

First person narratives and third-wave feminism: raising consciousness or the mother of a guilt trip?

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been previously submitted to any other university or institution for a higher degree. Except where otherwise acknowledged, this thesis is comprised entirely of my work.

Kath Kenny

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Kath Kenny', written on a light blue background.

April 2016

Abstract

More than half a century after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and forty years after Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* raised alarms about the levels of prescription drug use among women in America and Australia, respectively, two high profile Australian journalists and feminists, Lisa Pryor and Mia Freedman, wrote personal columns about juggling work and family, and dealing with mental health issues through consuming anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication. While second-wave feminists used the personal story form in the practice of consciousness raising, how do these contemporary writers – women who I argue are representative of third-wave feminism – use the personal story form? I argue that the personal story form in these contemporary examples has some parallels with the consciousness raising practice associated with second-wave feminism: it opens up a space for creating empathy and identification, and allows writers and readers to discursively create contradictory and ambiguous maternal subjects. At the same time, I suggest the use of the first person in the mainstream media also exposes feminists to particularly harsh and personal criticisms that appear specifically reserved for women and mothers. I also consider the way the personal voice in these contemporary stories both reinforces post-feminist and neoliberal constructions of women as empowered and responsible for juggling all spheres of life, and tasked with constantly adapting and improving themselves, while – seemingly paradoxically and somewhat contradictorily – simultaneously challenging idealised notions of motherhood through (limited) representations of aberrant mothering.

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A note on the text

In this thesis I refer frequently to three authors whose surnames are similar in spelling: references to these authors may therefore cause occasional confusion for readers moving through the text particularly quickly. The authors are:

Mia Freedman, author of the primary source article “I’m finally ready to talk about my anxiety” Debrief Daily (2015, March 23).

May Friedman, author of *Mommyblogs and the Changing Face of Motherhood* (2013).

Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (originally published in 1963 – for reference purposes I refer to the 2013 anniversary edition published by W. W. Norton and Company).

Perhaps it is very simple: much as we like to think otherwise, we cannot do all our thinking through stories.

It may be that there is something Trojan horse-like about a certain kind of narrative: it can sneak, unnoticed, past the usual well-oiled protocols of authentication [sic], the usual ethical questioning. Sometimes stories can lead you down foxholes you cannot fact-check your way out of...

Maria Tumarkin, 'This Narrated Life', *Griffith Review* 44 (2014, pp. 175-184)

In one upper-income development where I interviewed, there were twenty-eight wives...Sixteen out of the twenty-eight were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquilizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized for varying periods, for depression or vaguely diagnosed psychotic states. ("You'd be surprised at the number of these happy suburban wives who simply go berserk one night, and run shrieking through the street without any clothes on," said the local doctor, not a psychiatrist, who had been called in, in such emergencies.)

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (2013, pp. 278-279)

Introduction | From *The Feminine Mystique* to *Pill-pop culture*

Towards the end of 2014 the *Good Weekend*, the weekend magazine of the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, ran a short column ‘Pill-pop culture’, by Lisa Pryor (2014). Pryor – then a regular Fairfax columnist, a mother of small children and a full-time medical student – told her readers that at social gatherings people often asked her ‘How do you do it all?’. Recently she had taken to responding to her interlocutors with what she says is ‘the truth’: ‘caffeine and antidepressants’.

Pryor wrote that her party confessions opened up all sorts of ‘juicy’ conversations: ‘secret fears, custody battles, affairs, career doubts, parental ambivalence, intimate health problems’. But her even more public confession to *Good Weekend* readers – that ‘a little bit of neurochemical assistance helps me actually enjoy the glorious disaster of raising two small children while studying medicine full time’ – also led, in the following months, to a national conversation in the nation’s papers, in online news sites, and elsewhere, about the rights and wrongs of Pryor’s parenting, or more particularly her *mothering*, choices. Most notably, in a column published by the *Australian Financial Review*¹ days later, Mark Latham (2014a), a former leader of the Australian Labor Party, described Pryor as representative of ‘inner city’, ‘left feminists’: the sort of women who ‘don’t like children and don’t want to be with them’. Pryor sued Latham and the *AFR* for defamation. The matter was set for trial until the parties settled in March 2016 (Whitbourn 2016).

Four months after the publication of Pryor’s 317-word column, Mia Freedman, founder of the Mamamia Women’s Network, published a 4,800-word essay (Freedman 2015) detailing her nervous breakdown; a breakdown that she writes was preceded by the anxiety she felt while juggling three young children and a growing online startup employing dozens of staff. Her essay concluded with Freedman confessing she found a solution in a good psychiatrist and a

¹ Hereafter referred to as ‘*AFR*’.

prescription of the antidepressant Lexapro. And, like Pryor's column, Freedman's essay precipitated a lengthy public debate: dozens of people commented below Freedman's article, in a response that took the total words on the page to 17,000. Many women wrote that Freedman had described their own experiences exactly. But Freedman's story also led to criticisms from other media commentators for recklessly recommending a prescription drug. Mark Latham, in another *AFR* column (2015b), described Freedman's public confession as indulging in the 'online equivalent of group therapy', and in a Twitter account later linked to him, wrote that Freedman has 'a nanny, cleaner plus 'Sleep Whisperer' while lecturing suburban mums. Shameless' (Latham 2015a).

A striking feature of these contemporary stories was that they arose more than fifty years after Betty Friedan (1963/2013)² wrote about the most medicated housewives the western world had ever seen in *The Feminine Mystique*, and forty years after Anne Summers (1975, p. 103) wrote about 'vast numbers of women...imbibing massive doses of what they see as soothing panaceas: sedatives and tranquillizers' in Australia.³ Now here, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, were two first-person stories from women who confessed to taking prescription drugs for their mental health not because (as Friedan claimed of her subjects) they had too *little* to do, but because – at least on the face value of their accounts – they apparently had too *much* to do. While the parallels and differences between these stories, separated by half a century, appear to offer fertile research ground for feminist scholars, no popular nor academic work has (to the best of my knowledge) drawn connections between these texts: this thesis is, in part, an attempt to fill that gap.

² All references to *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963, are from the 2013 anniversary edition, published by W. W. Norton and Company.

³ Valium, wrote Summers, was prescribed '4.6 million times' in 1973-1974, making it most prescribed drug in Australia, with women accounting for nearly two-thirds of the drug's consumers (p. 110-111).

Methodological approach

With this historical context in mind, my thesis is a close textual reading of these two contemporary stories about mothers, work, family, anxiety, depression and feminism. In reading these tales, my key concern is investigating how the first-person voice was used by Pryor and Freedman, and by readers and commentators who responded to their stories. I will consider how the personal story form opens up spaces for creating empathy and identification, in a way that has some parallels with the consciousness raising practice associated with second-wave feminism. I'll also look at the criticisms that are made of women who relate personal stories. And I'll consider how the personal voice can both reinforce *and* challenge idealised images of motherhood, and neoliberal constructions of women as empowered and charged with juggling all spheres of life, constantly adapting and improving themselves.

The numerous responses to Pryor's and Freedman's columns demonstrated that first-person stories about mothering, feminism and mental health always have the potential to be controversial, provoking varied and lengthy conversations in the mediasphere. And as John Fiske argues in *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*, such media events are worth studying because it is through them that 'deep, powerful currents carrying meanings of race, of gender, of sexuality, of class and age,' can be observed (1994, p. 7). Using a metaphor of the social scientist as gold prospector, he says:

Media events are the sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence...they are useful to the cultural analyst because their turbulence brings so much to the surface, even if it can be glimpsed only momentarily. The discursive currents swirling around these sites are accessible material for the analyst to work upon: from them s/he must theorise the flows of the inaccessible and invisible currents of meaning that lie deep below the surface.

To create an archive of stories relating to this media event, I conducted a Factiva database search of Australian news media⁴ using the terms 'Lisa Pryor', 'Mia Freedman', 'anxiety', 'depression'

⁴ The archive was comprised of stories published between 14 November 2014 and 2 February 2016.

and 'Mark Latham'. This search uncovered 44 articles relating to Pryor's and Freedman's columns. Along with the two original columns (not uncovered in my Factiva search),⁵ I also included the 98 comments underneath Freedman's column in my analysis.

Theoretical approach

Many feminist scholars in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies* and *Women's Studies in Communication* have focussed on media analysis. Communication scholars Bonnie Dow and Celeste Condit (2005, pp. 455-6) outline the growth of critical media studies concomitant with the 'explosion of media forms since the 1970s'. My own approach will be a discourse analysis that works within media, rhetoric and communication studies, particularly influenced by poststructuralist feminist approaches, but also incorporating insights from feminist theorists from left traditions. I'm not seeking to make any claims about the 'truth' of particular discourses, nor am I assuming any particular discourse can provide direct access to the real intentions, subjectivity or lived experiences of the authors who produce them. Rather, I'm interested in looking at discourses for the way identity is 'discursively constructed and performed and thus in flux', as May Friedman puts it in her 2013 study of 'mommyblogs', a form of online writing that I will argue has much in common with Freedman's and Pryor's columns (2013, p. 26). Friedman considers power in Foucauldian terms, as 'capillary and active, situated within the discourse of a specific set of social practices, yet nonetheless providing moments of resistance, confusion, and possibility'; individuals (in her work, mothers blogging and reading online) are always continually created through discourse as 'unstable, incoherent subjects' (2013, p. 21). I agree with her contention that 'rather than focussing on whether life writing presents an empirical truth...it is useful instead to see this space [women writing about motherhood online] as emblematic of a

⁵ The original two primary source columns were not located in the Factiva database, and instead were sourced on Fairfax and Mamamia Women's network websites.

new form of performativity that allows for the self in creation and in response to cultural norms and strictures’⁶ (2013, p. 20).

In carrying out cultural investigations, I think it is also important to heed the advice of Catharine Lumby, who urges feminist scholars to pay attention to the particularities of cultural products, and ‘to grapple with contradiction and ambiguity’ (2011, p. 97). Rather than a one-sided analysis that highlights either the ‘regressive’ elements of popular discourses on the one hand, or simplistically ‘celebrates’ the popular in discourses on the other, I will seek to take a more nuanced path. As Lumby suggests, I won’t advocate a single “‘correct” viewing position’ (2011, p. 97); instead, I will consider the multiple and competing narratives about women, mothers, depression, anxiety and feminism that were produced in these events.

Dow and Condit are similarly interested in both the positive and negative readings that critical textual analysis of cultural products can produce; they note, however, that the majority of studies tend to be ‘generally negative in [their] assessment, arguing that strategies for reinforcing regressive ideas about men, women, and their relationships dominate cultural messages’ (2005, p. 459). They suggest this tendency does not reflect a lack of imagination or scholarship, though; rather, it is an indication that ‘as feminist ideas continue to circulate in contemporary culture, strategies for maintaining hegemonic notions of gender are constantly shifting and morphing, requiring critical vigilance’ (2005, p. 459). Therefore, while I aim to avoid a totalising bad news analyses Lumby warns against, the regressive notions of gender Dow and Condit identify as being resistant and constantly morphing will lead my analysis to take, on balance, a more pessimistic approach at times.

⁶ Friedman goes on to say: ‘Such an analysis, while not uninterested in the “truth” of women’s lives online, acknowledges the limitations of truth in these accounts’ (2013, p. 20).

