of memory and concluded, “It is a basic fact of the human condition that memories are what we get to keep from our experience, and the only perspective that we can adopt as we think about our lives is therefore that of the remembering self” (Kahneman 286). They note that when we are asked to reflect on something in the past, like a vacation, that it is “not an experiencing self that answers, but a remembering and evaluating self” (Kahneman 285). The experiencing self is fleeting and of the moment. Life is a series of moments with each moment lasting “up to 3 seconds, suggesting that people experience some 20,000 moments in a waking day;” and most of these moments, “with very few exceptions . . . simply disappear. The experiencing self that lives each of these moments barely has time to exist” (Kahneman 285).

To illustrate their theories, Kahneman et al. conducted a study where people were exposed to painful cold-pressor episodes. One episode was short but intense, while the second episode was longer but gradually diminished in pain. In the third round, people got to choose between the short, intense episode and the longer, diminishing episode. They concluded that, “from the point of view of the experiencing self, the long trial is clearly worse” (Kahneman 286). However, people chose the longer episode because the remembering self was less averse to the

memory of the diminishing pain. The remembering self, although based on experience, can be unreliable and manipulated. And, in fact, quite often people confuse actual experience with the memory of the experience. This confusion can lead to the fact that “the remembering self is sometimes simply wrong” (Kahneman 285).

If we are beholden to truth in memoir, we are limited by the human memory and perspective. I also argue that while the experiencing self is more corporeal and in the moment, the remembering self is discourse-oriented – using language to encapsulate and preserve what we remember. We, as readers, must acknowledge that the direct path between writer’s experience to writer’s memory to written word is a faulty one. Or, we can also view, as St. Augustine does, that autobiographical writers bend memory to fit the narrative will. He writes, in *Trinity*, “as the thought is formed from that which the memory bears, so too this very same thing, which is in the memory, may be firmly fixed in thought; to combine also imaginary visions by taking pieces of recollection from here and there and, as it were, sewing them together to see how in this kind of things the probable differs from the true” (Olney 63). This weaving of memory formulates a version of truth, based not on recollection but on re-interpretation. This Augustine ideal of a narrative will is examined by Tim O’Brien in his episodic novel *The Things They Carried*, when he writes, “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (171).

This notion of story-truth relates to an important foundational question of autobiographical writing: Is the autobiographical writer more storyteller or journalist, more author or archeologist? In other words, does the memoir writer – or mommy blogger – when necessary, choose story over fact, or fact over story? Charlotte Linde, in her book *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*, addresses our need for a life story – written or not – to be coherent. Thus, when we tell our life stories, we tend to highlight things that unify our story, and discard or recast elements that contradict. As storytellers, we focus on the pieces of our lives that

corroborate the “main idea,” the “unifying factor,” or the “essential truth” of our lives. As storytellers, not journalists, we decide what to include and what to exclude as we interpret the events, experiences and memories. In our selection of what to keep and what to toss, Linde writes, we “organize our understanding of our past life, our current situation and our imagined future” (11). She contends that we not only seek a better story, but our quest for coherence “bears a relation to our own individual desire to understand our life as coherent, as making sense” (17). Unlike a unified memoir, mommy bloggers, like other online authors of blogs, Foursquare check-ins, or Facebook posts, revise before posting – in choosing what to post and publish. Bloggers and Facebook authors unify their life stories over time, rather than in a singular text.

Despite this human thirst for a unifying life story, we can view autobiography through the Derridean notion of a structure that is “contradictorily coherent.” While the author is the center of the self-story, she is also above the story. Thus, the center (author) is not present in the story. While there are “I” representations of the author within an autobiography, the author is still absent – through time and characterization – from the autobiographical subjects within the text. Further, Derrida notes that, “a central presence which was never itself, which has always already been transported outside itself in its surrogate” and which does not “substitute itself for anything which has somehow preexisted it” (Derrida 116). Similarly, the autobiographical “I” does not represent an identity that pre-existed the self-narrative. And, as Derrida says, “In the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (116), the autobiographical narrative fills the absence of essential authorial identity. In other words, identity only exists in the narrative version not prior to it. Or, “the interiority of self that is to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical

storytelling” (Smith 241). With all of this in mind, we must acknowledge that autobiography is not a factual record of recollection but rather a composition.

Even if we recognize that memory may be faulty and identity may be manufactured, many readers still cling to the notion that events and experiences are the pivotal center of the life story. However, we can again look to the Derridean notion that “the center is not the center,” (Derrida 116) and acknowledge that even the life story lacks essence. With this in mind, what does that do to questionable memoirists like James Frey⁸ and Greg Moretenson⁹’s argument that their memoirs, while factually compromised, still convey an “essential truth”? But, if the “essential truth” of the story is absent, what gives the story structure? It is language, according to Saussure. Before language, thought is vague and memory is formless. The word, *logos*, creates a distinct order for thoughts and memories. Language creates a sense of order and a social reality. Thus, when one writes a memoir, it is not “essential truth” that serves as the foundation to the story; it is language. And, if we extend Saussurian concepts of “signified” and “signifier” as metaphors for autobiography, we can see life (events, experiences, memories) as

⁸ James Frey, author of *A Million Little Pieces* was accused by TheSmokingGun.com web site of fabricating details in his memoir. Frey, on Larry King Live on January 11, 2006, said, “The book is 432 pages long. The total page count of disputed events is 18, which is less than five percent of the total book. You know, that falls comfortably within the realm of what’s appropriate for a memoir.” Frey’s memoir, with the help of Oprah Winfrey, sold millions of copies. In an effort to defend his work, Frey told Larry King, “There’s a great debate about memoir and about what should be most properly served, the story or some form of journalistic truth.” He contends that he embellished or altered certain facts simply to create a better story. For example, he wrote that he cut his cheek, when in fact, he cut the part of his face between his lower lip and chin. He simplified these details for ease of storytelling, yet he contends, “the essential truth of the event remains the same,” that there was a large cut on his face. And, that is the crux of Frey’s overall argument, that while some details have been changed, the “essential truth” of his story remains the same.

⁹ Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, has used his memoir to raise millions of dollars to build schools for girls in Afghanistan. However, recently, author Jon Krakauer – bestselling author of creative non-fiction like *Into the Wild* – has questioned the veracity of Mortenson’s memoir. Once a supporter of Mortenson, Krakauer has pointed to fissures in the memoir’s factuality of his accounts of meeting with people in Afghanistan – including the first encounter with a remote village that serves as the origin story for all the work of Mortenson and his foundation (Central Asia Institute). Mortenson does not deny some adjustment to the facts, but argues that he sought to simplify a complicated story. He admits that there are times he has compressed the time line. And, he also suggests that some Afghani people’s stories differ from his because of differences in language, culture and sense of time.

the signified and narrative (autobiography, memoir) as the signifiers. Further, we must then concede that the relationship between life and narrative is arbitrary (not essential) and determined by the community not by substantial truth.

Taking this idea even further, Paul de Man in his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” suggests that autobiographical narrative may compose more than identity but construct life itself: “We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture?” (de Man 920). Does the “I” of the blog dictate to the “I” who composes the text? How much of actual life is revised to fit the regular blog narrative? For example, do mommy bloggers dress their children differently knowing that they may be photographed for a blog post? Do they choose activities and plan birthday parties with their blogs in mind? Theorists like Sidonie Smith, building on Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, argue that autobiography is a performative act. Butler writes, “Language is not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self” (196). The repeat autobiographical acts of writing about one’s life – online or on paper – form an identity that appears to pre-exist the text.

Memoir as Rhetorical Strategy: An Augustine Perspective

When we recognize that memoir is not a tool of self-reflection, we can acknowledge that it can be – and quite often is – a tool of rhetoric. The autobiographical story, with its seduction of factuality, is a powerful rhetorical device. St. Augustine – in his memoir *Confessions* – penned the first official memoir of the western world, but also formalized the craft of using life narrative

as a form of persuasion. His well-crafted story of sin and conversion provide a strong argument for following Christianity.

