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This article was downloaded by:[Quiney, Ruth]  
On: 3 March 2008  
Access Details: [subscription number 776352484]  
Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954  
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Women: A Cultural Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713689960>

### Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-first-century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma Ruth Quiney

Online Publication Date: 01 April 2007

To cite this Article: Quiney, Ruth (2007) 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother:  
Twenty-first-century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma ', Women: A Cultural Review,  
18:1, 19 - 40

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09574040701276704

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09574040701276704>

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# Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-first-century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma<sup>1</sup>

*... I can't help but think that this is not an easy time in history for women ... I have sat with women in their nighties at three in the morning and comforted them while they sobbed their hearts out from exhaustion and fear about their babies (Ford 2006:31).*

*In these times of dreary crisis, what is the point of emphasizing the horror of being? (Kristeva 1982:208).*

**I**N the early twenty-first century, the subjective experience and personal politics of mothering have attained significant literary visibility. Memoirs of mothering by Naomi Wolf, Rachel Cusk and others have become controversial, with critics expressing dismay at or contempt of the writers' revelations of dissatisfaction, confusion and disillusionment with the 'experience and institution' of mothering (Rich 1977). This article focuses primarily on the work of Cusk, a novelist who came to particular

public notice with a memoir of her first year of maternity, *A Life's Work* (Cusk 2001a). She has written that, since becoming a mother, 'unravelling femininity and maternity has become ... a compelling ambition, both personally and in my creative life' (Cusk 2001b). I attempt here an outline of the deeply contested cultural space in which writers like Cusk struggle to articulate new developments in maternal subjectivity, amid the bewildering socio-economic shifts of a globalized world economy, and in the aftermath of twentieth-century feminist activism. The bodily and emotional upheavals of motherhood are being portrayed, by relatively privileged, middle-class writers, as shocking dislocations of an original, pre-maternal 'true' self. Proposing this apparently traumatized mother as an actor in the contemporary cultural drama of 'wound culture' (Seltzer 1998), I examine the new subjective viewpoints that this maternal literature offers on the simultaneously empty and overflowing category of the mother (Scott 1986). Maternal writers, I argue, have entered a longstanding debate about the right of female experience to be recognized as politically and culturally important. They are also struggling to delineate an active, expressive maternal subject in the contemporary West. In British and North American contexts,<sup>2</sup> motherhood has become the focus of acute anxieties about (re)productivity in the context of advanced global capitalism. As often bitterly recounted in the work I analyse here, the tasks of birthing and raising future workers and consumers are increasingly presented to women as a curious and urgent mixture of career (with its own regimes of training, information and on-the-job surveillance) and sacrificial moral vocation. I explore here how maternal writers engage with the longstanding feminist fight to write the unspeakable, those abject discourses of (traditionally feminine) experience and emotion that transgress gendered and social norms to the extent that they are denied or forcibly repressed in quotidian interaction and communication. The writers examined here deal in their work with the machinery of this repression as it manifests itself both in critical responses and in their own reactions to themselves as mothers.

### *The Maternal Confessional in the (Anti-)Feminist Public Sphere*

In her introduction to *A Life's Work*, Cusk describes the book as 'a letter, addressed to those women who care to read it, in the hope that they find some companionship in my experiences' (Cusk 2001a:10). Embarking on deliberate self-revelation, she is acutely aware of its pitfalls: 'as a novelist ... I find this candid type of writing slightly alarming' (4). It is

the direct, intimate address of this book, and of other recent maternal writing, such as Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* (2001) and Lauren Slater's *Love Works Like This* (2003), that leads me to categorize it as 'confessional'. Rita Felski defines 'confession' as 'a type of autobiographical writing which signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author's life' and to make 'public that which has been private, typically claiming to avoid filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience' (Felski 1989:87–8). In her view, women's confessional writing of the feminist second wave, such as Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980), shaped the feminist project of consciousness-raising by narrativizing individual struggles against personal and political oppression. In this genre, Felski remarks, 'the questioning of self is frequently inspired by a personal crisis which acts as a catalyst' (87–8). The genre is concerned with mental and physical trauma, entwining the experiences of the body with the identity of the writer. Furthermore, particularly in the case of feminist work, it links bodily experience to political and cultural status.

The maternal confessional writing examined here treats the body-experiences of childbirth and becoming a mother as fundamental, catalytic crises of selfhood. 'Birth', writes Cusk, 'is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed' (Cusk 2001a:7). This writing enmeshes maternal self-expression with the growing corpus of literature on illness, depression and bodily crisis, which Roger Luckhurst theorizes as emblematic of contemporary 'traumaculture' (Luckhurst 2003). Confessional literature emerged, according to Felski, within a feminist public sphere inside of which women offered each other 'companionship' in the shared yet varied traumas of gendered oppression. In her formulation, the confessional text may be 'used as a springboard by readers from which to examine and compare their own experiences', and 'the representative aspects of the author's experience' become central to its reception (Felski 1989:93–4). The literature of traumaculture is thus indebted to a prior feminist discourse of breached boundaries and the search for communication and empowerment through self-narration.<sup>3</sup> Thus, maternal confessional writing inscribes female experience within an already 'feminized' culture of public vulnerability and trauma. Significantly, Cusk cites Adrienne Rich's second wave feminist memoir of mothering, *Of Woman Born* (1977), as her inspiration for *A Life's Work* (Cusk 2001a:4).