A note on the twinned history of feminism and journalism

One of the things that makes any investigation of feminist and anti-feminist discourses in the media so fascinating is the ambivalent or, perhaps more accurately, the double edged relationship feminism and feminists have had with the media and journalism. For feminists, the media (and the cultural industries more broadly) have been both a site of oppression *and* a place of potential liberation: a place where sexist myths and images can be both produced *and* challenged. It's not surprising many of mainstream feminism's key texts of the past half century have been produced by feminist journalists: writers who have fused the journalism skills of investigation, personal storytelling and rhetorical communication with feminism's tradition of consciousness raising.⁷ In many cases they are authors who have also combined their academic training with media skills and activism. Betty Friedan was writing for women's magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* (*LHJ*) in the 1950s when she started researching *The Feminine Mystique* (hereafter *TFM*): it was originally devised as an article for *McCall's* and the *LHJ*, before the former turned it down, and Friedan withdrew it from the latter because 'they rewrote it to say just the opposite of what, in fact, I was trying to say' (Friedan 2013, p. 513). 'The book came from somewhere deep within me', Friedan wrote in the *TFM*'s tenth anniversary introduction (2013 pp. 514-515):

all my experience came together in it: my mother's discontent, my own training in Gestalt and Freudian psychology, the fellowship I felt guilty about giving up, the stint as a reporter which taught me how to follow clues to the hidden underside of reality, my exodus to the suburbs and all the hours with other mothers shopping at supermarkets, taking the children swimming, coffee klatches.

Other feminist leaders and authors of key texts have been journalists: Gloria Steinem donned a Playboy bunny outfit to write an expose for *Show* magazine (1963), before making her name as a leader, along with Friedan, of second-wave feminism in the US, and co-founding *Ms. Magazine* in

⁷ Sandra Dijkstra argues that *The Feminine Mystique* was the mainstream success that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953) was not ten years earlier, not only because by 1963 'economic conditions were ripe for a mass movement', but because Friedan had acted as a 'translator' for de Beauvoir's book, someone 'who could boil down its ideas, and its theory, into less radical, more readable, journalese, so that its message could be transmitted to the masses' (1980, p. 293).

1972; Germaine Greer was already writing columns for the radical magazine *Oz* when *The Female Eunuch* was published in 1970; Summers was a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney when *Damned Whores and God's Police* was published in 1975, but its plain-speaking style has played no small part in the book being continuously in print since then (Arrow 2015), and Summers went on to become editor of *Ms. Magazine*; and 1991 Pulitzer Prize winner and *Wall Street Journal* reporter Susan Faludi was the author of the 1992 blockbuster *Backlash: the undeclared war against women*. In Australia, the tradition of journalists writing popular feminist texts continued in the 1990s: in 1996 then *Rolling Stone* editor Kathy Bail published the anthology *DIY Feminism*⁸ and Virginia Trioli (then a journalist with *The Age*) wrote *Generation F*.⁹ More recently Fairfax and ABC journalist Annabel Crabb published *The Wife Drought* (2014a). In the UK, journalist and columnist Laurie Penny, author of 2014's *Unspeakable Things*, is representative of a new generation carrying on the tradition, while in Australia, Fairfax writer and feminist journalist Clementine Ford will release *Fight Like a Girl* in 2016 (this list is by no means exhaustive).

Combining varying mixes of investigation, reporting and storytelling, such texts borrow from and work within journalism traditions. But like their academic counterparts, many popular feminist writers have also highlighted the media, advertising and culture industries as places where sexist tropes and rhetoric are both produced and perpetuated. In *TFM*, for example, Friedan examined how the advertising industries and women's magazines portrayed a romanticised ideal by which women of America's post-war suburbs lived.¹⁰ In *The Beauty Myth*

⁸ The author of this thesis contributed a chapter to *DIY Feminism* (1996) 'Sex and Harassment: Live from the Mouths of Babes'.

⁹ These two books were a response to *The First Stone* (1995), a controversial book by Helen Garner, a renowned fiction and non-fiction author and journalist (albeit someone often classed as a literary journalist) about a sexual harassment case at a University of Melbourne residential college.

¹⁰ Friedan describes the mystique as 'the high-school girl going steady, the college girl in love, the suburban housewife with an up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of children', adding that the image 'created by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis—shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams... A Geiger counter clicked in my own inner ear when I could not fit the quiet desperation of so many women into the picture of the modern American housewife that I myself was helping to create, writing for the women's magazines' (2013, p. 24).

(1991) Naomi Wolf argued women's advances in work and education occurred as the fashion and media industry promoted ever-higher and increasingly narrow standards of physical perfection: the superwoman also had to be a supermodel. Faludi outlined the popular media stories that haunted American women in the 80s: so-called man shortages for single women, infertility epidemics and the growing threat of militant feminism to the American way of life.¹¹ Despite the sexism these writers have identified in the mediasphere, as Anthea Taylor writes (2014, p. 770) 'media culture is now *the* primary site for the construction and circulation of various forms of feminism'. The tension that therefore results when prominent feminist writers such as Pryor and Freedman operate in this problematised sphere is a key concern of this thesis.

Chapter outlines

In chapter 1 I argue that Pryor's and Freedman's columns are comparable to the mommyblogs some scholars have recently identified as heirs of the feminist tradition of 'consciousness raising'. Pryor's and Freedman's personal stories encouraged reader identification and consolation – as demonstrated by numerous columnists who responded to the two columns, and in the dozens of reader comments published under Freedman's column.¹²

In chapter 2 I consider how the first person storytelling genre is complicated by a history of critical diminishment of women who tell personal stories – even when (and sometimes particularly) the first-person genre is deployed (either ostensibly or implicitly) from a feminist position. I will also compare and contrast Pryor's and Freedman's use of the first-person voice with the way their chief critic, Mark Latham, used the first-person voice.

¹¹ Faludi called it a backlash because these stories emerged just when support for the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion and mobilisation against sexual violence gathered pace.

¹² I am sympathetic to cultural studies approaches which take seriously audiences and the reception of texts: while a detailed ethnographic-style reception studies is outside the scope of what can be achieved in this short thesis, I will consider the 'interaction among producers, texts, and audiences' (Dow and Condit 2005, p. 457) in relation to the many readers' comments published under Freedman's story, and in relation to the columns and media reports published in response to both Pryor's and Freedman's stories.

In chapter 3 I will consider how these contemporary texts also *diverged* from the feminist consciousness raising tradition: following work by McRobbie (2004, 2007 and 2013), Gill and Scharff (2011) and others, I will consider the way these texts emphasise individual choice, individual empowerment and *personal* transformation, rather than the *social* transformation that concerned many second-wave feminists. I'll also briefly suggest these stories represent a particular form of celebrity and individualised feminism that now operates in the mediasphere.

In chapter 4 I will take a more positive, and seemingly contradictory, turn to consider how Pryor's and Freedman's stories about their imperfect lives disrupted the idealised ideology of contemporary motherhood. I'll compare Pryor's and Freedman's stories to the fictional 'aberrant' mothers in the television shows *Weeds* and *Nurse Jackie* – representations of motherhood that offer women release in an era of intensive parenting (Walters and Harrison 2014). I will also show how residual notions of motherhood and anti-feminist ideologies circulated in the discourses of some commentators.

In conclusion, I'll consider some of the seemingly paradoxical and contradictory reasons why the use of first-person stories by feminists can produce both feminist and anti-feminist aims and rhetoric. I'll also briefly point to potential areas for future study, suggesting that while ostensibly representative of popular feminism, Mia Freedman's Debrief Daily¹³ site – described in a *Guardian* profile of Freedman by author Chloe Hooper (2015) as being 'now at the epicentre of the mainstream Australian women's movement' – appears to both affirm feminist goals while simultaneously reinforcing regressive rhetoric and feminine mystiques.¹⁴ Divided into sections such as 'health', 'career', 'finance', 'reinvention' and 'beauty and style', and peppered with

¹³ Hooper's profile (2014) also noted Freedman's websites Mamamia and iVillage 'clocked 40m page impressions in March alone', and Hooper says Freedman, 'with her photogenic woman-next-door appeal, has become the go-to girl on feminist issues'.

¹⁴ Although I will only briefly touch on Daily Life, the Fairfax site which regularly cross-published Pryor's *Good Weekend* column, and which is a direct competitor to Freedman's Debrief Daily, I contend that Daily Life shares many of the same features as Freedman's site, with its mix of fashion, food, news and feminism.

instructions on how to live one's life and advice on fashioning the self, Debrief Daily is not a world away from a 1960 edition of *McCall's*, the women's magazine Friedan excoriates in *TFM*. Finally, I suggest the use of the personal story form by its editor Mia Freedman indicates the emergence of a particular version of celebrity feminism in Australia, one where the release of a personal story into the public sphere has now been seamlessly woven into marketing and branding strategies.

Throughout human history, the most important political battles have been fought on the territory of the imagination, and what stories we allow ourselves to tell depend on what we can imagine.

Laurie Penny, *Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies and Revolution* (2014, p. 1)

One | The ecstasy of empathy

In this chapter I argue that Lisa Pryor's and Mia Freedman's columns – columns detailing their experiences of mental illness while juggling children and, respectively, full-time medical studies and running a growing business – shared some features of the feminist tradition of consciousness raising. These columns – which I will argue can be likened to the often-maligned mommyblog – are comparable to the consciousness raising tradition in two crucial ways. First, both columns explored the author's battles managing public and private responsibilities; and second, readers and commentators responded to the columns saying they could identify with the stories, often relating their *own* experiences of anxiety and depression. In Chapter 3 I will discuss how these stories differ from the consciousness raising tradition of second-wave feminism – a tradition that linked telling personal stories to broader political activism ('the personal is political') – but for now, I want to consider the similarities.

Consciousness raising then and now

The term consciousness raising is closely associated with second-wave feminism.¹⁵ Susan Brownmiller (1999, p. 21), in her memoir of the early years of second-wave feminism in the US, describes a 1967 meeting of the nascent women's liberation movement in a New York apartment where she says the term was first coined. The assembled women were mostly veterans of the old and new left movements, and therefore influenced by the Marxist notion of 'false consciousness'. Anne Forer told Brownmiller she recalls saying to other women at the meeting "Would

¹⁵ Although some feminist historians may find Brownmiller's view of feminism US-centric, in her memoir Brownmiller situates the emergence of second-wave feminism in the social and political upheaval of 1960s America, with two intersecting but recognisably different wings: the 'reformers of NOW', founded by Friedan in 1966, and the more radical activists of Women's Liberation, the latter springing 'from the radical ferment of the civil rights, antiwar and countercultural movements' (1999, p. 7). She nevertheless credits Friedan's key role in inspiring a mass form of consciousness raising: 'A revolution was brewing, but it took a visionary to notice. Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, defining the "problem that has no name" ... although Friedan had defined the problem in terms of bored, depressed, middle-class suburban housewives who downed too many pills...I saw myself on every page' (1999, p. 3).

everybody please give me an example from their own life on how they experienced oppression as a woman? I need to hear it to raise my own consciousness.” Forer said her words particularly resonated with Kathie Amatniek (later Kathie Sarachild): “From then on she [Sarachild] sort of made it an institution and called it consciousness raising,” (Forer, quoted in Brownmiller 2009, p. 21).¹⁶ By 1972 the practice had spread to cities across America, with NOW chapters offering ‘c.r. nights’, Brownmiller writes (1999, p. 79). Anne Curthoys (1994) similarly describes the emergence of the Australian second wave feminist movement from the new left and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. Inspired by the women’s liberation movement in America, each group in cities across Australia went through ‘consciousness-raising periods, where discussions were held on women’s difficulties and problems...to draw out the ways in which problems experienced individually were in fact common problems, socially produced’ (Curthoys 1994, p. 16). Nancy Fraser also pinpoints the beginnings of the consciousness raising tradition within second-wave feminism, describing it as a practice of ‘horizontal counter-ethos of sisterly connection, creating an entirely new organizational practice of consciousness raising’ (2009, p. 105). It’s important to note though, as Fraser writes, that the practice of consciousness raising was a means to a larger end: ‘overcoming women’s subordination [through the] radical transformation of the deep structures of social totality’ (2009, p. 104).¹⁷

Although the left and feminist thinking of this period was not untouched by psychoanalytic thinking,¹⁸ more recently poststructuralist, post-colonial and queer theories have critiqued the notion of a simple false consciousness opposed to a unified and ‘correct’ consciousness, providing us with more complex understandings of divided and unstable subjects. Nevertheless,

¹⁶ The following year Sarachild would present a paper called ‘A program for feminist consciousness raising’ at the First National Women’s Liberation Conference outside Chicago, November 27, 1968.