Augustine was the one of the first to publically blow the dust off rhetorical tactics and use them in promotion of the Church. For centuries, scholars and philosophers debated the connections between rhetoric and morality. Sophists were scolded for using rhetoric to make arguments regardless of their moral groundings. Quintilian sought to “produce the ‘good man speaking well,’ one who combines Platonic commitment to virtue and absolute truth with the Isocratean and Ciceronian focus on effective public service” (Bizzell 39). In Augustine’s time, rhetoric was studied and practiced, but considered, by the Church, to be cheap and sinful. A pre-conversion Augustine studied and taught rhetoric, which he describes as: “I took pay to show others how to vanquish verbally” (61). And, he continues, “I, in my immaturity, was studying works of rhetoric, in which I hoped to shine for a fiendish and empty purpose, to indulge my pride” (45). After his conversion, Augustine realized that he could use his rhetorical skills for good. He acknowledged that “the use of persuasion is justified by the importance of the message. Augustine, thus shares with Cicero – and through him, with Isocrates – the conviction that rhetoric must be employed for people’s own good” (Bizzell 452). Augustine’s *Confessions*, when viewed as a rhetorical text, provides a framework for understanding modern-day memoir – not as literary cousins of reality TV, but as stories that shape how we believe and perceive the world.

First, it is important to note, that Augustine acknowledges his memoir’s weak relationship with what-really-happened. Augustine explains the role of memory and interpretation, “When a history of the past is truly related, the memory does not bring back the events themselves, which have gone out of existence, but the words describing them” (270). Because it is impossible to render actual replication of events, Augustine is more interested in Truth, than

truth. He, like Tim O'Brien, advocates for "story-truth" that "is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (171). Augustine's life narrative molds a new identity to fit his post-conversion life. And, the autobiographical act could quite possibly be part of his conversion — a written transformation of his identity from sinner to servant of God. However, if *Confessions* is a rhetorical narrative, Augustine can also be seen as molding a rhetorical character called "I" who resembles a person outside of the text. The relationship between the textual "I" and flesh-and-blood adds to the rhetorical power of memoir by correlating Truth with implied truth.

The truth claim validates Augustine's testimony. Gary Wills, who translated a version of *Confessions*, also wrote a biography of St. Augustine. He argues in the biography that "confessions" is not the right title for Augustine's memoir. He writes that the word "confession" when translated to English does not offer the textured nuance of the word "testimony." In the Wills' translation of *Confessions*, Augustine often uses the words "testify" and "testimony." For contemporary readers, these words create immediate connotations of a courtroom and a church pulpit. Evangelicals use the word "testify" to describe how they express their faith. Augustine's autobiographical acts in *Confessions* coincide with this association of the word "testify." Wills recognizes that Augustine's memoir is more faith testimonial than a record of his life — more a tool of persuasion than a record of facts. As a rhetorical narrative, Augustine chooses life details that connect coherently with his conversion story. He writes, "I have forgotten much, and much I am omitting, in favor of things I want to testify to more urgently" (56). His quest for coherence extends beyond mere storytelling effect; his unified life story has greater rhetorical power.

Examining Augustine's memoir through a rhetorical lens requires that we not just contemplate author and text, but also audience. *Confessions* is addressed to God. Yet, is God the audience? Augustine does not need to prepare his memoir for God because God already knows

his life story. He asks the question: “Why Should Others Overhear Me?” He wonders why he shares his life narrative when others can’t treat the darkness of his past and won’t know if he is speaking the truth. But, by illuminating his past, Augustine is moving his past from the dark into the light¹⁰. Augustine’s exposure isn’t just about light; it is also exposure to the public. But who is this public? Augustine envisions his reading public as fellow Christians and “the virtuous.” Michael Warner in “Publics and Counterpublics” states that an audience does not pre-exist a text, but it is the text that connects a public who can be defined as the audience. There is no external framework that defines a public; the audience is self-organized through discourse. You can’t have exposure without an audience; you can’t have an audience without a text. And, according to Augustine, it is through exposure and text that we can discover God. As Gary Wills writes: “God is the Word. We are made in his image. We are words” (xii). And, “We seek one mystery, God, with another mystery, ourselves” (Wills xii). Further, Wills explains, according to the Gospel of St. John, “the Son must testify to the Father, as the Spirit does to the Son. Christians are brought into the inmost mystery of the Trinity when the Spirit testifies in them . . . It is this action of the Spirit in Christians that Augustine wants to manifest” (Wills xvi). With his memoir, Augustine seeks to unite an audience – a discursive public – by exposing the mystery of his own life, and thus, illuminating the mystery of God. Does self-exposure narrative require a transaction between writer and text and reader? Successful rhetoric does. As Barthes writes, “a

¹⁰ Just before his conversion, Augustine was reading this passage from St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (5:8-14): “Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; / rather expose them, for it is shameful even to mention/ the things done by them in secret;/ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,/ for everything that becomes visible is light.” His moment of conversion culminates in reading the text of St. Paul, and Augustine writes: “The very instant I finished that sentence, light was flooding my heart with assurance, and all my shadowy reluctance evanesced” (182). By illuminating his sinful past, Augustine converts bad into good, dark into light, and private into public. Augustine writes, “Both what I know about myself and what I do not know will therefore be my testimony to you, since what I know I have seen by your light, and what I do not know is from my own darkneses, not yet scattered by your noonday gaze” (214). Augustine credits God with enlightenment, not the act of writing. Yet, it is Augustine who chooses to expose his “own fearful joy and hopeful sorrow” to be judged by his fellow Christians who “are sharers of my mortality, members of the same city, on our pilgrim’s way to it” (214).

text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 1325). Or, as de Man argues, "From specular figure of the author, the reader becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity*" (de Man 923). Memoir, ultimately, is only a collection of signifiers. These signifiers may have some relationship to the world outside the text. However, the relationship between autobiographical text and external event is determined by the reader. Further, the textual transaction with the reader determines the potency of persuasion – the effectiveness of the rhetoric.

With this in mind, it is not the facts that matter, but rather believability. Augustine certainly wrote his memoir before the time of investigative journalism. No one sought to check his facts. Believability is a much trickier metric in a post-structural world – absent any Master Signifier. The Internet and immeasurable access to information have created an aura of infinite doubt, where even a DNA test to prove the death of Bin Laden is met with skepticism. Memoir garners rhetorical power from its sense of factuality. Modern-day media consumers continue to be titillated by illusions of reality (reality TV, pro-wrestling, email chain letters, political spin) – even when they know elements may be fake. Mommy blogs barter on reality to bolster their claims of authenticity. And, it is the aura of such authenticity that gives mommy blogs their rhetorical power.

Performativity: Memoir, Gender & Maternity

De Man suggests an inverted cause-effect relationship where narrative constructs life. Butler relates such construction specifically to gender: "Woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (45). Rather than biologically pre-determined, gender, according to Butler, is an on-going compilation of performed acts that

appear naturalized. She writes, “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (191). Butler’s theory of gender performance can certainly extend to motherhood. Motherhood is often viewed as intrinsic to female humanity and it typifies the expression of womanhood. But, “if gender attributes,” as Butler writes, “are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (192). In terms of motherhood, does a mother feed her newborn every two hours because she loves her? Or does a mother love her newborn because she feeds her every two hours? We use the word “bonding” as a common term to connote the mother-newborn relationship. The action-oriented word “bonding” underscores the performativity that create this relationship.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler extends her theory of gender performance to maternity – arguably one of the most accepted foundations of biology and instinct. To make her argument, Butler counters Julia Kristeva’s conclusions, found in *Desires in Language*, that maternal instincts represent a semiotic subversion of the Symbolic. Kristeva suggests that maternity relates to poetic language that pre-exists paternal law and language. “Kristeva,” according to Butler, “describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture its self” – suggesting “maternity as a precultural reality” (109).

Butler uses Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to counter Kristeva’s notions of a pre-discursive maternity. Butler argues against the assumptions of a natural or essential sex. She writes, “The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations” (125). Using Foucault’s framework, Butler argues that the maternal body is “an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire” (125). Butler urges her readers to see maternity –

like other gendered identities – as a cultural and discursive construct. She writes, “The discourse of sexuality, itself suffused by power relations becomes the true ground of the trope of the prediscursive maternal body” (125). Further, Butler charges that we reify the power structures when we accept the ideals that maternity is pre-cultural and instinctual. The discourse that supports these ideas of instinct legitimizes the compulsory link between motherhood and the female body. Butler writes, “The clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function is inscribed on that body as the law of its natural necessity” (126). The discourse of maternal instinct limits women’s roles to reproductively defined – confining women to the private sphere that is removed from access to power. Further, Butler would argue that the naturalistic cultural construct of the female body – found on many mommy blogs, especially within topics of breastfeeding, homebirth, and babywearing – fuels the repression of women.