Luckhurst relates the outpouring of autobiographical and confessional literature about bodily crisis to the particular conditions of the 1990s,<sup>4</sup> in which the increasing severance of personal and community links and the

concomitant rise of a therapeutic model for emotional and psychic health have encouraged the formation, particularly among the 'liberal intelligentsia' (Luckhurst 2003:37), of public arenas for the expression and consumption of 'private' bodily pain: a 'traumatic memoir culture' (36). Motherhood is a familiar subject for explicitly politicized or polemical feminist memoir (see, for example, Rich 1977 and Chesler 1979), but the mass publicity generated by *A Life's Work*, Wolf's *Misconceptions* and other mass-marketed maternal works,<sup>5</sup> suggests a contemporary invocation of childbirth and mothering as traumatic experiences around which an ever broader, general public might gather. The fact that this public is female renders the trauma invoked by maternal confessional writing a point of intense cultural anxiety about the capacities of women: the state of modern mothers that—in an overarching historical context of appropriation of female bodies and reproductive labour as productive resources for nation and corporation—becomes troublingly analogous to that of the body politic as a whole (Thomson 1998:52–3). The public presentation of a traumatized maternal body, physically wounded by birth (Wolf 2001, Figs 1998, Figs 2002) and exhausted by the emotional demands and cultural restrictions of childrearing, amplifies perceptions of a 'state of injury' (Brown 1995) in which women exist in the contemporary West. The efflorescence of literature by women about maternal experience cannot but suggest an opening up, however contested, of access to public speech for maternal (non-)subjects. However, the suffering and crises of subjective identification to which the writing bears witness paradoxically confirm the continuing inscription of the mother as epitome of private, sacrificial femininity, oppositional to the cleanly bounded, productive post-Enlightenment subject.

### *'A Good Mother is nothing like me'*

*A mother told me the other day that for her the most amazing thing about motherhood was that now there existed a person who was more important than herself. I thought about this for a long time, as I do when confronted with statements from other mothers that I find alien. I don't think that my children are more important than I am, any more than I think I am more important than the person next door (Cusk 2001b).*

The subversive potential of maternal confessional writing like Cusk's is in good part comprised by its analysis of, and protests against, dominant cultural definitions of appropriate mothering. Herein, too, lies its vulnerability, not only to critical condemnation but to internalized notes

of guilt and uncertainty on the writer's part. Such maternal writing is much preoccupied with the figure of the Good Mother, acidly puncturing the apparently impermeable bubble in which the ideal mother of psychoanalytic, literary and cinematic family romance lives, mired in a fiction of everlasting fulfilment through service. The writing also provides an intriguing account of the anxiety and anger excited in the white middle-class mother by this laudatory, yet ultimately persecutory, mythic version of herself. Cusk's outburst, above, demonstrates the powerful interaction of cultural dictates and types with the enduring psychic structures of the Good Mother and her bipolar opposite. By declaring that she does not consider her value to be less than her children's, Cusk is attacking and critiquing the very myth that she might otherwise appear to embody: the *hegemonic* mother, the cheery suburban matron utterly devoted to her brood of productive future citizens. Assuming, with Roszika Parker, that psychoanalytic configurations reflect, consolidate and influence social norms and fantasies as well as encoding longstanding and troubling cultural and psychic patterns of desire and fear (Parker 1995), the elusive perfect mother-self who haunts maternal confessional writing and the Good (Enough) Mother of the most influential schools of post-war psychoanalytic thought are aspects of a relatively homogeneous ideal. Women who might have adopted the anonymous mask of affluent hegemonic motherhood have chosen to reveal the ambivalence of the paradigm itself: to worry at and interrogate the Good Mother, and thus to confront both her hegemony and her disciplinary functions. Parker remarks that it is a function of the Good Mother paradigm to contain any troubling ideas about the 'naturalness' of motherhood, 'dividing mothers into the good and containing, about whom nothing more need be said or done, and the mothers who require explaining' (99). Work like Cusk's pursues 'the tensions and conflicts and contradictions' of mothering rather than trying to resolve them (146), and thus exposes the conundrums of maternal ambivalence, and of cultural ambivalence about maternity. As the hostile critical reception of confessional maternal writing (which I discuss below) suggested, by attempting to explore the contradictions of mothering the writers were publicly cast as mothers requiring 'explaining' because they refused to contain their negative emotions.