¹⁷ Summers, writing from within her experience of second-wave feminism in Australia, similarly wrote of political change not being based on abstraction, but predicated on individual women understanding their own individual lives *within* society (1975, pp. 460-461).

¹⁸ Betty Friedan, who trained with ‘the brilliant Erik Erikson’ (Friedan 2013, p. 78) writes that *The Feminine Mystique* was centrally influenced by her ‘training in Gestalt and Freudian psychology’ (2013, p. 514).

I contend (as do many of the contemporary scholars I refer to in the following pages) that there is still something valuable about personal and confessional styles of communicating personal experiences. Stories that attempt to communicate what it feels like to be in the world can offer readers a sense of identification (even if momentary and fragmentary), a respite from feeling alone, and they can even help the reader articulate what she may previously have been unable to articulate; even – and sometimes especially – when texts communicate an identity that is contradictory, ambivalent and shifting. In her book *Mommyblogs and the Changing Face of Motherhood*, May Friedman (2013, p. 11) argues that by allowing women to write about the ‘contradictions’, ‘confusions’ and ‘chaos’ of motherhood, mommyblogs can even be said to represent a new kind of feminist activism that is helping to create a ‘more nuanced and contradictory maternal subject’. By discursively presenting messy, non-normative representations of motherhood, and allowing for constantly shifting conversational spaces between authors and other voices, Friedman argues mommyblogs accommodate and produce hybrid, cyborg and queer¹⁹ maternal identities (2013, pp. 22-27).

Friedman argues there is a commonality between older practices of consciousness raising and the newer practice of mothers writing about their lives online: ‘Like consciousness-raising groups of the past, mothers who blog have room to dissect their own experience in chorus, to (potentially, at least) find the political and the shared personal and examine their lives critically’ (2013, p. 11). Friedman says mommyblogs helped ameliorate the identity crisis and loneliness she experienced after motherhood, when her ‘selfhood was called into question’ (2013, p. 3). Lacking the ‘language to express my bewilderment at the stripping down of subjectivity that I was witnessing’, Friedman says mommyblogs provided the ‘intimacy and dialogue I craved’,

¹⁹ By ‘queer’ Friedman, following David Halperin, refers to non-normative resistance to subject formations more generally, rather than to just sexuality-specific subjectivity (2013, pp. 25-26).

something academic texts about motherhood couldn't provide: 'I leapt hungrily from blog to blog...thrilled to confirm that I was not the only new mother feeling as I did' (2013, pp. 3-4).

Lori Lopez (2009, p. 744) likewise cautions against dismissive and condescending attitudes to the 'mommyblogger', contending they are:

transforming their personal narratives of struggle and challenge into interactive conversations with other mothers, and in so doing, are beginning to expand our notion of motherhood, women bloggers and the mother's place within the public sphere.

Lopez goes so far as to say that showing 'the ugly side of motherhood has the potential to be liberating and beneficial for all women' (2009, p. 744). Earlier, Rita Felski made a similar observation about the link between consciousness raising and confessional writing: 'Like consciousness-raising, the confessional text makes public that which has been private...in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience' (1998, p. 83).

With these preliminary comments in mind, I want to consider how the contemporary stories I am investigating are comparable in their style to the mommyblogs Friedman and Lopez refer to, and the ways they resemble second-wave forms of consciousness raising.

Consciousness raising (in a revenue-raising space)

Although Mia Freedman's background is as a professional journalist (she was famously the editor of *Cosmopolitan* while still in her 20s), in 2007 she launched a personal blog, Mamamia, during a hiatus between jobs.²⁰ Her blog has evolved (as of June 2015) into a multimillion-dollar business, the Mamamia Women's Network, employing 100 full-time staff who preside over online sites receiving more than 650,000 unique visitors per month (Cadzow 2015). Many of the articles on Freedman's websites still share many of the features of the amateur mommyblog: highly

²⁰ Freedman's professional life is neatly summarised in Jane Cadzow's *Good Weekend* feature 'There's Something About Mia Freedman' (Cadzow 2015).

opinionated, often extremely subjective and very personal tales about pregnancy, parenting, relationships, friendships and divorce. Freedman, in fact, specialises in ‘a confessional style of journalism’, writes Jane Cadzow (2015) in a *Good Weekend* feature profile, ‘she has told the world about everything from her miscarriage and her fear of flying to her inability to put anything in an oven without burning it’.

Friedman (2013, p. 30) observes that the power of blogs is the way they have replaced notions of objectivity with ‘insistence on authorial stance, replete with biases and subjectivities’. Mia Freedman’s “I’m finally ready to talk about my anxiety” column (2015) – timed, as Cadzow (2015) notes, to coincide with the launch of her Debrief Daily site for older women – is, likewise, relayed in the author’s highly personal and distinct authorial style. It’s notable that in the column’s 4,800 words Freedman uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ 204 times.²¹ Her piece, ostensibly an account of a 12-day panic attack, is replete with personal anecdotes and reflections on her life: she describes in detail a visit to a health retreat that preceded the attack; she relays verbatim accounts from therapist sessions that followed the attack; she imagines she is suffering from ovarian cancer; and she recalls a fraught family holiday to Byron Bay where she maintains a cheerful face despite believing she was dying. She concludes by outlining her recovery thanks to a kindly GP and a therapist who prescribed the anxiety drug Lexapro. Interspersed throughout the tale are photos of Freedman on the beach with friends, in the water atop a surfboard, and posing by a buggy at the health retreat. The pictures are, notably, not the professionally shot images of a commercial magazine, but casual happy snaps, hallmarks of a style and genre more often associated with an amateur blogger, or someone’s Facebook page. The text is a beguiling and occasionally jarring mix of light hearted – ‘I started loving the shit out of this clean living

²¹ This means ‘I’ represents 4.25% of all the text’s words – or to put it another way, almost one in 20 words in Freedman’s text are ‘I’.

Zen business’ – and brutally frank – ‘Every day, hundreds of times, I imagined saying goodbye to my family. I imagined my funeral in vivid detail. I imagined my kids growing up without me.’

Pryor’s *Good Weekend* column, too, is comparable to the mommyblogs Friedman describes: detailed, confessional-style reports from the frontlines of motherhood, told in an intimate and informal style. Pryor fits the blogger genre neatly: she writes openly about the ‘glorious disaster’ of combining childrearing and full-time study, confesses to disliking conversations about ‘the stale terrain of weather and property prices’, jokes about those who seek peace in ‘meditation’ and ‘kale smoothies’, and concludes with the wry observation that if she ever wins ‘a medal in the Working Parent Olympics I may be stripped of it due to doping’. Such a whisper-in-the-ear informal style engenders, writes Lopez, ‘a tremendous closeness and loyalty to the blog’s author’: readers feel ‘they are reading the words of a close friend instead of [a] stranger’ (2009, p. 734).

Both Pryor’s and Freedman’s columns share many of the characteristics Lopez argues are key to the success of mommybloggers: the language used is ‘extremely informal and usually narrative’ and ‘the most popular writers employ a great deal of humor and levity to entertain their audience’ (2009, p. 734). Freedman too uses humour and self-deprecation. She jokes, for example, about the health retreat regime of ‘lymphatic drainage combined with 5:30am tai chi and extreme carb deprivation’, she constantly refers to her obsessive and workaholic tendencies (her laptop is ‘an extension of who I am’), and she confesses to witlessly spending hundreds of dollars in a health food store after one health retreat.

Empathising audiences

In mommybloggers’ stories Friedman says she ‘found women who were keepers of real-life experiences that soothed me, calmed my fears, and presented their own contradictions and ambiguities’ (2013, p. 4). And as we will see, the responses to both Freedman’s and Pryor’s columns, in the comment section of Freedman’s story, and in news and opinion pieces published

in response to the original columns, bear out Friedman's (2013, pp. 4-5) argument that readers hunger for the 'intimacy' of personal stories of motherhood. In her column Pryor writes that the 'unexpected benefit' of sharing her reliance on anti-depressants was that 'it is the best-ever conversation starter. Or a conversation deepener'. Pryor sums up the effects of her disclosures thus: 'It is about the power of showing vulnerability, diagnosable or simply human, *and how it makes others feel safe to do the same*' (emphasis added). Pryor is referring to the outpourings of empathy and disclosure that occurred in her real-life conversations, but her column also resulted in a spate of online responses, particularly columns by fellow journalists, many of which expressed sympathy, support and empathy. In her regular weekend column in the Fairfax press, the Australian journalist, author and commentator Annabel Crabb (2014b) defended Pryor's column in terms echoing Friedman's claim for the soothing, calming role of blogs. Crabb begins her piece astutely outlining the three key types of opinion columns, before categorising Pryor's column as a 'disclosure column', a genre she is keen to defend:

The writer gives away something precious about him or herself – something that is difficult or private...The reader (if it's done well) finds comfort or identification or company in the fact that someone else has – oh, I don't know – had cancer, cheated on their spouse, lost a child.

As Crabb argues (and as would Friedman and Lopez), the benefit of Pryor's candid narration is in its potential to offer consolation:

Any reader with depression, or who had at any point felt pushed to the edge of reason by the modern scourge of busyness, might have felt stirred by her candour, and relieved not to be alone.

Days later Mia Freedman (2014) herself defended Pryor's column, writing: 'We need more women like Lisa Pryor in the fight to normalise and accept depression and anxiety and other mental illnesses as part of life'. Other columnists and health professionals contributed columns and letters defending Pryor's disclosure and the importance of candidly talking about mental health issues to end stigma (Borenstein 2014, Christensen and Joseph 2014, Dent 2014, Maley 2014).

Freedman's own anxiety column, four months later, also attracted a host of responses. Of the 98 readers²² who commented below Freedman's column (by and large female readers, taking the comment handles as a guide), nearly two thirds (61) responded by saying Freedman's story mirrored their own experiences: readers used phrases such as 'you told my story exactly', 'I felt I could have written this', 'you have just written my life story', 'your story is mine' and 'it could have come straight out of my own head', and many referred to experiencing similar anxieties and depression while managing family and other responsibilities; of these 61 readers, 45 thanked Freedman for 'sharing' her story, with 10 noting that Freedman's confession had helped them feel less 'alone'. Six of these 61 comment writers said they would ask family and friends to read Freedman's story to help them understand the comment writers' own experiences.