Throughout U.S. history, women have generally gained a political voice at the table through the portal of motherhood. Motherhood has offered women a rhetorical veil to make political arguments about issues like infant mortality, health care, voting rights, labor issues, and much more. Motherhood is often a successful rhetorical device – think Sarah Palin’s Mama Grizzlies to the Maternalism of the New Deal to MoveOn.org’s Motherhood Manifesto – because it capitalizes on the normative version of motherhood. Politically, women use the mantle of motherhood to raise under-represented issues, complicating patriarchal perspectives and ignorance about workplace issues, family needs, child needs, and health and safety. Butler’s arguments bring into question all uses of maternal rhetoric – online, political or otherwise. Even maternal rhetoric that seeks to liberate or empower women, following Butler’s framework, does the opposite by fueling the discourse that defines women as reproductive bodies. With Butler in mind, mommy blogs can only reify the reproductive repression of women. While mommy blogs

do challenge some lady-like norms of what maternal feelings may look like, Butler's arguments deny all emancipatory potential of mommy blogs.

Communicative Capitalism

Jodi Dean coins the term communicative capitalism, based on Slavoj Žižek's understandings of Lacanian ideals of drive. Communicative capitalism addresses the glut of information on the Internet, our distrust of such information, and our drive to continue circulating it. Despite illusions of freedom, subjects in Web 2.0 formats are captured within infinite webs of information and fed by excessive flashes of enjoyment gained from reflecting information – such as commenting, liking or posting. Further, Dean suggests that we are trapped on a self-created network loop fed by our post-structural inability to acknowledge any Master Signifier except the further generation of more ideas. She writes, “We cannot know certainly; we cannot know adequately. But we can mobilize this loss, googling, checking Wikipedia, mistrusting it immediately, losing track of what we are doing, going somewhere else” (Dean 121). We view information as free – free to obtain and free to circulate – because cyberspace, according to Žižek, offers a rhetorical space with no Master signifier –no authority is telling the subject what to do (158). And, while such freedom should be liberatory, Žižek argues that, instead, “availability will induce unbearable claustrophobia; excess of choice will be experienced as the impossibility to choose” (154). He continues, “The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change . . . conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure” (154). We encounter information and can disseminate information, but we lose the ability to decide and discriminate. We are trapped within a loop that moves but goes nowhere, because, as Dean explains, “The contemporary setting of electronically mediated subjectivity is one of infinite doubt, ultimate reflexivization. There is

always another option, link, opinion, nuance or contingency that we haven't taken into account" (Dean 3). This endless loop and infinite doubt stimulate our thirst for authenticity – like the uncensored posts of mommy blogs – yet even binging on all available information cannot satisfy our thirst.

The online ocean of information, Dean suggests, blunts communication – information circulates but is no longer received, messages are moved but no longer delivered. Drowning in information, our ability to discriminate between different messages is diminished. There is no longer engaged debate, Dean argues, just volumes of information that absolve leaders, corporations, governments from responding: "Rather than responding to messages sent by activists and critics, they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume . . . will give their contributions dominance or stickiness" (Dean 53). The online circulation of information thwarts our ability to react by trapping us within a loop of hyperlinks, comments, forwarding, liking and posting. Our Web 2.0 interaction transforms activity into passivity, occupying our time with a quest for more information, human connection and deluding us with clicktivism over activism. Mommy bloggers write about motherhood (with a lowercase "m"), believing that they are expanding our limited notions of Motherhood. Collectively, most mommy bloggers – like others in the blogging community – are sated with their virtual activity, feeling a sense of usefulness in posting about issues without doing actual work to create solutions. Mommy blog posts, using Butler's framework, are incapable of revising the cultural script that limits mothers, and also, have little impact on the systemic issues that limit the lives of women who have children.

Yet, because cyberspace, writes Žižek, "render[s] the deconstructionist 'decentered subject' palpable in our everyday experience" (134), the Internet may offer a space for mother-writers to explore their textured and shifting identities. Identity is intrinsically multiplicitous, and the

Internet offers a greater framework for understanding that. And, because the non-linear database foundation of blogs allow for a collection – rather than cohesion – of selves, mommy blogs create a rhetorical space where “constructions of motherhood and identity become more fluid and juxtapositions of complexity reign. Motherhood is isolating and motherhood is a community; motherhood is a favorite place and motherhood is torture; motherhood is almost perfect and motherhood is failure” (Powell 46). The Internet enhances multiplicity and can, as Žižek points out, “undermine the notion of Self” (Žižek 134). For example, one mommy blogger Jenny Lawson, self-labeled as The Bloggess, writes several blogs from multiple personas: an edgy sex blog called, “Sex Is;” an uncensored mommy blog called, “The Bloggess: Like Mother Theresa Only Better;” a more family-friendly blog for the *Houston Chronicle*, called “Good Mom/Bad Mom;” and an advice column on the Personal News Network. She warns that people who know her in real life may not want to visit her in the blogosphere. The Internet allows for these simultaneous, diverse, and yet connected identities – including a “real life” self.

UNKNOWN-KNOWNS

Current scholarship – albeit small – on the subject of mommy blogs centers around the ideal that blogging can be an act of discursive resistance for mothers. Rebecca Powell writes for *MP: An Online Feminist Journal*, “Mommy bloggers construct a continuous, fluid, and resistant motherhood. They present multiple subjectivities, interrupt their self-made dichotomies and resist the good mother/bad mother discourse” (49). Or, Amy Koerber writes, “The women who frequent the online community that I investigate enact resistance by exploiting the inconsistencies inherent in mainstream discourses of motherhood and feminism, thereby producing new meanings” (218). Both theorists suggest that mommy blogs enable mothers to revise the dominant cultural script that defines motherhood.

The edgy and, often, confessional content of mommy blogs adds to these accepted theories of online maternal resistance. However, Žižek urges us as scholars to look beyond the overt. Žižek uses the “amateur” philosophizing of Donald Rumsfeld to illustrate the task of the intellectual. He quotes Rumsfeld:

There are known knowns. These are the things that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are the things we don't know we don't know. (137)

Rumsfeld's discussion points to the Bush Administration's speculation that Saddam Hussein possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction – an ominous label of threats so dire that we are not yet aware of their existence. Yet, Žižek argues that Rumsfeld ignores an essential fourth category – unknown knowns. Žižek defines this as: “the horizon of meaning of which we are

unaware, but which is always-already here, structuring our approach to reality” (137). The unknown knowns, Žižek argues, are even more dangerous, as in the case of Abu Ghraib. Using Abu Ghraib as an example, he describes unknown knowns as: “the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, although they form the background of our public values” (137). Žižek suggests that we should be more alarmed by the horrors we commit based on our unconscious ideological presuppositions, than the untold dangers we have yet to contemplate.

In further explanation of unknown knowns, Žižek, in his filmed lecture “The Reality of the Virtual,” uses the movie musical *The Sound of Music* to illustrate these ideas. The Known-Known elements of *The Sound of Music* include the overt plot that includes a family’s fight against fascism. He, however, suggests that the unknown known (unconscious) elements point to an opposite narrative: a wealthy, rural nationalist wants to fight against cosmopolitan, intellectual, city interests – concepts that have stereotypically symbolized Jewish people. When examining the unknown known elements of the musical, we get a different version of the story.

Žižek’s *Sound of Music* analogy can be applied to mommy blogs. When examining the known known elements of mommy blogging, we see edgy language, confessions of inadequacy, and admissions that create a counterview of motherhood. These elements suggest that mommy blogs are written testimonies that interrupt the dominant cultural narrative of Motherhood, and that mommy bloggers present an honest and gritty version of the private realm of Motherhood in a public cyberspace. Yet, when we examine the unknown known elements of mommy blogs, we can understand that the opposite may be true – that mommy blogs, instead, reify the traditional foundational aspects of Motherhood. A large number of mommy blogs are written by stay-at-home mothers who are white, middle class and heteronormative. Mommy blogs reinforce this version of Motherhood. Further, mommy blogs reinforce stay-at-home

motherhood¹¹ as a choice, emphasizing the mythology of a pre-cultural maternal. This SAHM narrative is essential to capitalism, which only thrives when a certain percentage of adults are removed from the workforce. SAHM, while obviously are working, are not drawing an income and not competing for jobs in the workforce. Furthermore, SAHM are seen as women who voluntarily opt out of the workforce, and thus, are not considered within unemployment numbers. If we only explore the known knowns of mommy blogging, we can mistakenly see them as honest texts that are tools of feminine empowerment. Yet, the unknown knowns point to a different perspective of mommy blogging that uses narrative to keep women content while they are being forced out of the workforce¹² through lower wages and lack of child care choices.