Melanie Klein's model of infantile splitting provides a useful key to the persistence of psychic and cultural bipolar fantasies of good *vs.* bad maternity (Klein 1988). Since, from the earliest contact with the breast and its intolerable removal, all infants will, at times, experience their mothers as depriving, the Bad Mother is fundamental to identity formation, providing the spur to self-acknowledgement in the child

while creating the mother as receptacle of fear of abandonment and retaliatory violence. On the level at which psychic formations emerge into culture, Klein's theories illuminate the persistence of the 'angel/witch' dichotomy in the mythologies of maternity that influence popular discourses, fiction and the law.<sup>6</sup> The bipolar angel/witch mother is in evidence throughout the revelations and self-castigations of maternal confessional writing, as when Cusk describes herself as 'more virtuous and more terrible, and more implicated in the world's virtue and terror' as a mother than she had thought possible (Cusk 2001a:8). Parker has suggested that the experience and stresses of birth and childrearing cause a woman to re-experience her own early splitting of the nurturing/persecuting parent, and to see both herself and her infant in these bipolar terms (Parker 1995:4). She comments that, in her practice, mothers seeking psychoanalysis tend to both believe in the amorphous and ubiquitous concept of the Good Mother, and, guiltily and angrily, to locate her outside themselves. She is someone else, someone better; 'nothing like me' (Chesler 1979:229). Permanently situated outside their own agency and identity, the Good Mother paradigm haunts and persecutes mothers like Cusk, representing the full weight of personal guilt, failure and grim accountability that accompany contemporary western motherhood. She appears here as a nagging lack, that apparently necessary aspect of the motherly self that eludes the woman who longs to be 'naturally' altruistic and containing. Cusk, for example, daringly questions the hegemony of the object-relations model of mother as sole infantile focus of desire:

It is not only difficult to believe that I am the object of the baby's desire, an object she is unresting in her attempts to enslave to her own will; it is in fact quite possible that she doesn't like me at all. . . . I do not believe that she is necessarily composing a list of objections to my conduct. It is merely that when I come looming through [the] fog I don't appear to improve things (Cusk 2001a:62).

Nonetheless, she recounts being swamped with guilt when she breaks down after a sleepless night with her constantly crying baby daughter. She sees in her child's shocked face the inescapable image of herself as witch-mother:

GO TO SLEEP! I shout, now standing directly over her cradle. I shout not because I think she might obey me but because I am aware of an urge to hurl her out of the window. She looks at me in utter terror. It is the first frankly emotional look she has given me in her life (80).



Cusk, however much she blames herself, remains resentfully aware of the social determinants of her guilt. She notes the unsympathetic reactions of those to whom she confesses her loss of control: 'I myself have moved outside the shelter of love. As a mother I do not exist within the forgiving context of another person' (80).

*'You are a self-obsessed bore': Critical Hostility to Maternal Confession*

The unforgiving context in which the mother-writer exists is most clearly delineated in journalistic critiques of her work. Cusk links the personal criticisms levelled at her by female journalists in response to *A Life's Work* with a general cultural policing of maternal speech by women seeking to identify themselves with the Good Mother:

I didn't know that that kind of cruelty and criticism you encounter among mothers at the toddler group could find its way into written media until my book came out . . . Then suddenly, I have women like Gill Hornby and India Knight writing articles about me,<sup>7</sup> in effect saying, 'Well, I love my children and they're the best thing that happened to me, I don't know what's wrong with you' (Merritt 2003:19).

Critical responses to maternal confessional writing in the national press have featured angry commentary about the claim of mothers to public speech, and about the status of their work as literature. Cusk and Wolf were painted as overly intellectual women unable to deal with the commonsense duties of womanhood (Briston 2001; 'Colic and the Intelligentsia' 2001). A pervasive characterization of mothering as too humdrum and tedious for public literary expression allowed critics to mock mother-writers for valuing their own maternal experience highly enough to presume it worthy of literary exposure and discussion. 'Some things', wrote the journalist Susannah Herbert in response to *A Life's Work*, '—and they include your labour pains and your baby's first smile—just aren't tradable on the open market. They don't travel, they don't translate, and it's crazy to expect the rest of the world to care about them as much as you do' (Herbert 2001). The amount of hostility aimed at Cusk and Wolf was enough to encourage another writer, Anne Enright, to apologize to the potentially offended reader at the beginning of her own maternal memoir, *Making Babies* (2004): 'Speech is a selfish act, and mothers should probably remain silent. . . . So I'd like to say

sorry to everyone in advance. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry' (Enright 2004:1).<sup>8</sup> (In a polite, yet directly subversive manner, Enright then claims a right to the 'selfish act' of maternal speech: 'my only excuse is that I think it is important. I wanted to say what it was like' (4).)

The opprobrium poured on mothers who have dared to write, let alone complain, about mothering is a firm reassertion of old 'truths' about motherhood: that maternal experiences are emphatically *not* subjects for theorizing or debate, that their public airing is indecent and may even indicate pathology on the part of the woman concerned. Enright's book, after its daring statement of the importance of her maternal viewpoint, goes on to pander somewhat to the cultural banishment of maternal experiences that fall outside stereotypical forms, deteriorating into pages of 'jokey advice' (Cusk 2004) such as 'no one gives a toss about your second pregnancy. Get on with it' (Enright 2004:157). The self-deprecating stance of Enright's comparatively 'light' maternal confession enabled her to escape the accusations of self-obsession and maternal incompetence that had been levelled at her predecessors. Conversely, the insulting language deployed by the latter's critics directly convicts them of Bad Mothering: 'you are a self obsessed bore: the embodiment of the Me! Me! Me! attitude which you so resent in small children' (Knight 2001). Though it is a gender-neutral band of writing 'parents' who are being attacked in Knight's piece,<sup>9</sup> the writers targeted are primarily women and are indicted for unbecoming self-inflation, for hysterical and imperfect femininity; their work vexes and disgusts by laying bare experiential territory historically demarcated as invisible.