Of the remaining comments, a further 14 readers thanked and congratulated Mia for sharing her story (without mentioning their own experiences). Six comments acknowledged Freedman's experiences and approach, but mentioned they had taken a different approach to addressing a mental health problem. I categorised only five comments as being negative: those comments raised concerns about Freedman 'promoting' a prescription drug. Of the 12 remaining comments, one was from 'a mental health researcher and clinical psychologist' thanking Mia for 'raising the discussion', one was from a reader asking for advice, and the remaining 10 could be classified as comments on other comments.

As demonstrated by the responses to both Pryor's and Freedman's columns, the confessional and personal mode of address allows readers to experience identification and take comfort. And according to the American feminist writer bell hooks, this style of writing can be an essential part of feminist activism. As she developed as a writer, hooks says, 'I had to give people something

²² Comments were downloaded on 2 February 2016.

that allowed them to identify with what I was saying, and not just offer some abstract idea that might not have any relevance to their lives' (quoted in Ma 2015). hooks says:

At times I share things that I don't want to share. But if you really see yourself as a worker for freedom, then the challenge is also on you to sacrifice whatever notions of privacy that many of us would want to hold onto, especially if we are clinging to bourgeois models of self and identity.

The importance of claiming identity

hooks' words about 'bourgeois' models of identity notwithstanding, it's worth backtracking briefly to remember the importance of establishing a sense of identity as a feminist goal. In *TFM* Friedan (2013, p. 366) described the radical loss of identity women can experience when they become housewives and mothers in a way that resonated with millions of readers:

the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness, in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or "I" without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive.

Writing in Australia, Summers wrote of the 'enveloping double bind when [women] devote their entire lives to their families: their selves are constructed on this premise, yet their selves are threatened when they do it' (1975, p. 101).²³

But if second-wave feminism was focussed on women's need to establish an identity – any identity being preferable to the non-identity of the wife and homemaker – it would be fair to say that the gains women have made in participating in the world of work and the public sphere have given rise to a greater concern amongst writers on motherhood to explore the experience of a *torn* or *conflicted* identity.²⁴ English Canadian writer Rachel Cusk (2008, p. 63), in her memoir *A*

²³ The Summers' quote continues: 'The hostility, bewilderment or despair experienced by women who realise this is often turned inward against themselves – depression – rather than outwards against the cause of their 'self' dislocation. The quiet and passive endurance of anguish is typically female behaviour.'

²⁴ This is not to ignore the existence of important second-wave works such as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), which covered similar terrain.

Life's Work, an intimate story of her attempt to combine a domestic and artistic life, writes powerfully of the fragmented maternal subject: 'To be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger or leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think about other things. To succeed at being one means to fail at being the other.' Like the bloggers Friedman and Lopez refer to, Cusk (2008, pp. 13-14) is prepared to detail the self-annihilation and ambivalence women can experience when 'performing' motherhood: 'Looking after children...is isolating, frequently boring, relentlessly demanding and exhausting. It erodes your self-esteem and your membership of the adult world.'²⁵ Cusk suggests motherhood and personhood are always at war, 'for motherhood is a career in conformity from which no amount of subterfuge can liberate the soul without violence, and pregnancy is its bootcamp' (2008, p. 21).²⁶ In her foreword to the 2008 edition of her book, Cusk (p. 3) says she wrote it for the 'man or woman who recognises in the experience of parenthood the experience of the primary disjunction – with all its wealth, comedy and love – between the self and others'. For these readers, she says, the book functions 'as an echo, a consolation, a mirror'.

As Ruth Quiney (2007) argues, the rise of motherhood memoirs by noted writers such as Cusk and Naomi Wolf (author of 2001's *Misconceptions*) can be seen as attempts by female writers in the early twenty-first century to reckon with the 'trauma' and dislocation of motherhood.

Motherhood, Quiney notes (2007, pp. 30-31), can produce a state of upheaval for middle-class women, 'reared with the expectations of high personal productivity' as workers and autonomous

²⁵ While encouraging other parents to find solace in her words, Cusk nevertheless warns against reading the book as an instruction manual, suggesting the 'ambivalence which characterises the early stages of parenthood seemed to me to be kith and kin of the writer's fundamental ambivalence towards life' (2008 p. 4).

²⁶ Cusk's 'bootcamp' analogy echoes Friedan's likening (2013, pp. 368-372) of the suburban housewife's life to Nazi prison camps – where prisoners were 'forced to adopt childlike behaviour, forced to give up their individuality and merge into an amorphous mass': while housewives are not being readied for 'extermination', they are 'suffering a slow death of mind and spirit...And yet in the comfortable concentration camp as in the real one, something very strong in a woman resists the death of herself.'

actors. When she becomes a mother, writes Quiney, a woman's "lost" productivity is projected away from her: transferred, deferred to the child the future citizen who *must*, according to every popular maternal advice regime, come first'. Maternal memoirs, Quiney argues, can thus be read as an attempt to create female subjectivities in a world where the female body bears not just 'the weight of historical oppressions', but also of contemporary economic uncertainties: motherhood memoirs grapple with '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' (2007, p. 36).

I have argued there is clearly a potential liberation or consolation for readers in first-person accounts of motherhood such as those Pryor, Freedman (and Cusk) offer. But Cusk (2008 p. 2) says that when her memoir was first released many people claimed to find it 'offensive'. Cusk's comments offer a key to understanding what can happen when women speak personally outside the realm of mommyblogs, and in more traditional forums such as books and the news media: and the negative reactions to Pryor's and Freedman's texts is the topic of the next chapter.

The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell – in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her.

Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics* (1988, p. 58)

Two | What drug is he on?

Women writing online about mothering, as Lopez suggests (2009, p. 744), can help to ‘expand our notion of motherhood’. And, as I have argued, their work can be likened to the practice of second-wave consciousness raising by offering stories that console and soothe readers. In this chapter, I will argue that women writing like mommybloggers in more mainstream media forums can be exposed to harsh criticism when they present non-normative images of motherhood. This chapter will also contrast the positive responses to Pryor’s and Freedman’s texts described in the previous chapter with more critical responses they received from other commentators. I will also briefly compare the way Pryor and Freedman deployed the personal voice with the way their chief critic, Mark Latham, deployed his own personal voice.

Discounting women writers

Many feminist writers and critics have noted the privileged position male writers hold vis-a-vis female writers. Summers (1975) surveyed the then historical record of Australian literature and concluded a double standard operated when critics assessed the works of men compared to their assessment of literature by women: ‘When a man delineates the dimensions and the excruciating complexities of his existential situation,’ critics judge his efforts to be ‘proper and commendable’ (1975, p. 36). Meanwhile, critics find women’s existential contemplations, which ‘necessarily revolve around...domestic responsibility and maternal fulfilment which women are socialised to desire’ are found to be comparatively ‘trivial’, and their work considered ‘of no interest to men, even if the work is considered to be “intelligent”’ (1975, p. 36). Not only are women’s experiences diminished, men take the liberty of writing *about* women, Summers notes (1975, pp. 42-44). Earlier, Virginia Woolf likewise famously wrote of men’s loquacity in writing about women: ‘if I had to first read all that men have written about women...the aloe that flowers once in a hundred years would flower twice before I could set pen to paper’ (1928/2013, p. 29).

Decades after Woolf and Summers, Toril Moi noted the androcentric notions of creativity, where women are denied the right to 'create their own images' and 'patriarchal standards' are imposed on literary representations of femaleness (1987, p. 57).

More recently Ceridwen Dovey, in a 2014 essay in the *Monthly* on autobiographical writing, argued the confessional form of autobiography has a gendered history: in short, when men write personally there is a tendency to call it art; when women do the same, the tendency is to dismiss the work as inconsequential. Dovey notes that when the Norwegian bestseller, Karl Ove Knausgaard, wrote a thinly-veiled autobiographical account of the monotony and drudgery of suburban parenthood he was praised for portraying 'with savage honesty the challenges of being a man of genius who is also expected to be thoughtful, sensitive, unmonkish' (2014, p. 43). While he was labelled 'Norway's Proust' and hailed as the founder of 'New Man existentialism', in contrast, Dovey says, a writer such as Helen Garner has been dogged by critics for the domesticity of her themes (2014, p. 43).

Dovey also compares Knausgaard's reception to the much more critical reception Cusk received. Like Knausgaard, Cusk has written about daily life's dull domestic routines, interspersed with meditations on art and death. Yet numerous critics have been scathing of her work, with one calling her a 'brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish' (Dovey 2014, p. 44). Quiney (2007, pp. 22-23) suggests the hostile reception to Cusk's and other maternal memoir books is that they protest against dominant images of good saintly mothers, and present mothers who 'refuse to contain their negative emotions'. Cusk herself writes about 'the journalists who accused me of being an unfit or unloving mother, the critics who still use my name as a byword for hatred of children, the readers who find honesty akin to blasphemy when the religion is that of motherhood' (2008, p. 4). In the second edition of her book, Cusk responded to critics who condemned her work (2008, p. 6):

For a long time I was so disturbed by the suggestion, made so often in print, that I did not love my children that I truly regretted having written this book; not because I feared my children one day reading *A Life's Work*, but because the thought of them ever coming across this allegation was profoundly saddening.

Such criticisms of Cusk uncannily echo comments made by Mark Latham of Lisa Pryor, six days after her column was published in the *Good Weekend*: reading Pryor's column Latham (2014a) said he:

felt depressed myself, at the thought of a Fairfax columnist describing one of life's great responsibilities, the raising of infant children, as requiring neurochemical assistance...How will the children feel when they grow up and learn that they pushed their mother onto anti-depressants?

Later in the piece, Latham describes Pryor as representative of 'inner-city feminists': these women 'spend a lot of time complaining, ostensibly on behalf of other women, yet their real priority is themselves. More often than not, they don't like children and don't want to be with them.' He contrasts Pryor and her ilk with the women of 'western Sydney, who have no neuroses or agenda to push'. For Latham, women like Pryor aren't distressed because of the difficulties of raising children, but because of their failure to accept, like 'western Sydney' women, the natural consequence of being an adult woman. Instead, according to Latham, they have signed up to the 'hoax' of left feminism (a movement he likens to a 'psychoneurotic disorder), and taken the 'cowardly' route of relying on anti-depressants: 'popping pills as an easy way out, instead of facing up to the responsibilities of adulthood'.

While Pryor spoke of herself in very personal terms, Latham's *response* to Pryor was (almost) universally acknowledged as an unacceptably personal attack on her character, and her qualities as a mother. So disparaging was Latham's column that Pryor considered it defamatory. Pryor's lawyer was quoted (Whitbourn, 2015) as saying: 'Whether you characterise it as a rant or an eruption of bile, [the column] is deeply personal'. Latham's eventual resignation from the *AFR* the following year was precipitated by revelations (Di Stefano 2015) Latham was behind a twitter account that similarly abused a number of high profile women in personal terms, including

Freedman. *Crikey* writer Guy Rundle (2015), in a column that was in part a lament for Latham's eventual resignation, nevertheless noted that Latham's attacks in his column on women, from Pryor to 2015 Australian of the Year Rosie Batty to Lieutenant Colonel Cate McGregor,²⁷ had 'become more bitter and more personal'. In a *Guardian* column that also regretted Latham's departure from the *AFR*, Gay Alcorn (2015) nevertheless noted Latham's 'problem' was that 'he personalised everything...He didn't have to totally go over the top, implying Pryor was "demonising" children and shouldn't have had them at all'.