Further, much of modern motherhood mythology pivots on the notion of choice – that mothers today have the opportunity to choose between the private world of home and the public world of work. Žižek reminds us that as scholars we must critically examine the ideals – like choice – that we presuppose, our known knowns. The emancipatory aura of mommy bloggers suggest that women choose to stay home, choose to opt out of the workforce and do so, because with the alleged freedoms in our “post-feminist” society, women prefer to stay home. In other words, the discourse suggests that mothers, when given freedom and choice, would rather fulfill the “natural” roles of mothers. Žižek writes, “We ‘feel free’ because we lack

¹¹ Stay-at-home mothers have their own online acronym: SAHM, used by mommy bloggers. Heather Armstrong, at dooce.com – the most financially successful mommy blog that brings in about \$50,000/month, writes: “I am a Stay at Home Mom (SAHM) or a Shit Ass Ho Motherfucker. I do both equally well” (The information section of the Dooce.com Facebook page. 19 May 2011.)

¹² Many mommy bloggers admit to unhappiness in the at-home realm, despite much media attention suggesting that within the last decade – with a recession in both 2001 and 2007 – that women chose to leave the workforce and stay home with their children. Yet, according to a report “Equality in Job Loss” by the Joint Economic Committee, women opting out of work for motherhood is more mythology than fact. The report notes: “There is no evidence, however, that mothers are increasingly ‘opting out’ of employment, in favor of full-time motherhood. For this story to be true, the employment rate of non-mothers would have had to diverge sharply from that of mothers, which is not the case” (6). Further, Heather Boushey of the Joint Economic Committee wrote an article about this report for *Feminist Economics*, and she explains: “The US media has portrayed any exit from employment by a mother as about motherhood, not other factors, such as inflexible workplaces, labor market weakness, a decrease in men’s contributions to housework, or other reasons why women may not work outside the home” (31).

the very language to articulate our unfreedom” (142). He points to this ideal of hyper-individualized freedom, which appears so integral to who we are as Americans or Westerners. Yet, this discourse of individualism and freedom only mystifies our perceptions, enabling us to believe that problems are solved when we each improve our individual selves and never turn toward the systems that, in fact, undermine our freedoms. Mommy blogs suggest that women need to find more balance in their lives – simply do a better job of juggling work (whether domestic or outside of the home) and family. This discourse suggests that women can remedy their situation by improving themselves – more stress relief, better recipes, greater balance, etc. – and, thus, they never demand that the systems – child care, maternity leave, paid sick leave, working mothers’ salaries, health care, etc. – improve or change.

When we do not examine the unknown knowns, we are in danger – as Žižek suggests – of engaging in “obscene practices we pretend not to know about, although they form the background of our public values” (137). We can “unearth” the unknown knowns of mommy blogging by examining their foundation and discourse through the theoretical lens discussed earlier in this thesis:

1. Memoir – like mommy blogs – do not reflect life or an identity that precedes the text. Rather, the writing and storytelling mold one’s identity. Mommy bloggers use memoir-like blog entries to fortify – not rectify – their roles; thus, molding motherhood identities that comply with the normative cultural script.
2. Because memoir is not the mere reflection of life, it can be employed as a rhetorical tool – using the allure of factuality for persuasive purpose.
3. Further, the regularly generated text of mommy blogs appears to capture the natural and instinctual state of motherhood. But, the autobiographical acts of mommy bloggers, instead, fuels the ideal that women are, first and foremost, tools of reproduction – an

ideal that appears to precede the autobiographical acts, but instead is formulated by them.

4. Blogging and other Web 2.0 activity – including mommy blogs – offer a false sense of action, where passivity poses as activity, clicktivism as activism. Furthermore, the volume of online communication creates a quagmire of information where messages are circulated but never received.

MEMOIR AS PERFORMANCE

Starting with Sidonie Smith's assertion: "the interiority of self that is to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling" (241), memoir is understood as formative not reflective. The writing or telling of one's life story (and the ongoing revision of this narrative) creates an identity that appears to pre-exist the narrative. Thus, memoir is a performative act, in the same way that Judith Butler argues that gender formation is a performative act. Mommy blogs are regular installments of memoir in an online space. When we recognize that the autobiographical text is more than mere reflection of the "real" world, we can see it as tool for making meaning *in* the world and *of* the world. Mommy blogs provide opportunity for women to use discourse to make meaning of their lives or to understand their role as mothers.

Birth stories offer an interesting example of how mothers revise their stories to make meaning of their lives. First of all, birth can be both traumatic and life-changing. Because of the trauma and the physicality of birth, there can often be large memory gaps – even if video or photographic documentation exist. Sidonie Smith argues that this estrangement from the actual experience or memory of the experience is where memoir and meaning is born. She writes, "The very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss of consciousness of fragments of experiential history . . . autobiographical narration begins with amnesia" (18). The need for narration or storytelling stems from the inability to recall the experience. The blog HurtByHomebirth.blogspot.com¹³ offers the opportunity for women to narrate their traumatic

¹³ This blog is hosted by a doctor, Amy Tuteur, who describes the blog: "as a safe place where women can tell the stories of the babies who died or who were left injured by homebirth."

birth stories. The women writers on this blog use writing to make sense of an often traumatic event that ended with the death or injury of a baby born in a homebirth setting. The writers make a concerted effort to stick to the facts as they can remember them, or as others (like husbands) help them to remember them. Bloggers write entries like this:

I was GBS¹⁴ positive. Which meant, according to my research, that I would need at least four hours of antibiotics before the birth of my child. IV antibiotics my midwife could not provide. I was heartbroken and began mentally preparing for a hospital birth. My family was relieved. However, my midwife was unconcerned. She kept repeating over and over, 'According to state regs, it does not rule you out of homebirth. So many midwives don't test for it- their clients have GBS and don't even know it. They still birth perfectly healthy babies. We can use garlic and a chlorhexidine douche during labor. It just means after your water breaks, you only have about 12 hours to deliver the baby.' After a while, the repetition of that mantra placated me. I trusted her deeply. (28 Mar 2011).

This entry demonstrates a mix of scientific terminology, informal research, foreshadowing, dialogue and context within the larger narrative. It offers a mix of what the writer attempts to remember and ways in which the writer tries to contextualize her memories. The blog entries on this blog site offer examples of the ways that writers try to formulate explanation and meaning from a traumatic life experience with many memory gaps. The writers second guess themselves: "My son is dead. If I had been laboring in a hospital he would be alive" (17 April 2011). They blame the midwives for their negative homebirth experience: "My midwife was a fine midwife

¹⁴ Group B Strep, usually treated by giving mother antibiotics during labor to prevent transmission to the infant as he/she passed through the vagina.

for perfect births, but I know from experience that you can have a perfect birth by yourself at home” (17 April 2011). In this lengthy blog entry titled “Grant’s Story,” the blog host notes at one point: “Rachel asked to add this paragraph to her story a few hours after it was originally published.” This demonstrates the desire for the writers to remember “facts” correctly, revising the narrative until it makes sense and fits coherently within the broader narrative of their lives.

Further, the audience¹⁵ has a role in the composition of mommy blogs. The transactional nature of autobiography is pronounced in memoir-based blogging like mommy blogs. Mommy blogs generate a number of comments from readers – many comments are made within a day or two of the blog post. This immediacy heightens the intimacy between writer and audience and emphasizes a sense of authenticity. The audience-writer interaction impacts the text and future blog posts. Yet, not only do audience comments have the ability to form the bloggers’ future writing, the community of readers determine the life narrative’s meaning. As Barthes writes, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 1325). Or, as de Man argues, “From specular figure of the author, the reader becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity*” (923). Memoir and mommy blogs, ultimately, are only a collection of signifiers. These signifiers may have some relationship to the world outside the text. However, the relationship between autobiographical text and external event is determined by the reader. In the example of the Hurt by Homebirth blog, the audience confirms the writer’s story. The author of “Grant’s Story” is the mother “Rachel” and she engages with the 44 comments left on her blog post. She writes, “I was very scared about making Grant’s story public. So scared that someone would tell me I killed my son. I have a lot of guilt. I know the human spirit can endure more than one can even imagine... but to push that limit on someone

¹⁵ I think it is important to remember Michael Warner’s argument that an audience does not pre-exist a text. It is the text – like the entries on this mommy blog – that connects a public who can be defined as an audience. The audience is self-organized through discourse and able to interact with each other through the Internet.

that is already at the breaking point is unnecessary and cruel. Through all of this I've learned sympathy. I have been completely stupefied by people's ability to care" (18 April 2011). Most of the comments offer sympathy for her lost child and gratitude for sharing her story. It is through the audience interaction and audience validation that Rachel's story gains additional meaning.