### *Maternal Abjection and (Self-)Disgust*

The critical classification of maternal confessional works as self-indulgent, dull and indecent is a reassertion of traditional generic standards (according to which embodied, and particularly feminine, experience is relegated to 'low' culture<sup>10</sup>) and a reaction to the works' open subversion of the Good Mother's saintly silence. Maternal confessional writing deals intimately with the subject matter of the procreative body, the experience of its mutating boundaries and peculiar sensations, as well as with its unspeakable feelings, particularly its treacherous dissatisfactions; thus it might be classified as writing of the maternal abject. Predictably, the reaction of contemporary critics to the publication of specific details of embodied maternal abjection was, in the case of Anne Enright, a maidenly throwing up of hands, implying deep and troubling cultural anxieties about the female procreative body, heaving itself messy and

uninvited into respectable discourse. In *Guardian* readers' responses to the serialized accounts of pregnancy and birth that were later published as *Making Babies*, disgust mingled with outrage that the 'low' topic of maternal embodiment could be granted column space: 'thank you so much for the details of Anne Enright's extraordinary pregnancy (her timing of digestion was especially engrossing)' (Joughin 2001). Unease is generated by the highly articulate version of maternal embodiment and subjectivity that the work presents, one that threatens the cultural hegemonies governing writing about bodies and gender: the same dominant discourses that possess the rarely questioned power to marshal such terms as appropriateness, decency and literary quality, and thus to sort the broadly normative and acceptable from the transgressive and dangerous. The marginal literary status of maternal self-writing, therefore, renders it both potentially subversive and relatively vulnerable: its grudging acceptance as publishable material appears to be conditional on wider cultural imperatives, governing what mothers can and cannot say or be at a given historical point. (It is interesting, for example, to speculate on whether *A Life's Work* would have reached publication in its existing state if Cusk had not already authored two critically well-received novels, even though she also was widely mocked for approaching motherhood in 'high' literary style (Briston 2001, Macleod 2001).)

Foremost perhaps among the qualities of the writing that render it a genre of *embodied* experience is the unflinching attention to the details of domestic entrapment and physical pain, mess and drudgery, which are open to critical interpretation as 'disgusting' or simply mundane. Though the address of the books is polite, they display a grim intent to lay bare the food- and body-fluid-smearred world of maternity to an unprecedented extent. This is Cusk's description of her kitchen when her daughter is around eight months old:

unidentifiable matter describes paths, like the trail of a snail, over walls and surfaces. The room has acquired a skin, a crust of dried milk upon which old food sits like a sort of eczema. . . . mess spreads like a force of nature, unstoppable. My clothes are limed with it; I find gobbets in my hair, on my shoes (Cusk 2001a:138).

Cusk finds herself steeped in the 'improper/unclean' (Kristeva 1982:2), her environment dominated by food and excrement, the viscous fluids of mundane abjection:

My daughter's pure and pearly being requires considerable maintenance. At first my relation to it is that of a kidney. I process its waste. Every three hours I pour milk into her mouth. It goes around a

series of tubes and then comes out again. I dispose of it (Cusk 2001a:134).

Wolf describes a young mother's car and wardrobe as so 'filthy with baby stains' that her husband will not set foot in it (Wolf 2001:213), while Slater provides an eyewitness description of her Caesarean section: 'they just pulled your womb out, it was blue, and they scrubbed it with a sponge and then put it on the table' (Slater 2003:128). The physical shock of bodily invasion, erupting fluidity and mess accompanies the socio-cultural dislocation and bewilderment of writers who have previously inhabited an affluent middle-class realm in which the demands of the body may be consigned to a minimal space out of public view. Pregnancy and childbirth magnify those demands, and subject the late capitalist 'control freak' (Warner 2005:161) to numerous uncontrollable bodily events, of which birth is only the first. The maternal control freak must handle tidal waves of emotion for the physically vulnerable, demanding child. Living with the requirements of an infant who 'emanates unprocessed human need where the world is at its most civilised' generates massive conflict for Cusk, who finds herself torn between allegiance to the regulated public world and a reaction against it: 'I come to see something inhuman in civilisation . . . I hate its precious, fragile trinkets, its greed, its lack of charity' (Cusk 2001a:137). In a sharp illustration of the isolation of mothers from the broader social and political implications of their personal feelings and experiences, she finds herself unable to distinguish this generalized 'compassion' and sense of social injustice from 'sentiment'. She is ashamed and confused, wary of public interaction, having lost her sense of herself as a 'clean and proper' (Kristeva 1982:100) contemporary body through association with her daughter: 'it is as if I myself have been returned to some primitive, shameful condition' (Cusk 2001a:136–7).