The feminist critique

Latham's discourse is notable for its slippage between discussing Pryor the individual, and discussing (and condemning) feminism the ideology. Pryor's column does not mention the word feminism – and feminism is only obliquely inferred by Pryor's comment that the question 'How do you do it all?' is not often posed to 'many working fathers'.²⁸ But Latham's linking of Pryor's personal account to left feminism's supposed child-hating 'orthodoxy' is, however, a strategic rhetorical strategy by Latham to discredit Pryor for, as Lind and Salo (2002, p. 218) found in an analysis of millions of words in the news media, feminists are regularly demonised in the media. Their study found feminists are more likely to be demonised in media stories than women are: 'feminists are nearly 10 times as likely to be associated with words such as jerks, bitches, radical, or bad than are women' they write (2002, p. 224). Their results showed the media regularly frames 'feminists' as in conflict with 'real women':

feminists are not quite "normal," not quite "regular", not quite "real". Real women have homes, live in real places (cities, towns, etc.), and engage in regular day-to-day work and leisure activities. Real women do the types of things we (audience

²⁷ McGregor, Australia's highest-ranking transgender member of the Defence Force, was reported as saying that when she worked for NSW Labor leader Bob Carr as 'Malcolm' McGregor, her relations with Latham were relatively cordial; since transitioning to a woman, 'there's been the nutty attacks [on me] in his column', she said, noting that the 'variable that has changed recently is my gender' (Robin 2015c).

²⁸ Although Pryor did not use the word feminism or explicitly call herself a feminist, she did not eschew Latham's categorisation of her as a feminist. And she was supported by outspoken feminist, academic and fellow Daily Life columnist Jenna Price, who started a petition that gained 2000 signatures asking the *AFR* to remove Latham's initial column attacking Pryor (Robin 2016)

members) do, but feminists are much less likely to be portrayed in such situations than are “regular” women.

Portraying Pryor as speaking for an ‘ideology’ of feminism is, then, a neat way to question her credibility, and to disqualify her right to express her personal story. Latham’s criticisms of Pryor echo the criticisms Quiney notes were made of Cusk and Wolf by leading journalists and commentators: they were ‘painted as overly intellectual women unable to deal with the commonsense duties of womanhood’ (2007, p. 25).

A few weeks after Latham’s column ran, the *AFR* ran a second column by writer Brigitte Dwyer (2014), who took Latham’s characterisation of Pryor – as representative of not only feminism, but of a nightmare version of feminism that hates children – as incontrovertible. In her column (‘Feminists, remember that mothers are women too’) Dwyer wrote:

Lisa Pryor is the latest in a long line of women who portray the rearing of children as a hindrance to a fulfilling life. From Anne Summers, who mocks women who would ‘rather be mummies’ than CEOs, to Mia Freedman, who describes motherhood as a series of mind-numbing and trivial tasks, like ‘folding teeny tiny socks’ or ‘trying to remember which boob I’d last fed on’.

Dwyer links Pryor to Mia Freedman, referring to an earlier column by Freedman, not the anxiety column that is the main subject of this thesis (which had not yet been published):

Freedman’s words represent the bleak totalitarian outlook of modern feminism. As Latham pointed out, only those with no imagination would describe raising their own child as dull and tedious work. After all, it would take a neurosurgeon to explain the changes in a child’s first years of life, a linguist to describe how a baby learns the art of speech, and a writer to describe all that is implicit in a new baby.

‘Every modern feminist should ask herself whether the desire to be considered the equal of men necessitates undermining the status of motherhood,’ Dwyer concludes, appearing to accept the Latham’s conflation of Pryor’s story with a doctrinaire, child-hating feminism being imposed on the wider culture. Months later, Latham would repeat the same rhetorical strategy to criticise high profile women such as Rosie Batty who tell their personal stories: for Latham, they represent a ‘feminist life-babble, where the likes of Mia Freedman regularly publish the details of their latest mental breakdown on the Mamamia website – the online equivalent of group therapy’

(Latham 2015b). (In chapter 4 I will return to this question of the critique Latham made of both non-normative mothers and feminism).

Latham's new man channels old motherhood myths

An interesting aspect of Latham's criticisms of Pryor was that although he accused her of using her personal story to push an ideological, feminist agenda, it was actually *Latham* who used his own personal story politically. In describing his own parenting (2014b) – 'I've loved 99 per cent of my time as a house-husband, a glorious duty of care in the service of three brilliant children' – he used his personal experience to make the argument that there was something wrong with women (specifically inner-city feminists) who did not find domestic life and child care fulfilling. It is interesting to note here the language Latham uses to describe parenting – a 'glorious duty' – which reads as an echo and rebuke to Pryor's description of parenting as a 'glorious disaster'. And while Pryor's story focusses on her own personal experience (referring to others only by reference to the 'disclosures' her stories encouraged others to reveal), Latham not only relates his *own* personal story, he styles himself as a ventriloquist of the 'women I speak to in western Sydney, who have no neuroses or ideological agenda to push, [and] regard child-rearing as a joy' (Latham, 2014a). While Pryor and Freedman tell stories that invite other mothers to identify with their tales, Latham assumes he not only knows the minds of western Sydney mothers, but that they are natural keepers of an approved version of motherhood, and he can also speak on their behalf. Here he appears to confirm Summers' observation (1975, p. 42) that when men represent women in literature, it is often for a 'symbolic or ideological purpose': male writers 'equate women with life itself...making heavy use of the symbolic possibilities of the womb and its mysterious cycles and life-nurturing possibilities'.

In Latham's world, full-time motherhood is an edifying task, and he contrasts 'the likes of Pryor' with 'people in the suburbs' who reject the miserable world of work for the more rewarding

pursuit of full-time parenting: ‘Other than for money, why would anyone want to commute and toil long hours for businesspeople?’ (2014a). In extolling his own househusband life – ‘looking after a huge native garden, cooking gourmet meals for my family, pursuing a few business interests, writing a few books’ – Latham comes across as an eerily familiar reboot of Maurice Enghausen, a Minneapolis schoolteacher Friedan discusses in *TFM*. After reading a newspaper story about the long and arduous working week of the housewife, Enghausen quit his job to take over the home of a Mr and Mrs Robert Dalton and their four children for a few days to show women how they could be more efficient (2013, p. 295). In one day he washed floors, bathed children, completed and ironed three loads of washing and cooked multiple meals, Friedan writes (2013, p. 296):

“I still wish that teaching 115 students was as easy as handling four children and a house,” Enghausen told *Science Magazine*. “I still maintain that housework is not the interminable chore that women claim it is.”

Dovey notes the Knausgaard phenomenon has been described as ‘First World fathers having the chance to experience their own Betty Friedan moment’ (2014, pp. 43-44). What she is getting at is the phenomenon of men coming along to a movement or a world women have been toiling in for years and taking on – or being given – preeminent roles as authorities and spokesmen. While nobody wants ‘to deny the New Men their moment...give the ladies who’ve cleared the way a little credit!’ Dovey writes, quoting a critic of the Knausgaard phenomenon (2014, p. 44). Latham was not without his own cheer squad for his own style of mixing personal domestic musings with political and philosophical positions: *AFR* editor-in-chief Michael Stutchbury lauded Latham’s sensitivity and ‘insight’ in an *AFR* news story just days after Latham resigned from the paper: ‘While I didn’t agree with everything Mark wrote, he has played a significant role in Australian public life and brought rare personal insight into his writing’ (Stutchbury quoted in Staff reporters, 2015). Alcorn (2015), meanwhile, lamented his loss to the *AFR* opinion pages too, describing Latham as ‘astute, brave and far more readable than most’.

In a 2015 *New York Magazine* article, Julie Ma quotes Lena Dunham, who observes the way men's personal experiences and observations can be privileged over women's:

The term 'oversharing' is so complicated because I do think that it's really gendered. I think when men share their experiences, it's bravery and when women share their experiences, it's some sort of — people are like, 'TMI'...what exactly constitutes too much information? It seems like it has a lot to do with who is giving you the information, and I feel as though there's some sense that society trivializes female experiences.

Latham not only considered himself brave for talking about his personal life (as it seems, do commentators such as Alcorn and Stutchbury), but while accusing Pryor and others of complaining and asking for special treatment, he simultaneously positioned *himself* as a victim: a hapless man trying to do the right thing as a stay-at-home dad who has become a casualty of feminism. In a follow-up column (2014b) to his earlier critique of Pryor, Latham wrote that he has:

some advice for anyone thinking about becoming a home-dad: it's very rewarding, an opportunity to really know and love your children. But beware the feminazis: they won't give you any credit for what you're doing, only scepticism and ridicule. In theory, they want men to stay at home, freeing up career opportunities for women. But in practice, when a prominent man actually takes on this responsibility, he's greeted with disbelief and denigration.

Latham was responding to columns (see Crabb 2014b, Maley 2014, Dent 2014) taking him to task for his personal criticisms of Pryor, and that suggested his own domestic experiences (receiving a parliamentary pension and carrying out satisfying part-time work) were not comparable to most ordinary women's experiences.

As an opinion writer Latham, of course, was far from silenced: 'on a per-article basis, he was the [AFR's] seventh most read person', notes Crikey media writer Myriam Robin (2015b).²⁹ The *Australian's* Sharri Markson (2015) wrote that 'placed outside the AFR's paywall, Latham became the political equivalent of a cat video: he generated traffic, shares and controversy'. While there is

²⁹ See, 'Fairfax's guide of who to poach from the Australian Financial Review', *Mumbrella*, 14 May 2015, <http://mumbrella.com.au/fairfaxs-guide-of-who-to-poach-from-the-australian-financial-review-293651>

not the space in this thesis to examine representations of women and women's voices in the media more broadly, it is worth briefly noting a recent report commissioned by the Women's Leadership Institute Australia (2013), which analysed all Australian metropolitan newspapers: it found only 20 per cent of those quoted in all news stories were women (this was at a time when Julia Gillard was Prime Minister). The Global Media Monitoring Project (World Association for Christian Communication, 2015), which maps representation of women and men in news media worldwide, found women make up less than a quarter (24 per cent) of subjects interviewed or reported on, while only 37 per cent of stories in newspapers, television and radio are reported by women. This is the media context in which Latham portrays his own voice as being a victim of 'howls of complaints' from the 'heiresses, multi-millionaires, privileged elites' who ran a 10-month campaign against 'my democratic freedom to express my opinion' – a reference to an internal campaign Latham believed senior Fairfax female staff and supporters were running to have his regular column pulled (Latham, quoted in Meade 2015).

The gender stereotyping of Latham

In concluding this chapter, a balanced approach must acknowledge how Latham *himself* was subject to gender stereotyping. If Latham accused feminists such as Pryor and Freedman of being neurotic and narcissistic child-hating careerists, then it's fair to say Latham's critics sometimes made personal attacks on *his* character, casting aspersions on Latham's *own* mental state, particularly as his statements in the media became more personal and abusive. And while some observations about Latham's state of mind were made from ostensibly feminist positions, some commentators betrayed some equally gendered thinking by suggesting Latham's apparent unhinging was linked to his stay-at-home father status: as if a jobless man will automatically self-destruct. Jacqueline Maley (2014) speculated in her comment piece 'What drug is Mark Latham on?' that Latham must be indulging in 'brain-bending, deep-pharmacy' gear, so deluded was his portrayal of domestic life. Sarah Le Marquand (2015) wrote that Latham's writings and tweets

created: ‘A picture of a bored and directionless man desperately conjuring up increasingly baseless and nonsensical claims as he furiously types.’ Le Marquand located Latham’s apparent mental disturbance in the fact that he is a man whose ambition has been thwarted: ‘a decade ago [he] fell from the lofty position of almost being elected prime minister to political oblivion, [attention] is the very result he so craves.’ Amy Gray (2014) ridiculed Latham in her column in the *Guardian* as a ‘relevance-deprived’ former politician who had conjured up a ‘crazy’ plan to garner attention. Gray’s and Le Marquand’s reliance on the notion that a man not working would lose the plot was the unacknowledged twin to Latham’s own argument that women who worked were, by nature, unnatural.