Beyond birth stories, mommy blogs more generally seek to make meaning of their lives within the larger world – especially stay-at-home mothers who often find themselves uncomfortably removed from the public sphere of the workforce or school. Mommy blogs often grapple with “opting out” of the workforce with their new role in the world, sometimes exaggerating the importance of their stay-at-home path within a motherhood mythology steeped in naturalistic narrative. These memoir-style blogs can be tinged with unhappiness, which can be hard to juxtapose with the other narratives of maternal instinct and voluntarily leaving the workforce. The unhappiness found in mommy blogs connects back to Betty Friedan's insight on the boredom of “housewives” in 1963, calling it “The Problem That Has No Name,” in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Mommy blogs, like BabyonBored or OneBoredMommy, remind us that Friedan's problem-with-no-name still exists – even though we now use the label “stay-at-home moms.” Bloggers, like Jessica Shyba of MommasGoneCity.com who calls herself a dental school widow and lives far from family and friends, note that they blog to reach out into the world. Many mommy bloggers admit to unhappiness in the at-home realm, despite much media attention suggesting that within the last decade – with a recession in both 2001 and 2007 – that women chose to leave the workforce and stay home with their children. Mommy blogs indicate that there is loneliness and boredom, much like Friedan describes: “It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning . . . each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches . . . she was afraid to ask even herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’” (57).

Blogging provides some cure for this silent dissatisfaction by enabling a bridge between the isolated private realm and the very public Internet. Blogging mothers and their readers see “internet mothers” as friends because, as Melissa Summers from Suburban Bliss (with the tagline Birth Control via the Written Word) writes, “I know so many of us are still feeling lost amongst the mothers in our vicinity” (17 July 2006).

Summers was scolded in the media and invited to defend herself on the *Today* show for suggesting “it’s okay to have a glass of wine during a playdate.” Alcohol as a tool for coping with full-time motherhood is a common mommy blog theme. BabyonBored blogger, Stephanie Wilder Taylor, admitted to her own abuse of alcohol – after publishing a book called *Naptime is the New Happy Hour*. She wrote a blog post titled “Secrets” and confessed: “But when the twins were born and I was home and my milk was dried up and postpartum was setting in, the simplest thing to do seemed to be have a glass of wine” (26 May 2009). And, she has now opened her blog to other mothers with a series titled “Don’t Get Drunk Fridays.” At least 45 mothers have guest-blogged on Taylor’s blog to tell their personal stories of alcohol abuse.

MEMOIR AS RHETORICAL TOOL

Once we acknowledge that memoir – including mommy blogs – is not a record or reflection of life, we can view memoir as a potential tool of persuasion. In the same way that St. Augustine used his personal story of conversion to persuade others (for centuries) towards a path of Christianity, mommy blogs can be used to garner political advantage. Mommy blogs combine performative autobiographical acts with a de-centered cyberspace, offering new incarnations of political agency. As theorist Amy Koerber writes, “To understand resistance in cyberspace requires rethinking political agency in a way that is compatible with the kind of unstable, shifting and dispersed subject often characterized as postmodern, rather than continuing to think of political agency as the outward expression of an identity that originates inside of the subject” (219). Mommy blogs with large audiences and volumes of text should have the potential to impact the political sphere. In the following example, bloggers and their audiences connected over specific legislation. They used blogging to create awareness about the specific legislation. They used the online connectors like tagging, linking and commenting to weave a larger aware audience. Blogs and their audience, then, moved beyond the blogosphere and their own enclave to create political pressure.

Infertility Bloggers & HB1677

Theorist Clancy Ratliff, in a 2009 *Women’s Studies Quarterly* article, writes about the relationship between the withdrawal of legislation in Virginia and a group of infertility

bloggers¹⁶. Infertility bloggers are sometimes considered a subset of mommy blogging because their blogs generally revolve around issues of family, even though the “mommy blog” classification can also be seen as offensive by women blogging about infertility. Ratliffe defines infertility blogging as a genre of blogging that “is connected with online discussion forums on infertility, in which participants write about their efforts to conceive and their experiences with fertility treatment” (128). She notes several specific infertility blogs, such as: Stirrup Queens and Sperm Palace Jesters, Chez Miscarriage, and A Little Pregnant. These are some of the blogs that have helped to shape infertility as a blogging genre.

Ratliff also describes HB 1677 “Fetal Death; Report by Mother, Penalty,” legislation proposed by Virginia state Delegate John Cosgrove. The proposed bill stated, “When a fetal death occurs without medical attendance, it shall be the woman’s responsibility to report the death to the law-enforcement agency in the jurisdiction of which the delivery occurs within 12 hours after delivery” (qtd Virginia State Legislature 2005). In other words, the proposed bill required women to report any miscarriage to law enforcement within 12 hours and would penalize any woman who did not. On January 6, 2005, Maura Keaney, a former high school teacher, political volunteer and blogger, wrote about HB1677 on her blog Democracy in Virginia, and cross-posted her blog to DailyKos.com, a popular online political community. Keaney’s blog posts spread throughout the blog community, especially within the community of infertility bloggers, “who brought honest and emotionally raw narratives about their experiences with miscarriage to the conversation about the bill” (Ratliffe 131). Emotional and angry blog posts and letters highlighted the vague language and its potential to punish grieving women. By January 10, 2005, Cosgrove withdrew the legislation. Ratliffe writes, “As a result of the blog

¹⁶ Charlotte Linde suggests that we retell and revise the stories of our lives to create a coherence and cohesive narrative. With this in mind, memoirists also seek to make their personal life narrative coherent within the larger cultural narrative. Infertility blogs are an example of this – memoirists seeking to make sense of their infertility in a dominant cultural script that privileges fertility.

exposure, more than five hundred people e-mailed Cosgrove's office, including many infertility bloggers who wrote to Cosgrove of their personal stories of miscarriage, some of them cross-posting the stories in the comments section at Chez Miscarriage" (136-137). In Ratliffe's case study, infertility bloggers used the Internet to create awareness about anti-female legislation, to connect with a larger community, and to facilitate the creation and message delivery of a number of personal and painful stories of miscarriage. The combination of awareness, audience building and personal narrative led to political success in thwarting the proposed legislation. More importantly than the cyber-generated connectivity and audience building, these bloggers use personal narrative to persuade. The Internet provided the bloggers opportunity for connection and information, but it was the power of the personal that provided political persuasion.

MOMMY BLOGS AS GENDER PERFORMANCE

Mommy blogs offer two ways to understand Butler's theory of performativity. First of all, Butler writes, "Language is not an *exterior medium* or *instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self" (196). The repeat autobiographical acts of writing about one's life – online or on paper – form an identity that appears to pre-exist the text. She applies this same thought process to the formation of gender, including motherhood. Even within a post-modern world, we cling to the ideal that maternity is a pre-cultural reality steeped in biology and instinct. Butler urges her readers to see maternity – like other gendered identities – as a cultural and discursive construct. She writes, "The discourse of sexuality, itself suffused by power relations becomes the true ground of the trope of the prediscursive maternal body" (125).

When we consider the power of gender performance to reinforce and repress the power structures, can we see mommy blogs as an extension of the discourse and cultural construct that entrap women? The discursive communities of mommy blogs can become especially destructive when you add commercial interests to the mix. Subservience to husband was part of the old feminine paradigm. Now, women find themselves in service to their children – meeting their every whim, cooking special foods for each child, and protecting children from every new danger reported in the news. Just as vacuum cleaners and pearls once paved the path to true womanhood, marketing companies provide the promise to true mommyhood – from BPA-free baby bottles to baby wipe warmers to retro polka-dotted, hand-free breast pumps. It begins before birth, as soon as a mother-to-be registers for a baby shower or buys a few baby items, she starts receiving direct mail coupons for diapers, formula and other provisions. The

hospital becomes the site for targeted multi-million dollar ad campaigns, most notably slick baby formula marketing packages with diaper bags and free formula. Recently, Disney has laid its target on brand-new mothers, launching a new marketing campaign that sends marketing staff into the labor and delivery wards of hospitals with marketing agreements for new moms in exchange for a Disney onesie. In exchange for the onesie, the new mom agrees to be sent marketing materials – signing up for materials from a corporation that spends billions of dollars reinforcing gender stereotypes.