### *The 'Primordial Soup of Femeness'*

The shameful condition of maternity is clearly a physical one, emblematic of the threat of leakage from maternal and infant bodies. The emanation of 'unprocessed human need' is acutely threatening to the self-identification of the late-capitalist woman, leading to perceptions of a bodily takeover, maternity subsuming personhood. Wolf describes an aqua aerobics class in which her fellow members are elderly or middle-aged women:

I was annoyed at the complete abandonment of my personal boundaries . . . I looked around at the universal grey heads and loosened bodies of the women in the water—women who had done their job and given the world their births—and I realized: Now I was one of them.

I felt as if . . . I had fallen into a primordial soup of femaleness, of undifferentiated post-fecundity . . . We are all liquid, all deliquescence; the unbounded unidentified matrix out of which new life comes endlessly creeping (Wolf 2001:64–5).

As Wolf struggles against the embrace of the pre-Oedipal, the elderly women become crones, signifiers of the archaic feminine. Like the very medical and media cultures that she excoriates in *Misconceptions*, Wolf conceives of maternal embodiment as the feminizing embrace of Othered flesh; though at pains throughout her book to assert the personhood and rights of the western mother to fuller cultural participation, she cannot dismiss dominant constructions of her own maternal body, now emblematic of ‘primordial’ femaleness doing its ancient, self-erasing ‘job’, as betrayer of the active mind/self. Cusk describes a similar sense of dissolution of the self and of bodily boundaries into the mass of the species, identified with an awe-inspiring, yet repulsive, female embodiment:

In the changing rooms at the swimming pool you can see the bodies of women. Naked, they have a narrative quality, like cave paintings; a quality muted by clothes and context, a quality seen only here, in this damp, municipal place where we are grouped anonymously, by gender. Though I too have the body of a woman, the sight still briefly arouses in me a child’s fear, a mixture of revulsion and awe for these breasts and bellies and hips, this unidealised, primitive flesh which, forgetful here of its allure, seems composed purely of reproductive purpose (Cusk 2001a:11).

Both authors, in describing these scenes of ‘primitive’ femaleness, momentarily divert the objectifying/abjecting gaze from their own pregnant bodies, locating reproductive femininity outside, in a ‘Lake of Fecundity’ (Wolf 2001) that threatens to swamp them: the ‘unidentified matrix’ to which their pregnant stomachs treacherously declare their belonging. They thus express an inability to encompass their own reproductivity; though each must acknowledge that they, too, possess ‘the body of a woman’, maternal embodiment lurks outside the boundaries of what they know as their ‘real’ selves, in the oozy realms of horror.

*The Gender Trap and the 'Mommy Mystique'*

Cusk's and Wolf's self-conception before pregnancy is as *comparatively* genderless beings, a perception reinforced by 'post-feminist' cultural conditions under which the single middle-class woman is encouraged to enter higher education and competitive occupations that promise status and power. The degree to which the 'true' late-capitalist self is conceptualized as essentially masculine (bounded, controlled, cleanly individuated: see, for example, Bordo 1993) is demonstrated by the jarred reactions of Wolf and Cusk to their bodies' sudden inscription within the 'primitive' mythology of 'reproductive purpose', which for them connotes essential femininity. Wolf and Cusk both subscribe, however unconsciously or uncomfortably, to the gendered metaphysics of mind-body separation and self/other distinctions that inform dominant medical definitions of health and cultural definitions of subjectivity. If health is 'a state in which there is no regular or noticeable change in body condition' (Young 1990:56), the threat of change, especially eruption and leakage, from pregnant and maternal bodies (Longhurst 2000), and the need to contain this institutionally, produces the 'disease' model of female reproductivity (Davis-Floyd 1994). Motherhood appears here as an embodied experience of 'social wounding to which particularly raced, gendered, and classed bodies remain subject' (Sweeney 2004:60); in maternity, the previously unraced, unclassed middle-class white woman is violently struck with her inescapable genderedness. 'My sex has become an exiguous, long-laid, lovingly furnished trap into which I have inadvertently wandered and from which now there is no escape' (Cusk 2001a:25).

The writers' class status is important to the identity and reception of these texts, and they can be located within the largely hidden history of childbirth and childrearing as productive function within capitalism. Carolyn Steedman has explored the economic and personal values of children as capital, and the foundations of capitalism in the unpaid, private labour of women, rearers of a suitable workforce (Steedman 1986). As Steedman documents in the life-story of her own mother, the socio-economic interacts with and influences the personal, psychic determinants of maternal subjectivity. The middle-class writers examined here provide an intriguing vantage point on the changing determinants of reproduction as production. Reared with expectations of high personal productivity, mothers such as Cusk and Wolf clearly suffer from their own low valuation of the 'low-status occupation' of motherhood (Cusk 2001a:7). The unnervingly deliquescent maternal body is not seen as productive by these conventionally successful 'career' women; yet

motherhood is also a discipline, a brutally detailed regime of self-surveillance and professional advice. The 'lost' productivity of the mother is projected away from her: transferred, deferred to the child, the future citizen who *must*, according to every popular maternal advice regime, come first. For the 'successful' late-capitalist woman, to become a mother is to be suddenly and incomprehensibly charged with the production of the cultural and national future (Berlant 1997:83–146) and with the expectation that one's own productive future (not only one's 'career', but also the right to signify as an individual or 'real person' politically and socially) will gracefully adapt to or make way for it.<sup>11</sup>