While the previous chapter argued Freedman’s and Pryor’s columns shared features of mommybloggers, offering stories that provided readers with relief and consolation, this chapter has considered some of the consequences of women deploying the first person voice in the mainstream news media: specifically, the way such personal stories come in for harsh criticism in the mainstream media, a space where women’s voices are still in a minority. Two decades ago Lumby (1994, pp. 50-51) identified an increasing ‘feminisation’ of news formats, with a greater focus on feature and colour writing and human interest stories: but this shift clearly hasn’t been accompanied by a commensurate numerical increase in women’s voices. Nor, it appears, has it led to an always fair and reasoned treatment of women’s voices when they *are* heard: in this case, at least, two women’s voices discussing issues of managing home and work are, for some commentators, two voices too many.

“For heaven’s sake, you have a family and a business. You can’t sit in the foetal position for three months! No. We have to fix this now.”

From Mia Freedman, “I’m finally ready to talk about my anxiety”, Debrief Daily (2015)

For the social worker, the psychologist and the numerous ‘family’ counselors, analytically oriented therapy for private patients on personal problems of sex, personality, and interpersonal relations was safer and more lucrative than probing too deeply for the common causes of man’s suffering. If you no longer wanted to think about the whole of mankind, at least you could ‘help’ individuals without getting into trouble.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (2013, p. 218)

‘Self’ is a social entity – it is socially constructed and socially maintained. If it is unable to be maintained, if a person experiences partial or total breakdown, then we need to examine the social processes which have contributed to this.

Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police* (1975, p. 91)

Three | Now mother is mother's little helper

In chapter 1 I considered the parallels between Pryor's and Freedman's texts and second-wave feminism's consciousness raising tradition. In this chapter I will argue these contemporary texts also *diverged* from the feminist consciousness raising tradition in some important ways: in particular, in the way in which the authors emphasise individual choices, individual empowerment and *personal* transformation, rather than *social* transformation. By constructing a self that is entrepreneurial, constantly self-monitoring, improving and making good choices – a self that is, crucially, *adapting* to the world – these texts have much in common with neoliberal, or even postfeminist, ideologies. I will argue therefore that these texts can be seen to represent a personalised feminism many scholars have identified as a feature of third-wave feminism. And I will also suggest Pryor's and Freedman's texts can be seen in the context of a rise in a particular kind of personal narrative that has become a staple of news journalism, and which has found expression in a certain strand of branded, or 'celebrity', feminism that scholars have noted as a feature of contemporary feminism.

The importance of personal narrative in late modernity

While second-wave feminists championed the telling of personal stories for political purposes, more recently Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 55) argued that constructing a personal narrative is how individuals construct a 'stable sense of self-identity' in the contemporary era. For Giddens, self-identity is no longer straightforwardly determined by the class or other groups we are born into, but something each person needs to actively, and continually, construct in an 'on-going "story" about the self'.³⁰ In an influential 2004 essay 'Post feminism and popular culture', Angela

³⁰ Giddens (1991, p. 55) writes: 'A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly

McRobbie, following from theorists such as Giddens, argues that the current era's dominant ideology emphasises individuals as self-creating, autonomous beings, and discounts the social structures that shape and constrain us. Where McRobbie departs from Giddens is her emphasis on the regulative dimensions of this process, and the way in which the current era calls on women, in particular, to monitor and construct the self. We construct ourselves 'internally and individualistically' McRobbie writes (2004, pp. 260-261):

Self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life plan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. Self-help guides, personal advisors, life coaches and gurus, and all sorts of self-improvement TV programmes provide the cultural means by which individualisation operates as a social process... Individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a lifeplan.³¹ They must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage, to taking responsibility for their own working lives.

In their 2011 edited collection, *New femininities: postfeminism, neoliberalism, and subjectivity*, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff similarly argue that women – who are more often responsible for managing multiple aspects of life (family, relationships, careers, their own bodies and the bodies of others) – are more frequently called on to self-manage and self-discipline: 'To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen' (2011, p. 7). Penny (2014, p. 13) puts it more bluntly, emphasising the coercive character behind the apparent free 'choices' women make:

Women are subject to stricter rules of behaviour: how to act, what to say, what to want. What to wear, what to eat, where to shop, how to behave at work, when not to text him back, when to fuck, how to fuck, what colour to put in your hair when he leaves you. If you took the adverts out of what the mainstream media still thinks of as its 'women's content', lists of instructions is almost all there would be left.

fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing "story" about the self'.

³¹ McRobbie's quote can be compared and contrasted with Friedan's urging of women to develop their *own* lifeplan, albeit from a feminist impulse: 'When society asks so little of women, every woman has to listen to her own inner voice to find her identity in the changing world. She must create, out of her own needs and abilities, a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with the work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future' (2013, pp. 407-408).

Despite such proscriptive injunctions, Gill and Scharff (2011, p. 7) argue that in the current era a ‘postfeminist’ sensibility – a sensibility that assumes an ‘active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject’ – has proved powerfully seductive. Postfeminism, they write, is not simply a response to feminism, but it bears ‘a strong resemblance to’, and is ‘at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas,’ posing a convincing rhetorical question: ‘Could it be that neoliberalism *is always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?’ (2011, p.7).

Choice, individual empowerment and third-wave feminism

In an era where neoliberal ideologies have proved ascendant (see also Fraser 2009 and Connell 2009), I want to suggest it is no coincidence that personal columns by high profile women such as Pryor and Freedman foreground individual choice, empowerment and transformation, leaving their narratives all but emptied out of any wider discussion of politics, and the broader forces that shape and constrain choices. By contrast, as Nancy Fraser notes, for second-wave feminism telling personal stories was part of a ‘broader emancipatory’ project for the ‘radical transformation’ of society (2009, pp. 104-105).³² However as Fraser (2009, p. 107) has written (and as McRobbie 2004, Gill and Scharff 2011 have posited elsewhere) the transformative project of second-wave feminism turned out to be ‘stillborn’: feminism has proved remarkably adaptable to a transformed kind of capitalism where ‘public provision’ and ‘state citizenship’ has given way to a much more individualised idea of ‘personal responsibility’.³³ As feminism entered every ‘nook and cranny of social life’ (Fraser 2009, p. 108) second-wave feminism transformed and remerged as a third-wave feminism concerned more with ‘identity and difference’ – a more

³² With the notable exception of liberal feminists, she notes.

³³ Elsewhere Gill (2007, p. 162) writes about the way in which postfeminism both incorporates feminist ideals (the freedom of individual women to make choices) and simultaneously repudiates feminism (including the idea that social structures that constrain choices must be changed): ‘postfeminism constructs an articulation or suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and this is effected entirely through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism.’

individualised feminism that downplayed critiques of the broader economy and politics.³⁴ Shelley Budgeon likewise writes that third-wave feminism starts from the assumption that women's experiences are complex and different, and it 'tends to look with scepticism upon claims that women's oppression is systematic and that the occupation of a similar structural position creates an identity that women share' (2011, p. 282). Although acknowledging the contested nature of the term 'third-wave feminism', Budgeon characterises it as a feminism that has responded to economic, political and social forces (the uncertainty of work under late capitalism, the expansion of the information and image-based world, and multiple modes of sexuality and other identities) with a politics that privileges difference, hybridity and ambiguity (2011, pp. 279-278). And she argues that while third-wave feminism doesn't consider the need for feminism is over, it shares with postfeminism a focus on 'empowerment' and 'female success' (2011, p. 282).

Fixmer and Wood (2005, p. 236), while more sympathetic to third-wave feminism's strengths and nuances, likewise describe it as a highly 'personal' politics, often focussed on 'physical, bodily action that aims to provoke change by exercising and resisting power in everyday life'. In contrast to second-wave feminism's focus on central juridical power, third-wave feminism is more often concerned with *personal* empowerment: 'A feminist is not just someone who envisions a different world but someone who creates a life that will change it,' they write (2005, pp. 243-244). Fixmer and Wood argue that third-wavers – by 'viewing personal experience as a focus in its own right and not as a route to theoretical insights and structural change' – can end up emphasising the personal at the expense of understanding the systemic and political (2005, p. 248). While Fixmer and Wood define third-wave feminism through careful readings of three anthologies of feminist writings³⁵ (two from 1995 and one from 2002) they are careful to say

³⁴ 'What had begun as a needed corrective to economism devolved in time to an equally one-sided culturalism' writes Fraser (2009, p. 108)

³⁵ *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Findlen, 1995); *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (Walker, 1995) and *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* (Hernandez and Rheman, 2002).

scholars should not make distinctions between second- and third-wave feminism that are set in concrete: many second-wave feminists can sound very third-wave at times – for example, Germaine Greer tasting menstrual blood, and Susie Orbach writing *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) (2005, p. 249).

Media narratives and third-wave feminism

The third-wave concern with individual stories and difference has, one could argue, entered into modern marriage of convenience with a media form that privileges personal stories. Bute, Harter, Kirby and Thompson, in a chapter from *Contemplating maternity in an era of choice* (2010), analysed discussions of age-related fertility in the American news media between 2002 and 2008, and found media stories focussed on individual women's personal stories and choices around infertility and child bearing, ignoring social and economic forces that constrained those choices. 'Narratives remain a staple of journalistic form', they note, but 'when the focus on personal choices and decisions remain disconnected from institutional forms of power and politics, storytelling may have limited impact in instigating consequential shifts in ideologies that order everyday lives in significant ways' (2010, p. 65-66). While they note that 'feminists [still] rely on storytelling to raise consciousness about lived inequities,' (2010, p. 53)³⁶, they suggest our understanding of the nature of storytelling is now more complex: what is '*not* being said, by whom, and about whom' is as interesting as what *is* articulated (2010, p 58).

John Pauly (2011, p. 77), writing as a media scholar rather than as a social or feminist theorist, makes a related observation about literary journalism, arguing it is a form that now privileges the personal at the expense of offering social or political analysis. Pauly writes that when it first emerged in the 1960s New Journalism, with its experimental and more literary techniques –

³⁶ They add: 'Narratives remain primary rhetorical resources through which some subject positions are legitimized and privileged' (2010, p. 53).

inserting the author in the story, including dialogue, building characters and personalities – allowed for subjects such as class, race and feminism to become proper subjects for journalism, ‘giving voice’ to what until then were outsider groups. But he questions whether literary journalism’s techniques are still appropriate for grappling with the ‘speed, scale, multicultural complexity, and organizational density of the world in which we live’ (2011, p. 79). Journalism that takes ‘a person-centred approach deepens our engagement with subjects (and can even be considered humanistic in its orientation)’, but it also runs the risk of ‘over theorizing the individual and under-theorizing the group’ (Pauly 2011, p. 78).³⁷ In other words, writing which focuses on the personal, on the ‘story’, can end up saying little about larger social forces.³⁸

Monitoring, self-improvement and transformation in Pryor’s and Freedman’s texts

Both Pryor’s and Freedman’s narratives present tales of an individual facing a mental health problem – depression and anxiety, respectively. But while both authors allude to the social circumstances which might have contributed to their problems (Pryor refers to the ‘glorious disaster’ of child raising and full-time studies, and Freedman mentions her accumulated sleep debt resulting from ‘15 years of parenthood, a toddler and a business’) neither author explicitly suggests at any point the solution to their problems lies in social or political change.