One notable subgenre of mommy blogging is the crunchy blog, including blogs like JustWestofCrunchy.com and TheFeministBreeder.com. These blogs center on topics of breastfeeding and attachment parenting. Many of these bloggers espouse ideals of voluntary simplicity, and suggest that – as mothers – they have left the workplace as a political statement against the capitalist definition of working mother. They insist they have voluntarily left the workforce to offer their families a simpler life. These bloggers argue that they willingly sacrifice their salaries and work hard to bridge the family's income gap with homemade items and simpler living choices. Crunchy mom bloggers boast that their parenting choices – breastmilk rather than formula, cloth rather than disposable diapers, family bed instead of crib – are also big money savers.

Theorist Amy Koerber suggests that crunchy mommy blogs – which she labels as radical mothering web sites – offer a counter discourse to more traditional feminist discourse that, she suggests, interpret motherhood as burdensome. She writes that this has created “a perverse situation in which women are supposed to seek empowerment through leaving their children with underpaid child-care workers in institutional settings and pursuing success in the same corporations that have long been guilty of environmental damage and worker exploitation, and through denying the possibility of a positive life-affirming mothering instinct” (221). She argues

that feminists have so narrowly defined motherhood, continuing to view it in terms of the public vs. private sphere. Feminists, she suggests, have not yet developed a woman-centered way to view motherhood, and as thus, have limited women's choices. These "radical mothering web sites" (or crunchy mommy blogs), according to Koerber, can be liberating because they offer the rhetorical space to begin this work of formulating a woman-centered definition of motherhood.

Elisabeth Badinter, a French feminist theorist and writer of books *like Dead End Feminism* and *The Conflict*, argues that this version of motherhood espoused by crunchy mommy blogs, is not liberating. In fact, she suggests that they promote a type of motherhood of homebirth, breastfeeding, and cloth diapers that dismiss the inventions that have liberated women. Much like the Cult of the True Woman, this crunchier version of motherhood (through the promotion of mommy blogs) is morally and politically superior to other forms of American motherhood. A self-righteous tone often reigns in the crunchy mommy blogs where bloggers and followers are proud of the additional work and sacrifice whether it be in breastfeeding a child past toddlerhood or being awoken multiple times a night for many years because of the family bed. For example: One mommy blogger – Failure to Progress on tumblr – posed the question: Would you use a diaper service (to wash cloth diapers) if one were available? Most of her blog followers said no. Some mothers expressed concerns about the type of detergent being used, while others insisted that they love washing their children's cloth diapers because they are proud to do such a task for their child and their family.

Crunchy mommy blogs assert an anti-capitalist ethos, yet, like other mommy blogs, are still used as tools of commercialism. For example, The Feminist Breeder blog celebrated her daughter's first six months by publishing the uncut video of her (HBAC¹⁷) homebirth (October 21, 2011). The video on her blog is surrounded by advertisers from the site's sponsors, creating

¹⁷ Homebirth After C-section

an uncomfortable intermingling of the commercial with the hyper-personal. This same blog devotes an entire entry to discuss the DivaCup (a non-absorbent menstrual cup). The DivaCup entry starts with this note: “Note: The following is **NOT** a sponsored post or review. I purchased the DivaCup with my own money at Whole Foods *before* DivaCup asked to help sponsor this site. All views and opinions are 100% my own” (October 19, 2011). While mommy blogs like The Feminist Breeder claim to offer a hippie-fied version of motherhood, crunchy mommy blogs are marketing machines – even if the products they peddle include organic cotton, earth-friendly goods, or Lactivist items. Remembering that mommy blogs are performative acts that mold identity and our understandings of motherhood, the marketing power of mommy blogs is notably dangerous – placing identity and motherhood within a corporate-defined discursive power structure.

Many mommy blog conversations center on dichotomies: the working mother vs. the stay-at-home mother, the good mother vs. the bad mother, the perfect mother vs. the real mother, the breastfeeding mother vs. the formula mother. Mothers often look to blame other mothers for these either-or-divisions. Yet, when we look at the working mother vs. SAHM, which is the foundation for many of these conversations and divisions, the workforce is structured to force such dichotomies. Most women do not have the option to both work away from home for part of the day and be with her children part of the day. Considering long work hours, commute time, extra-hour expectations, minimal access to quality child care, inflexible work schedules, minimal paid sick/maternity leave, etc., our current industrial model of work and home create either-or decisions for families. Women still earn less than men (mothers earn even less), so it is often the woman who stays home – making better financial sense for the family. While this is obviously a cultural construct, our naturalist narrative suggests that women stay home because “mother is best” for the child. Butler writes, “The body gains meaning within discourse only in

the context of power relations” (125). Thus, women choose to stay home to breastfeed or because babies naturally thrive when attached to their mothers, when in actuality mothers are stifled by power structures that limit access, foster wage gaps, and support female unfriendly work environments. Butler writes, “The clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function is inscribed on that body as the law of its natural necessity” (126). The dominant motherhood narrative uses a naturalist agenda to keep women tethered to the domestic sphere, and the dichotomist structure of work vs. home disallows most women from living in the middle.

MOMMY BLOGS AND COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM

When considering the potential of mommy blogs as performative acts or rhetorical tools, there emerges an understanding of the political power of mommy bloggers – especially when combined with the implied democratization of Web 2.0 formats. The Internet – especially the interactive assets of Web 2.0 – promises a democratized space where humans connect and find freedom. While these promises exist and suggest that the Internet should be liberatory, Žižek argues that, “The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change . . . conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure” (154). We encounter information and can disseminate information, but we lose the ability to decide and discriminate. We are trapped within a loop that moves but goes nowhere, because, as Dean explains, “The contemporary setting of electronically mediated subjectivity is one of infinite doubt, ultimate reflexivization. There is always another option, link, opinion, nuance or contingency that we haven’t taken into account” (Dean 3). This endless loop and infinite doubt stimulate our thirst for authenticity – like the uncensored posts of mommy blogs – yet even binging on all available information cannot satisfy our thirst. The online circulation of information thwarts our ability to react by trapping us within a loop of hyperlinks, comments, forwarding, liking and posting. Our Web 2.0 interaction transforms activity into passivity, occupying our time with a quest for more information, human connection and deluding us with clicktivism over activism. Following is a mommy blog example that exemplifies the political numbing effect that happens within the delusions of activity created by Web 2.0 interaction.

Target & Breastfeeding

In December of 2009, a woman, Mary Martinez, breastfeeding her 4-week-old infant in the electronics department of a Michigan Target store was confronted by a security guard, who told her that breastfeeding in public was illegal. Martinez's husband, an off-duty Detroit police officer, countered the security guard's claim, knowing that breastfeeding was not "illegal." (Michigan law states that breastfeeding is exempt from public nudity provisions.) At this point, Target employees called the police, who eventually escorted the Martinez family from the store.

This incident was immediately the topic of many angry postings on mommy blogs, especially blogs that regularly support attachment parenting¹⁸ ideals and breastfeeding. Blogs, from CrunchyDomesticGoddess.com to MomLogic.com, relayed the incident in their blogs and provided contact information for Target Corporate Headquarters. At the time of the incident, the Michigan state legislature was considering a law that would expand the rights of breastfeeding mothers. The pending legislation would move beyond the public-nudity exemption and give women the right to breastfeed in any place they have the legal right to be. Several blog posts and comments mentioned the pending legislation and asked blog followers to contact their state legislators in Michigan to urge them to expand the rights of breastfeeding mothers. For example, on the CrunchyDomesticGoddess.com blog post about the Michigan incident, Angela at Breastfeeding 1-2-3 writes, "This incident highlights exactly why Michigan mothers are needed to testify tomorrow, December 2, 2009, in favor of the pending Michigan breastfeeding legislation." (December 1, 2009). She also provides a link to her own blog on BlissTree.com where she provides legislative language, a list of Michigan House Judiciary Committee members and their email addresses and phone numbers, and information on how

¹⁸ Attachment parenting, a term coined by Dr. William Sears, is a form of parenting characterized by: natural birth bonding, breastfeeding (sometimes well into toddlerhood), babywearing, co-sleeping, etc. It is deemed a more natural parenthood.