Maternal confessional writing, from its class-privileged vantage point, demonstrates a new consciousness of childbearing as barely compatible with the goals of the capitalist consumer or with the life-course of the highly trained 'symbolic-analytic' worker of the new global labour elite. There is in Cusk's and particularly in Wolf's work a freshly voiced discomfort at the dissonant pressures heaped upon the 'new capitalist mother' (Pitt 2002). The lasting hegemony of attachment theory, that dyadic model of intense maternal (rather than parental) attention to the child that remains dominant today (Bowlby 1973, Belsky 1986); the contradictory economic pressures of the global economy and overheated property market; the creeping privatization of political and social responsibilities for the rearing and (increasingly) substantial portions of the education of children: all are cited in feminist polemic as productive of a traumatized and even maddened motherhood (Hochschild 1992, Hays 1998, Coward 1992, Warner 2005). This is particularly clear in work by contemporary US writers, responding to the particularly striking dissonance between maternal and working identities in a context in which childcare is overwhelmingly viewed as an entirely private pursuit, and a spectacularly powerful work and consumption ethic pertains that can make motherhood and conventional economically 'productive' paid labour appear completely incompatible (Warner 2005, Wolf 2001).

What I wish to emphasize in relation to the conundrums and double binds of 'new capitalist' motherhood, whether working or 'stay-at-home' and in both British and US contexts, is the changing constitution of maternal suffering as a realm of expressive impossibility, in which language fails: 'In motherhood, a woman exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings, and like sounds outside a certain range they can be very difficult for other people to identify' (Cusk 2001a:3). Warner proclaims another 'problem with no name' (Warner 2005:53) or 'Mommy Mystique' (32) assailing middle-class American mothers, who describe their lives as 'this mess' (4). Warner's book suggests that what is unspeakable, for these women, is their resentment of

the constrictions of an increasingly conservative maternal role in post-Reaganite America, within a globalized economy in which their labour may be worth less than their childcare costs, and their children appear to face an insecure economic future unless intensively trained to be exemplary capitalist 'winners'. What Warner does not discuss in detail is the dissonance between the ideal capitalist citizen (who, in both British and American contexts, is a young, driven entrepreneur and devoted 'wealth-creator' without troublesome dependents or intrusive domestic duties), and the non-subject these well-educated mothers are expected to embody, as carers and carriers of future citizen-workers. In a context in which a woman's productivity must be mortgaged to reproductivity and to the guarantee of a working future for children and nation, Warner's 'Mommy Mystique' emerges as a new site of feminine wounding and loss, unrepresentable in cultures founded around the Oedipal trauma of the (male) child, and the subsequent attainment of individual separateness that enables him to become productive (Warner 2005:93). Cusk experiences her own, maternal trauma as isolating speechlessness: 'When I became a mother I found myself for the first time in my life without a language, without any way of translating the sounds I made into something other people would understand' (Cusk 2001b). Like the *jouissance* of Lacan's woman who 'does not exist' (Lacan 1982:144), or the wordless (non-)communication of the hysteric, maternal pain both emerges from the dominant structures of culture and transcends them, becoming unspeakable by and unreadable to the wounded woman herself.

These, then, are new wounds, closely related to those laid bare by second wave feminists, yet reflecting the coercive individualism of their time of writing. Though these contemporary confessional texts may well be used 'as a springboard by readers' for their own investigations into the political and subjective complications of being a contemporary mother, they do not emerge, as Rich's and Chesler's works did, from a hopeful movement towards collective maternal/feminist consciousness; rather, they document a refraction of maternal identities, and the concomitant struggles of individual women to conceptualize themselves as mothers and as subjects after the anti-feminist, neo-liberal 'backlash' of the 1980s (Faludi 1991, Coward 1992). In the contemporary confessionals, there is 'considerable shift of emphasis . . . away from the *misrepresentation* to the *unrepresentability* of women' (Meaney 1993:223, my emphasis). There is little sense of maternal community, nor even of its possibility: other mothers are portrayed by Cusk, for instance, as ultimate enforcers of the truth-regimes of motherhood. They are competitive and judgemental, like the members of the toddler group that she describes with loathing and links to the 'cruelty' of the name-calling journalists who trumpeted their



own maternal satisfactions (Cusk 2001a:159–74, Cusk 2001b). These writers document the atrophy of some of the imagined and real political collectivities that inspired and constituted second wave feminism. Even Naomi Wolf, whose project in *Misconceptions* is actively political in that she makes direct demands of US institutional authorities to change birthing and childcare practices, presents other mothers as isolated victims—whose identities seem to be deployed to voice her own more difficult emotional reactions to mothering: ‘Cara was a good mother who was not getting enough love and support’ (Wolf 2001:210)—and presents any alteration of current conditions of maternity as dependent on an unlikely, spontaneous sea change in institutional views.