Rather (as work by McRobbie 2004 and Gill and Scharff 2011 suggest) both women’s narratives could be read as neoliberal or post-feminist tales. While the moral significance, the medical facts, or the efficacy of either women’s medical treatments are outside the scope of this thesis (and not appropriate to address), the cultural theorist can nevertheless make observations as to how these

³⁷ Budgeon (2011, p. 282) writes similarly of a third-wave feminism: ‘By advocating an analytical move away from understanding gender in collective terms third-wave feminism often promotes a “politics of difference” starting from the specificity of individual experience.’

³⁸ Pauly (2011, p. 82) concludes with the admission that perhaps ‘drama’ and ‘story’ are so integral to journalism that ‘analysis’ will always take a back seat.

stories operate as *texts*. As texts, they present stories in which the author identifies a personal problem through a process of self-monitoring, and seeks help to manage that problem in a way that emphasises choice and consumption (most literally, in the consumption of a pill), self-improvement and transformation – a transformation of the self that, through medication, is arguably occurring at the most fundamental level of personality.

Freedman (2015) recounts visiting a health farm, a therapist, a GP, various specialists and, ultimately, a psychiatrist who prescribes the drug Lexapro. Freedman's tale concludes in an upbeat fashion of, if not triumphing over, at least successfully managing, her anxiety.

Along with Lexapro, I've learned how to manage my anxiety in other ways too. I need lots of sleep and I need to exercise every day. I need to keep my mind busy and active and I don't drink coffee or take drugs. And I try to limit my exposure to stories about cancer or mothers being suddenly taken from their children. I also have regular health tests; mammograms and ultrasounds. I do it probably more for my mental health than my physical health and it's expensive but I don't apologise for it. If that's what it takes to help alleviate my anxiety, it's worth it.

Insofar as the heroine of Freedman's tale goes through a process of identifying a problem, consumes various well-being services to find solutions, and now constantly monitors and manages her body and mental state, you could argue she is presenting a self that is an ideal neoliberal subject. Here, Freedman appears to exemplify what Gill (2007, p. 163) describes as the kind of self increasingly constructed under neoliberalism – 'individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The individual must bear full responsibility for their life biography.' And Freedman represents here an 'embodied' politics of personal transformation and change Fixmer and Wood (2005) argue characterises much third-wave feminism. Furthermore, Freedman is not only enacting the monitoring and life planning McRobbie refers to (2004, p. 260), through consulting 'personal advisors, life coaches and gurus', in a doubling act Freedman has, by her story's denouement, positioned herself as a personal advisor and life coach to her readers, writing: 'If you think you have a problem with anxiety you probably do,' she writes. 'Reach out. Get Help. It's the strongest bravest thing you can do.'

Although a much shorter narrative, Pryor's story too narrates a tale of successfully managing a mental health problem for which she takes personal responsibility. The author describes how she manages her anxiety whilst telling the story of attending a cocktail party ('semi-professional in purpose') a setting that, along with the accompanying picture of a slickly groomed Pryor wearing a fashionable inner city look of black jeans and jacket, encourages a reading of a successful middle-class woman making decisions that are right for *her*. 'I'm not depressed, I am anti-depressed... It's not about endorsing medication, even though it has worked so well for me.'

The importance of choice in Pryor's and Freedman's stories

Throughout Freedman's narrative, choice is celebrated, and she casts an absence of choice as an infantilising situation that precipitates her latest mental health problems. Her story begins with a visit to a health retreat, a place where choices are radically removed:

Someone is always there to tell you where to go next and what to do. You make no choices about food and you barely even have to decide what to wear; it's 24/7 tracksuit pants, no make-up and dirty hair shoved under a cap. A health retreat is the opposite of real life in every possible way. It's like being a very small child who is only expected to do the most basic of things for themselves, like chew their food and go to the toilet.

In Freedman's account, when her ability to make choices is taken away, disaster strikes:

'anxiety...parachuted in to fill the space created when I dismantled the very scaffolding around which my life was built'. Throwing off her busy life 'was the most reckless and foolish thing I could have done and if you're anything like me, I caution strongly against it,' she writes.

'Notions of choice, of "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself", are central to the postfeminist sensibility' Gill (2007, p. 153) writes, adding that a 'grammar of individualism' underpins what she calls a 'postfeminist sensibility in media culture' – an individualism that can be seen in the 'relentless personalizing tendencies' of advertising, makeover shows, but also in news and talk shows and reality TV, and the way 'in which every aspect of life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination'. For Gill (2007, p. 155), the stress on personal choice in

a post-feminist media culture is 'intimately' entwined with a 'new emphasis on self-surveillance'. Although she acknowledges that self-surveillance and monitoring has long existed,³⁹ she argues it has taken on distinctive features in the present moment: it has not only increased in intensity, it has moved into 'entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct' (2007, p. 155). Women are now required not just to transform their bodies, they must remodel their *interior* lives. As Gill (2007, p. 156) notes, the surveillance of the self has been added to the surveillance of the body as the natural terrain of women's magazines:

the self has become a project to be evaluated, advised, disciplined and improved or brought into 'recovery'. However, what is so striking is how unevenly distributed these quasi-therapeutic discourses are. In magazines, contemporary fiction and television talk shows, it is women, not men, who are addressed and required to work on and transform the self.

Similarly, Penny has noted that under the market-based ideology neoliberalism, even 'the self is just an entrepreneurial project' (2014, pp. 2-3). Or, as Stephens (2004, p. 88) elsewhere argues, contemporary mothers are caught in 'a constant process of anxiety-ridden self-improvement': 'Scratch a new capitalist mother and you will find anxious references to performing motherhood expertly, efficiently and competently, and the desire to do more exercise' (2004, p. 99).

In *Transformations of the Ideal Mother: The Story of Mommy Economicus and Her Amazing Brain*, Thornton (2014) writes that the latest findings in neuroscience – that women's brains have enhanced neuroplasticity after giving birth – have merged with neoliberal ideologies to create popular discourse that makes women doubly responsible for maximising their roles as workers and mothers, and for managing their mental health. Analysing popular media stories and popular science books, Thornton traces the emergence, over the previous decade, of discourses that reframe old notions of a debilitating 'baby brain' into a new story that casts mothers 'as uniquely

³⁹ As Summers argued in *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975, pp. 241-242) femininity is not something that women are born with but it is 'something they must strive for'. And because femininity 'cannot be precisely defined...a woman does not know exactly what she is reaching for. This creates further anxiety and leads women to perpetual self-scrutiny. And comparisons with other women.'

“plastic” and agile creatures who enjoy a supercharged neural capacity activated by the biological and social processes of motherhood’ (2014, p. 271). Thornton says the ‘mommy brain discourses’ have created a new and distinctly female figure with new and ‘incredible powers of flexibility’, who can juggle work, children and find time for regular exercise to reclaim her pregnancy body (2014, p. 285).⁴⁰ Postpartum depression is ‘the flipside of the enhanced mommy brain’ and since women’s brains are vulnerable, according to this discourse, women must constantly work to ensure their brains receive ‘positive inputs and avoid the vicious cycle of postpartum depression and related problems’ (2014, p. 285).

There are, I argue, elements of Thornton’s mommy brain discourse in Freedman’s and Pryor’s texts – texts showing the author managing multiple responsibilities, emphasising efficiency and choosing positive cycles of brain ‘inputs’ over negative ones. Pryor declares ‘I’m anti-depressed’, while Freedman emphasises fast and efficacious solution necessary to manage her busy life:

Clearly, I had a problem. And with three children to care for, a business to run with my husband, employees to manage and a life to lead, I could not afford to live like this, waiting for the next attack. I needed help to manage it. So my therapist referred me to another counsellor she knew who worked specifically with anxiety patients. In the one session I had with him, he said that he recommends just being still and curling up until it passes, even if that takes several months. When I recounted his advice to my own therapist, she was dismissive. ‘For heaven’s sake, you have a family and a business. You can’t sit in the foetal position for three months! No. We have to fix this now’. I was relieved to hear this because I didn’t think I could spare three months or even three days to curl up and be still.

The pernicious and gendered nature of choice and the rise of the power feminist

While rhetorics of neoliberalism, postfeminism and Thornton’s Mommy Economicus emphasise individual choice and empowerment, McRobbie (2004) is keen to point out the pernicious aspects of this emphasis on choice: ‘The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who

⁴⁰ Thornton says her ‘Mommy economicus’ resembles Foucault’s prototypical neoliberal subject, homo economicus, an ‘entrepreneur of himself... a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise’. Motherhood ‘is about self-improvement, self-actualization, and self-benefit’ Thornton writes (2014, p. 282).

can make the right choices...lines are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably' (2004, p. 261). In a study of how rhetoric around the word 'motherhood' has operated, O'Brien Hallstein (2010) has similarly examined how a succession of motherhood discourses and labels such as 'supermom', 'soccer mom', and 'alpha mom' have worked to depoliticise issues such as managing work/life conflict, and the glass ceiling, reducing them to a function of individual women's private choices. Through her analysis of media stories, O'Brien Hallstein explains how labels such as 'soccer mom' work rhetorically by co-opting the gains of feminism and the feminist notion of 'choices', at the same time as they 'trivialise and diminish' any conflicts women experience by making women individually responsible for managing contradictions through making the right choices (2010, pp. 14-15). O'Brien Hallstein is building on Douglas and Michaels' 2004 text *The Mommy Myth*, which outlines the emergence of new momism images in the 1980s: the supermom who worked, carried a briefcase and pushed a stroller all while looking immaculately groomed. 'If women wanted to work, they were just going to have to add it on to their other endless responsibilities. If they couldn't hack it, well, too bad for them' (2004, p. 81). Douglas and Michaels, in turn, acknowledge they are building on Friedan's work: 'The new momism is a direct descendent and the latest version of what Betty Friedan famously labelled the "feminine mystique"' (2004, p. 5).

The notion of a superwoman feminist, juggling everything through adaptive, flexible and entrepreneurial action, is perhaps best embodied today by feminist superstar celebrities such as Sheryl Sandberg. As McRobbie (2013, p. 133) has noted, Sandberg's book *Lean In* (2013) is characterised by a 'positive, cheerful' tone, and is replete with 'uplifting anecdotes, helpful tips, homilies, sentimental eulogies'. She adds: 'This is a radically depoliticised and accommodating feminism; its conservatism is most apparent in its shying away from argument and confrontation.' For McRobbie, even Sandberg's activism is an impoverished activism, her *Lean In*

circles representing 'a more ghostly version of its more overtly feminist predecessor in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s' (2013, p. 133).

Here, I want to suggest Sandberg's individualised, highly branded form of feminism is a genre we can now see a version of in Australia in certain high profile feminists such as Mia Freedman; feminists whose expertise in feminism is matched, if not outweighed, by an expertise in attracting followers and leading and intervening in public debates through leveraging their personal 'stories'. It's worth quoting McRobbie's description of this phenomenon at length (2013, p. 133):

old-fashioned, more anonymous forms of political engagement such as those associated with the bureaucratic years of social democracy, where women often worked behind the scenes quietly pursuing a feminist agenda, are now replaced by the need to personalise all activities, put a name and a face on everything one does, to gain publicity or followers, likes or dislikes...To be effective requires going public, being highly visible and this in turn requires modes of self-branding and self-promotion which lessens the public service dimensions of traditional political activity...There is no option but to launch oneself into this sphere of entertainment if one wants to take part in public debate...This has consequences for the more branded and personalised feminism which has surfaced in recent years and which comes immediately to be attached to certain names and careers...Feminism is now a heavily named and signed activity, where in the past 'collective' sufficed.