Michigan mothers can testify to the legislature. After this initial flurry surrounding the story of Mary Martinez and the Michigan Target, a few blogs noted that the breastfeeding legislation passed out of committee with a vote of 11-2. Yet, there were no further blog posts related to this specific incident or further updates on the legislation. And, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures' report on Breastfeeding Laws, Michigan remains one of only five states that does not have "laws that specifically allow women to breastfeed in any public or private location" (May 2011).

Commercially, Target Corporation responded with a form letter, matching their public statement, to mommy bloggers who contacted the corporation to complain. The letter states, "We want everyone to feel comfortable shopping at Target. Guests who choose to breastfeed in public areas of the store are welcome to do so without being made to feel uncomfortable. Additionally, we support the use of fitting rooms for women who wish to breastfeed their babies, even if others are waiting to use the fitting rooms" (CrunchyDomesticGoddess.com, December 4, 2009). This blogger, Amy Gates, and those who commented about the letter expressed overall disappointment in the corporate response, but thought that a boycott would be an extreme response. Commenter "Pop and Ice," writes, "I'm not going to boycott Target as well, however I'm going to think seriously about patronizing other stores instead for upcoming gifts" (December 4, 2009). Despite the online textual anger expressed in mommy blogs over this incident, there were little-to-no implications commercially or politically. Communicative capitalism defines an Internet where text circulates but is never delivered, conjuring up an image of a spinning wheel that goes nowhere. Writers, like hamsters, spin their respective wheels – very busy but not actually going anywhere.

UNKNOWN KNOWNS OF MOMMY BLOGS

In examining the unknown knowns of mommy blogs, we can see them as tools of oppression. Mommy blogs – because they are multiply performative – weave a market-based narrative that shackles women to the private sphere, away from the workforce, where they engage as consumers and authors of the same narrative that oppresses them. Mommy blogs pose as edgy and emancipatory texts, yet instead they generate discourse that reinforces their allegiance to the domestic sphere and women's defined role as instinctual tools of reproduction. Mommy blogs' false sense of authenticity make them susceptible to marketing schemes – and ultimately the same corporate-based capitalism that benefits from mothers' absence from the workforce. Mommy bloggers use this rhetorical online space to soothe their displacement from the public sphere and their disempowerment within an economic system that deliberately excludes them and punishes mothers with lower wages. Because mommy bloggers feel helpless (both known and unknown) within this capitalist cultural confinement, they use Internet-based autobiographical acts in their quest for meaning and coherence. Further, mommy bloggers seek human connection through the Internet, which – despite marketing mystification that suggests otherwise – serves to further dehumanize their condition. Mommy blogs both commodify and dehumanize the personal narrative, creating a false sense of activity that prevents women from improving their own lives. The Internet, with its promises of freedom and global community, offers “radical closure” (Žižek) that serves to oppress not liberate the mommy blogger. This effect lulls the mommy blogger into inaction with the hum and buzz of virtual activity of linking, posting and commenting, which further excludes the mommy blogger – by her own hand – from

the public and political sphere. Mommy blogs with their maternal rhetoric and their manufactured busyness create a culture where the oppressed become their own oppressors.

Yet, even with Butler's analysis on gender performance and motherhood, maternal rhetoric must continue to be a part of broader political conversations. While we may acknowledge Butler's analysis of maternal rhetoric's potential to reinforce limiting reproductive definitions of female identity, how can we ever address these limiting factors if we pretend that parenthood is a gender-neutral institution? Similarly to critical race theorists who disdain discussions of "color blindness," we cannot ignore the culturally constructed framework of gender, parenthood and power. We also must acknowledge the representative voice of mothers who live within and are limited by the cultural confines of patriarchal parenthood. How can we discuss motherhood and encourage the real-life narratives of mothers without further reinforcing the normative mythology that women are tools of reproduction?

Composition and writing can certainly be tools of de-mythologizing motherhood. Gloria Anzaldúa, in an interview with Andrea Lundsford, explains that by giving voice to previously excluded and silenced narratives, we are able to rewrite the culture. "Twenty years ago, incest was not a part of consensual reality. It was the writers who wrote about it, feminists who talked about, who made films about it, who did art about incest and child abuse, who changed reality" (Lundsford 1426-27). The question remains: Do mommy blogs provide this opportunity to revise the dominant motherhood narrative. Like the earlier example of the infertility bloggers, mommy blogs have potential to bump the trajectory of the political system. Is there emancipatory possibility in 3.9 million mothers writing about their own motherhood experiences? When we recognize that the autobiographical text is more than mere reflection of the "real" world, we can see it as tool for making meaning *in* the world and *of* the world. In an eagerness for coherence, we have – throughout history – created a dominant narrative that has fortified the

ideology of power. Yet, through the autobiographical act, there is opportunity to interrupt this dominant narrative or to “reinforce identities that have not previously found narrative expression or that are shifting in relation to cultural norms” (Egan 25) – like motherhood. Yet, do mommy blogs interrupt or reinforce?

Blogging and motherhood are a natural partnership. Blogging is simultaneously private and public. It can be composed from the confines of home, but the words exist in the public space. Because of this private-public duality, blogging is ideal for mothers – who despite decades of entering the workforce still often come from the home realm. Mothers have often been required to code-switch because private life, children and motherhood have been deemed inappropriate topics within a public setting – especially a political or work-related one. The blogosphere offers the space where women can talk about the private in public, blurring the cultural boundaries that compartmentalize their lives. Yet, we must acknowledge that the private and the public are not different yet equal spheres. The public sphere with its political and financial opportunity has power over the private domestic sphere. Within this hybridity of blurred spheres, mothers may risk both diminishing their own public power by associating with the domestic, or further denigrating the domestic sphere by continuing to assign power to the patriarchal public sphere.

Yet, transformation may be possible when we include the private/domestic within the powerful public sphere. When we include stories rather than exclude, narrative has the ability to rewrite reality. This liberating perspective reminds us that by de-centering the autobiographical text we have the ability for revision and re-vision of the pervasive cultural script. We have the power to imbue understood reality with a more textured – sometimes uncomfortable – meaning. We have the opportunity to invert convention and even oppression. “If you define writing as any kind of scribble, any kind of trying to mark on the world,” says Anzaldúa. “And

some of us want to take those marks that are already getting inscribed in the world and redo them” (Lunsford 1406). Mommy blogs provide the potential to “re-do” our understanding of motherhood because of their volume of text, their willingness to thrust the private into the public space, and their dynamic author-reader interaction. However, Crawford argues, “But storytelling in a vacuum is nothing more than that. For society and culture to be able to respond to women’s needs, through law or otherwise, storytelling must be accompanied by critique” (236). Thus, collectively, mommy blogs reify the normative motherhood narrative with gritty and sometimes profane clicktivist delusions, rather than actively work against the systemic issues that limit the lives of mothers: lack of quality child care; breastfeeding discrimination; unpaid maternity leave; wage disparity for women, working mothers and women of color. Mommy blogs emphasize a narrative of voluntary stay-at-home motherhood (SAHM). This SAHM narrative is essential to capitalism, which only thrives when a certain percentage of adults are removed from the workforce. Mommy blogs use narrative to keep women content in the domestic sphere while they are being forced out of the workforce through lower wages and lack of child care choices.

CONCLUSION

As I have worked on the research and writing of this thesis, the online landscape has evolved. Several world events suggest that we, as media consumers and citizens, have learned to utilize online rhetorical spaces to impact actual political issues. Iranian citizens, after questionable election results in 2009, used Twitter as a tool to connect, organize, and promote political protests, which enabled greater numbers of protesters to attend political actions. Dissenters used this successfully to create louder, more powerful protests (dubbed the Twitter Revolution), until the government used the same social networking tool to lure and arrest dissenters. A year later, citizens in Egypt successfully and quickly overthrew their 30-year dictatorship using social networking sites to, again, connect, promote and organize actual political action. And, according to the Facebook page “We Are All Khalid Said,” Egyptians rose against the government after people witnessed Khalid Said, a 28-year-old blogger, being tortured to death after posting a video of police officers engaging in illegal activity. This Facebook page shows graphic photos of a dead Said, but also video, photos and reports of other atrocities. Fueled by this type of social networking¹⁹, mass organizations by Egyptians overthrow their government in 18 days – kicking off what has been dubbed the Arab Spring. And, this September 17, Americans fed up with government bail-out of the financial sector and the lingering unemployment rates used the Internet and social networking to launch Occupy Wall Street. Satellite Occupy movements have

¹⁹ Jodi Dean argues on her blog “I Cite” in a blog post “What is to be done?” that social networking had no role in the Egyptian uprising. She, in fact, displays a flyer that urges people to not share information on social networking sites because it is monitored by the government and the police. She, addressing communicative capitalism, argues: “Too much information becomes too little. Too much analysis and commentary deflects and displaces. The culture of media circulates and redirects energies away from direct confrontation. No wonder turning off the internet in Egypt had energizing effects – people had to get information from each other on the streets” (06 February 2011).

sprouted up across the U.S., with social networking and Web 2.0 applications used to connect and organize. The Occupy movement has, at the most, transformed some of the general discourse of our current economic crisis to include discussions of income disparity, wage suppression, and the banks' complicit role in our bad economy. But, each of these examples – although to great varying degrees – suggests that we have discovered how to move beyond a clicktivist quagmire and we have learned to connect our virtual political work with actual political work.