### *The Double Binds of New Capitalist Motherhood*

Maternal confessional writers confess their own vulnerability to a powerful and paradoxical ideological synthesis that fuses the mythography of the selfless Good Mother with the clashing capitalist discourses of individual achievement and productivity. They foreground the inescapable conclusion urged on the contemporary mother by official discourses and expert advisers, that *she* is the shaper of the psyche and personality of the baby; thus its future quality as a person/product will be her achievement or, conversely, her fault (Eisenberg *et al.* 1992, Bowlby 1973, Winnicott 1982, Belsky 1986, Roberts 2005). Cusk says of her baby’s inconsolable early crying:

I understand that crying . . . has any number of causes, which it falls to me . . . to interpret. Further, it is suggested to me that this interpretation is being used as the information upon which she is with every passing minute founding the structure of her personality. My response to these early cries, in other words, is formative. I should . . . make no false moves, lest I find myself co-habiting in the months and years to come with the terrible embodiment of my weaknesses, a creature formed from the patchwork of my faults held together by the glue of her own apparently limitless, denatured, monstrous will (Cusk 2001a:61).

Her dread resonates with D. W. Winnicott’s warning that, if a mother ‘fails’ her child ‘at the start . . . he will pay her out forever’ (Winnicott 1982:201). She describes here the personal impact of powerful moralistic discourses of maternal culpability that merge cultural resentment of the mother (traceable, in Kleinian formations of social and cultural life, to the mother-hatred experienced by every baby) with the anxious,

individualistic work-ethic of late capitalism. As Ros Coward and Judith Warner argue, the increasingly visible imposition of absolute responsibility for infantile sufferings and faults<sup>12</sup> on the mother is symptomatic of the privatization and individualization of all forms of social relationality (including most physical care and economic support for the vulnerable) that accompanied the market-driven welfare reforms of the Thatcher/Reagan era (Coward 1992, Warner 2005); these have increased the burden on primarily female carers within families conceptualized as ideal private economic units in which to contain (and conceal) unprofitable relationships of nurture and dependency.

### *The Desire for Information and the Shock of Ambivalence*

For Karen Pitt, the 'new capitalist mother' symbolizes new discourses of maternal control and achievement, efforts geared, ultimately, towards the production of new generations of workers trained to master the complex informational flows of global capitalist economies and cultures (Pitt 2002). For such mothers, the informational load of written pregnancy and childrearing advice is both disempowering and alluring, offering many irritating and confusing dictates, but also providing a project of self-regulation and perfection to pursue. Wolf writes of her own 'love-hate relationship' with the popular, highly prescriptive pregnancy guide *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (Eisenberg *et al.* 1992), which she describes as 'obfuscating and condescending, yet I needed it' (Wolf 2001:19). This longing for information, the how-to manual that should accompany the perfect child, emerges particularly strongly from the middle classes with their high material and educational expectations, the 'can-do' attitude that all life-experiences may be managed productively and profitably, given the correct information and technical mastery. For instance, while finding the guidance literature and popular psychoanalytic models with which she is presented comically inadequate, Cusk is also clear about her own persistent expectations of a phantasmatic manual: *the* information, or master-discourse of parenthood, that, in default of other sources, might perhaps emanate from the baby herself. 'I wonder whether she, in fact, knows what to do, and will inform us presently' (Cusk 2001a:52).

Ambivalence is the dominant emotion that maternal confessional writers express with regard to their children; this in itself renders their work an expression of the culturally unrepresentable (Parker 1995). In *Love Works Like This*, Lauren Slater's account of her highly medically managed pregnancy rarely personalizes her foetus: though she names it

Eva, this is done more in an attempt to *make* the ‘baby’ more real to her, to inspire the love she knows she ought to feel (Slater 2003:41). Slater recounts her emotional detachment from her infant daughter as an infuriating absence of all socially and subjectively anticipated maternal emotion. Thus her ruminations on how love should ‘work’: ‘What does love look like? what chemical causes it? I want love in a test tube, all labelled and blue’ (131). Her questioning of the dominant mythology of ‘natural’ motherly love is echoed by Cusk, who documents the dislocating and overwhelming effects of her feelings for her baby:

My compassion, my generalised human pity, has become concentrated into a single wound, a dark sore of knowing and of the ability to inflict. . . . it is not to love but to its lack that I am suddenly alive . . . I have merely become more afraid of love’s limits, and more certain that they exist (Cusk 2001a:80–1).

This experience of love as the uncovering of previously uncharted realms of vulnerability represents maternity as acutely threatening to the clean individuation that is so culturally prized in the West. This, for Cusk, is an experience of almost intolerable contradiction: ‘My daughter . . . was everywhere, like something sweet but sticky on my life, like molasses, like glue’ (143). The embodiment, emotionality and subjectivity of Cusk and her infant daughter spill out, their neediness and pain leaking inexorably into the ‘clean and proper’ realms of normative subjectivity from which, as woman and infant, they are excluded. Cusk’s struggle to rearticulate herself as subject is not only an attempt to restore the silenced mother to discourse but to alter the terms in which a maternal subject might be articulated, finding her new ‘voice’ in the trauma of her own silencing and the loss of pre-maternal status, a trauma that she relates to the wordless helplessness of the infant. The final page of *A Life’s Work* recounts a scene in a department store in which Cusk watches a mother and adult daughter choosing clothes for a newborn baby that is screaming in its pram. Cusk watches the young mother ‘trying to keep up, to stay in time . . . she is in those first days of her parturition both mother and child’ (212). However, it proves impossible to focus compassionately on the ‘raw’, vulnerable mother: even Cusk is drawn to identify with the needs and vulnerabilities of the baby, as it ‘cries and cries; and it is all I can do not to life it from its pram and hold its small, frightened body close against my chest, hold it and hold it until it stops, so certain am I that it would, that it would know that I knew, and be consoled’ (212).

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### *Maternal Anguish as Public Trauma*

These works, then, can be read as feminist critiques of the gendered realities of contemporary maternal lives. But they are also about the battle to locate female subjectivities within bewilderingly overdetermined discursive territory, in which the individual female body bears the weight of historical oppressions, and of the confusions wrought by contemporary socio-economic upheaval. Thus, the overwhelming sense of loss of self in the transition to motherhood, and of grief for the apparently fully individuated, 'normal' body that preceded maternity. The other overwhelming affect of this work is guilt, socially and psychically mediated: the mother's traumatic re-experience of intense, infantile helplessness and ambivalence coincides with a period of bodily strain, loss of social status, isolation, and strong cultural and internalized expectations of competence and self-sufficiency that few can fulfil. These are the components of a twenty-first-century western form of 'maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic' (Kristeva 1982:12). The expression of this anguish as consumable public trauma, in which other women may 'find companionship', suggests a tentative expansion of 'wound culture' to include the foundational 'absence or gap' in subjectivity (Luckhurst 2003:28), that of the maternal container within whose comforting, sacrificial vacancy other subjects supposedly form.

### *Notes*

- 1 The phrase 'New Capitalist Mother' is taken from Pitt 2002.
- 2 This analysis tries to locate maternal embodiment in the consumer-capitalist context of the United States and the country that is perhaps its closest economic and cultural ally and imitator, the United Kingdom. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of a previous draft of this article for reminding me of the necessity to differentiate between national cultures of motherhood. The specific demands placed on a mother will vary according to the national culture in which she exists, though I am aiming to draw close parallels between American and British confessional writers and, by analogy, between the middle-class cultures of 'productivity' in which they mother. Lauren Berlant provides a helpful outline of the new meanings allocated to (re)productivity in post-Reaganite America (Berlant 1997:83–144), which emphasizes the replacement of maternal with foetal 'citizens' in the national reproductive imaginary, and situates the 'contest between the mother and the fetus' in a specific US context (Berlant 1997:86). Debates about maternal *vs.* foetal rights and the primary duty of a woman towards the family have generally been less aggressively conducted in Britain, though British media

quite frequently echo the calls of the US Christian right to ensure maternal submission to foetal requirements, particularly when reporting medical research on correct maternal behaviour in pregnancy. See, for example, Mukherjee *et al.* 2005 on the unknown potential hazards of ingesting the 'safe' amount of two units of alcohol per week in pregnancy, and a report in the *Daily Mail* warning that 'even a tiny tippie may harm your unborn baby' (Chapman 2006).

- 3 See Luckhurst 2003:38 on confessional trauma literature as a possible result of the 'sequestration' of direct bodily experience in late capitalist western culture (in which death and, significantly, birth have been structured as absolutely private, barely communicable events).
- 4 Among those cited by Luckhurst (2003:37) are Moore 1996, Picardie 1998 and Diamond 1998. See also Brendan Stone's intriguing exploration of the recent memoir culture of depression and mental illness (Stone 2004).
- 5 See, for example, Enright 2004, Shaw 2001, Slater 2003, Abrams 2001, Hanauer and Gilchrist 2003, and Warner 2005.
- 6 For reflections of this dichotomy in legislation, see Thomson 1998:63–114 on British abortion laws.
- 7 'Cusk's book is a timely manifestation of all that is wretched about grotesquely self-obsessed modern parenting' (Knight 2001); 'if everyone were to read this, the propagation of the human race would virtually cease, which would be a shame. Because, believe it or not, quite a few people enjoy motherhood. But in order to do so, it is important to grow up first' (Hornby 2001).
- 8 This pre-emptive apology may have been prompted by scathing responses to the serialization of the book in the *Guardian* before its publication, of which more below.
- 9 Knight 2001 offers a cursory criticism of P. J. O'Rourke's writing about fatherhood, before long and scathing attacks on Wolf and particularly Cusk, as quoted.
- 10 Williams 1991; see also Clover 1992 on horror as 'body genre' and the associations of abject embodiment with the 'lowbrow'.
- 11 The rampaging debates about the desirability and effectiveness of 'working mothers' (full discussion of which is beyond my scope here) heighten the expectation of maternal perfection through selflessness: if a mother is doing a paid job, whether or not she actually has the choice to do so, she can be judged to be 'failing' in her primary childrearing duties. The consequences of such failure are regularly spelled out by well-publicized research on the inadequate educational and emotional skills of children entrusted to non-maternal care; see, for example, Belsky 1986 and Roberts 2005. For useful feminist analyses of controversies around mothering and work, see Hays 1998 and Hochschild 1992.
- 12 Simultaneously, the vulnerability of children (and foetuses) to risk is receiving tremendous attention: see, for example, Furedi 2001 and Warner 2005; on the foetus, see Thomson 1998:117–41.

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