Yet, does this political action hold promise for mommy bloggers and the political needs of mothers? Or, can we argue that the same systemic limitations that confine mothers to domestic spaces will continue to exclude mothers from broader in-the-real-world political work? In a recent local Occupy Facebook thread, two mothers confessed that they could not participate more fully in the Occupy movement because of their responsibilities as mothers. Wendy Smith writes, “Didn’t realize GAs [general assemblies] are required to be a part of the movement or have a voice . . . it makes me feel that as a single mother I have to give all or nothing at all” (Occupy Pueblo, 17 Nov 2011). Another mother, Sarah J. Towne, wrote, “Part of what’s intimidating for me is that I don’t have the time and ability to attend as many of the Occupy events and GAs as I would like . . . [I] feel as though since my involvement is necessarily limited by my circumstances, perhaps, I should not participate at all” (Occupy Pueblo, 17 Nov 2011). Mothers may continue to cling solely to online rhetorical spaces because of the logistical limitations that currently exclude women with children from participating more fully in politics. However, the current dominant discourse surrounding motherhood – reinforced by mommy blogs – is part of the systemic stranglehold that excludes many mothers from the public sphere. Because when we engage in maternal rhetoric without a critical lens, we continue to mythologize women as primarily tools of reproduction.

And, the question remains: Can the personal writings of 3.9 million mothers online change the dominant cultural script that oppresses women? Sadly the answer is no, if mothers continue to use online rhetorical spaces to post revised versions of their lives to reinforce the system that excludes and limits them. But, it is not enough to dismiss this genre, and it is not enough to suggest that women should be writing/fighting for a seat at the table of patriarchy. There is a place for the use of maternal rhetoric and there is a need – despite Butler’s arguments about gender performance – for broader political and cultural conversations about the physical. Any woman who has sat in a boardroom while breastmilk has leaked on her work clothes cannot ignore the physicality of motherhood. As mothers we may be able to performatively achieve some forms of masculine-defined equality, but we also must fight as mothers when we develop mastitis in our breasts because our workplaces offer no places to pump breastmilk. These are physical issues and needs that arise from motherhood – not gender-neutral parenthood. This is why maternal rhetoric must be a part of our broader cultural and political conversation. We cannot jump from closeting motherhood – confining it to the private sphere – and, then, just politely discuss parenthood sterilely devoid of gender implications.

There is a well-acknowledged gender-based wage gap²⁰, but that income disparity is worse for working mothers. In fact, studies have shown that the largest wage gap is between women with children and women without children. Sociologists have determined that there is a salary decrease of up to 23 percent for college-educated mothers with two or more children compared with their non-mother peers – a wage gap dubbed the Motherhood Penalty²¹.

Mommy blogs and maternal rhetoric – online or otherwise – offer us an opportunity to change

²⁰ The Institute of Women’s Policy Research, using 2010 U.S. Census data, states that women earn 77 percent of white men’s earnings. African-American women only earn 62 percent and Latina women only earn 54 percent of white men’s earnings.

²¹ More information on the Motherhood Wage Penalty can be found in: “The Motherhood Wage Penalty: Which Mothers Pay It and Why?” by Deborah J. Anderson et al in *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 92, No. 2. 345-358.

the conversation about motherhood in both the private and public sphere. We clearly have a system that begrudgingly accepts women – if they don't let any of their messy female physicality get in the way. Maternal rhetoric, when not reinforcing the oppressive system, has the potential to rankle the patriarchy. The system needs a revision that honestly examines gender performance and accommodates any gender physicality, but instead we have spent our years of feminist activism on getting representation within the patriarchy. Maternal rhetoric offers the opportunity to completely rewrite the cultural script – seeking ways to empower women, men and their families. Audre Lorde reminds us that we will never dismantle the master's house using the master's tools. Mommy blogs, if they resist being co-opted by corporations, have the ability to claim unchartered rhetorical space, to speak honestly and sometimes graphically about the culturally constructed limitations facing mothers, and to rewrite the dominant narrative that insists women remain confined solely to the private sphere. Mommy blogs, with their uncomfortable birth videos and frank discussions of breasts and vaginas, are successfully moving private conversations into the public sphere, but we need to move it further. We need to demand that our physical bodies – not in spite of them – belong in public, in politics and in the workplace. We can no longer use these rhetorical opportunities to justify our exclusion from the public sphere. We must acknowledge that, yes, we give birth, we bleed and we have milk that comes from our breasts. And, while we do have these material differences, we must use Butler's theories to also acknowledge the performative acts that have incorrectly assigned these physical attributes to mythologies that support mothers' exclusion. Yet, denying the physicality of motherhood also reifies the patriarchy. When we silence maternal rhetoric, we will never address issues of affordable and quality child care, little-to-no paid sick leave, breastfeeding needs (corporate-created formula is not an answer), motherhood wage penalties, and little-to-no paid maternity leave.

When studying mommy blogs, we also must acknowledge that the personal can be political, as Carol Hanisch wrote in her famed 1969 essay “The Personal is Political.” Hanisch argued that if enough women share their personal stories, they will realize that their oppression is not individual, but, rather that each women’s individual oppression is part of a larger systemic oppression. It is only through the sharing of our personal stories that we can connect the dots to form the larger picture required for successful analysis and action. She suggests that action without the foundation of personal stories often lacks analysis and risks becoming anti-woman, such as when Miss America protests lashed out at the female contestants forgetting that they were not oppressors but the oppressed. Hanisch also suggests that when political women force apolitical women to “think like us and live like us,” we will fail. She argues that “there are things in the consciousness of ‘apolitical’ women . . . that are as valid as any political consciousness. However, when we share the personal without connecting it to the political, we are in danger of reinforcing oppressive systems by fueling the unknown knowns that presuppose the predicaments of motherhood as normative and natural. We must be able to convert our collective experiences into the kind of action that will improve women’s lives.

And, finally, I realize that many may question my insistence on women’s inclusion in the workforce. Some may even suggest that I am judging the stay-at-home mother too harshly. I respond by explaining I am not judging any mothers but rather the system that excludes mothers from the public sphere. In 2006, Hanisch wrote an introduction to her previously penned “The Personal is Political.” From her nearly 40-years-later vantage point, Hanisch acknowledges a few revisions that she would have made to her original essay. She would revise her initial statement that it didn’t matter if women were in the home or in the “rat race” – essentially it didn’t matter if women were in the private sphere or the public sphere. In her 21st century introduction, Hanisch expresses her revised philosophy:

I have come to agree with Susan B. Anthony that to be free, a woman must have "a purse of her own." Women can't be independent without participating in the public workforce. That also means uniting in a fight for a public childcare and for a restructuring of the workplace with women's equality in mind, while insisting men share the housework and childcare on the homefront, so that women don't end up doing it all. (January 2006)

Historically, and currently, we have mistakenly crammed such statements into dichotomies that have pitted the working mother against the at-home mother. This false battle only serves to mystify systemic oppression and divide women, preventing the opportunity to connect the collective personal. Some theorists suggest that de-centered cyberspace has the potential to erase such dichotomies because it creates a rhetorical space where women – even from the isolation of home – can share the personal, “subverting the good mother/bad mother discourse to an ‘All Mothers’ discourse, where mothers are encouraged to tell their stories and create new possibilities” (Powell 49). As Bridget Crawford argues, in her critique of the heavy use of personal narrative in third-wave feminism, “Support and reassurance are necessary conditions for human flourishing. But sharing experiences is not by definition a political act” (234). The personal will only transform the political and cultural scripts that oppress women when action and analysis accompany our stories.

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