Earlier, in a 1996 article 'Damned bores and slick sisters: The selling of blockbuster feminism in Australia', Shane Rowlands and Margaret Henderson were already detecting the emergence of a new form of 'feminist' text, one largely polemical in tone, and where the author as marketing device and celebrity was foregrounded in both the texts themselves and in their reception in the media. They argued Rene Denfeld's *The New Victorians* and, locally, Helen Garner's *The First Stone*, represented a new form of 'blockbuster feminism' one that is 'part of a historical shift or tendency towards conservatism, where style, the consumer, and the marketplace masquerade as analysis, the activist, and collective forms of struggle' (1996, p. 14). Crucially, they argue these 1990s texts represented a new development in that they highlighted the *problems* of feminism; 1970s blockbusters such as Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), on the other hand, were more 'utopian in outlook, and activist in orientation' and represented a more 'productive force' for feminism (1996, p. 13).

Sandra Lilburn, Susan Magarey and Susan Sheridan (2000) build on Rowlands' and Henderson's concept of the feminist blockbuster, arguing Germaine Greer, and *The Female Eunuch*, was the prototypical blockbuster author and feminist text in Australia: they paint a picture of Greer on a 1972 Australian publicity tour as an iconoclastic individual standing not so much within, as hovering above, the women's movement, a clever, witty, seductive but cantankerous and contrarian feminist goddess.⁴¹ Like other blockbuster texts, during her publicity tour Greer the author was foregrounded as often as her text, but Lilburn, Magarey and Sheridan argue that Greer's performance as a celebrity represented a *successful* synthesis of feminism and the media, one that 'legitimated a feminist politics in the public arena' (2000, p. 343). By mixing 'cultural disruption' and 'popular communication', Greer presented a challenge 'to the cultural meaning of "woman"' (2000, p. 347). As discussed in chapter 1, and as I will shortly discuss in the following chapter, Pryor and Freedman do similarly present (limited) challenges to the cultural meanings of women and of mothers.

Nevertheless, in more recent years the shift in emphasis towards author personalities and celebrity identities that McRobbie (and Rowlands and Henderson) identify has arguably seen a reversal of an earlier trajectory: once feminists who authored significant books would become celebrities, now feminist 'authors' are often celebrities first (see, for example, Sandberg, but also Caitlin Moran (2012) and Lena Dunham (2014)). In this latest generation of books, the author's life story is as important as theoretical feminist debates and discussions; and the author's personal success stands in as an alibi and proof of her feminist credentials. Freedman, who is both an explicitly feminist journalist and publisher *and* simultaneously a feminist 'celebrity' who frequently highlights her personal story, appears to occupy a transitional or hybrid position between the tradition of feminist journalists most evident in the second wave, and the celebrity

⁴¹ The success of *The Female Eunuch*, despite its erudition and academic gloss was, they argue, located in Greer's media literacy – and in her book's mastery of the polemical and rhetorical mode, blended with personal testimony (2000, p. 340).

feminist authors briefly mentioned above. Personal stories have always been a feature of women's magazines: in the examples here, especially in Freedman's case, releasing personal stories is a key to building an audience and a brand. But the challenge for third-wave feminism, as Budgeon argues, is to 'transcend the ideological incitement to engage *uncritically* in a project of self-definition founded upon individualised female success and the values of choice, freedom and self-sufficiency' (2011, p. 289). In other words, the question is how can third-wave feminists tell, and celebrate, stories of female empowerment, individual choices and individual success, without losing sight of the need to change not just ourselves, but the social conditions our selves are formed within? The extent to which Freedman – a feminist star detached from more old-fashioned notions of an activist base – can achieve feminist objectives other than expanding our 'cultural meanings' of mothers and women is a question I will return to in my conclusion.

The theories of McRobbie, Gill and Scharff and Thornton offer us a way of understanding how first-person texts can operate, particularly when they produce selves constructed by dominant neoliberal discourses of the current historical moment: foregrounding individual responsibility, choice and empowerment. But the theoretical schemas or ideal versions of neoliberal subjects these scholars present are simply that; and at times their theories risk becoming over-generalisations and sweeping observations. When a theorist such as McRobbie discusses the movie *Revolutionary Road* (McRobbie 2013) or *Bridget Jones's Diary* (McRobbie 2007) she invariably provides astute readings of crucial aspects of a given cultural text; but her selective discussion of a text's features can, at times, appear as if the cultural product is being made to fit the theory, rather than the theory being made to fit the cultural product: contradictions, ambiguities and complexities are, therefore, sometimes missed. But cultural products (or texts) – like the subjects that produce them – are multifaceted. My final chapter will therefore attempt to grapple with some of the ambiguities and apparent contradictions of Pryor's and Freedman's texts.

Motherhood is a terrain that is both prescriptive and highly organized by language

May Friedman, *Mommyblogs and the Changing Face of Motherhood* (2013, p. 26)

...discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, (1978, p. 101)

Four | Tripping off and up on the normative parenting grid

In chapter 3 I considered how Pryor's and Freedman's texts presented selves that can be seen in terms of third-wave feminism's, or even postfeminism's, concern with individual empowerment and personal choices. In this chapter I will briefly take a more positive turn and consider how Pryor's and Freedman's stories about their imperfect, messy parenting can be seen – almost contradictorily and somewhat paradoxically – to *challenge* contemporary ideologies of motherhood, particularly the idealised image identified by Douglas and Michaels (2004), in which motherhood has become increasingly professionalised and full of self-monitoring and anxiety. By expressing fundamentally flawed models of 'aberrant' motherhood, I will argue that Pryor's and Freedman's texts push the boundaries of normative parenting, offering women pleasure and identification in a way that has some parallels with the fictional mothers in contemporary TV shows such as *Weeds* and *Nurse Jackie* – mothers who sell drugs and pop pills and refuse intensive, smothering parenting models (Walters and Harrison 2014). In this chapter I will also consider how residual and anti-feminist ideologies circulated in some commentators' discourses, who argued women should find primary fulfilment as mothers, with work secondary. And I will look at the emergence in the commentary on Pryor's and Freedman's articles of the retrograde, post-feminist notion that assumes feminism is accounted for, and therefore that for women to speak of the need for feminism amounts to a form of 'special pleading'.

The rhetoric of motherhood

Words and images don't exist outside an already richly-inscribed system of signs and myths, as Barthes reminds us in *Mythologies* (1972). And the symbolic or mythological category of the 'mother' is a sign that is more heavily loaded than most. Writing about an *Elle* magazine feature on women novelists, Barthes (1972, p. 50) describes a photograph of 70 novelists and its accompanying caption, which faithfully listed the number of children each writer had produced

alongside how many books each had produced. Barthes says – ironic acid dripping from his pen – that while society gives artists the freedom to be an individual, the female writer must not ever forget that she is, first and foremost, a woman and a mother:

Women are on the earth to give children to men; let them write as much as they like, let them decorate their condition [by being artists], but [let] their Biblical fate not be disturbed by the promotion which is conceded to them, and let them pay immediately, by the tribute of their motherhood, for this bohemianism... Women, be therefore courageous, free; play at being men, write like them; but never get far from them; live under their gaze, compensate for your books by your children;... One novel, one child, a little feminism, a little connubiality.

In her book *Rhetorics of Motherhood* (2013) Linda Buchanan draws on Barthes' notions of cultural codes, as well as Foucault's notion of the constitutive power of discourse. She posits (2013, p. 8) that 'The Mother' is a code that 'connotes a myriad of positive associations, including children, love, protection, home, nourishment, altruism, morality, religion, self-sacrifice, strength, the reproductive body, the private sphere, and the nation'. While acknowledging the term 'Mother' is culturally and contextually defined, 'its associations forever in flux rather than fixed', (2013, p. xix) Buchanan argues that our familiarity with a code in any given context 'creates a shorthand of sorts, enabling speakers to sketch immediately identifiable characters – the sainted mother or the selfish career woman – with only a few strokes' (2013, p. 9). Through constant repetition, a cultural code such as 'motherhood' both 'communicates' and 'cloaks prevailing power relations... it makes those relations seem normal, eternal, objective, self-evident expressions of the way things are' (2013, p. 5).

The notion of the mother as both a saintly and selfless figure, someone with a special role in nurturing children, is not ahistorical and fixed, Buchanan writes (2013, pp. 15-18). Rather, the code of motherhood 'began to assume its current form between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries'. With the rise of industrialisation, space became gendered and women were recast as nurturers, with a special role in connecting emotionally to others, and as consumers, and not producers, of goods: 'Capitalism thus exerted its own imprint on motherhood, reifying a "natural

division of labor”, where men ruled the “public” sphere of the economy and women the shrunken “private; sphere of the household” (Buchanan 2013, p. 18).

Friedan (2013) wrote of the further spatial segregation of women in the US in the post-World War II explosion of suburbs: and as detached houses in growing estates grew in number, so too did images and discourses circulated in advertisements, magazines and fiction of the happy housewife, of women cheerily baking and devoting themselves to children’s development and managing modern households with new domestic wonders. Summers explored the particularly Australian inflection of the motherhood code that characterised the country’s colonial origins, particularly the dualistic stereotype which emerged: women were either whores (convicts and female immigrants) or middle-class mothers (god’s police)⁴²: ‘women as wives and mothers of children were entrusted with the moral guardianship of society’, in opposition to non-mothers (or whores) (1975, p. 21). Like Buchanan, Summers too places the development of our contemporary notions of motherhood in the nineteenth century: women were the heart of the nuclear family, where ‘children were considered to be in need of special treatment for a protracted period of time’ (1975, p. 368). As in the US, suburban life boomed in post-war Australia and (as I will discuss later in relation to Mark Latham’s veneration of women in the suburbs) Summers outlines the particular social and economic conditions in Australia that meant that the ideal of suburban middle-class family life was stitched into the cultural fabric of Australian life.

For Friedan (2013, p. 284) the ‘feminine mystique’, which represented this new critical role of women as both a decorator of and decoration to the domestic home, as well as its emotional lynchpin, was a ‘paradox’: ‘it emerged to glorify woman’s role as housewife at the very moment

⁴² Earlier Betty Friedan (2013, p.39) wrote that the whore/saint split had taken on a new shape in an era where women were beginning to work, but where magazine editors of post-WWII USA were shaping fiction designed to convince women to return to the home: ‘The split in the new image opens a different fissure – the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self.’

when the barriers to her full participation in society were lowered, at the very moment when science and education and her own ingenuity made it possible for a woman to be both wife and mother and to take an active part in the world outside the home.’ As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, more recently feminist scholars such as Susan J Douglas and Meredith Michaels, in their book *The Mommy Myth* (2004), described how women’s advances in education, work and other spheres were met with increasingly idealised images of mothering perfection in the media and cultural spheres – the ‘superwoman’, the ‘soccer mom’, the ‘alpha mom’, forever raising the bar of what the good mother looked like. Rising standards of attentiveness to children, beatification of mothering at home and success at work perpetuated ‘a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet’ (2004, p. 4)⁴³. Douglas and Michaels characterise the mommy myth as a ‘new double bind, where mothers are meant to be simultaneously both hip, sexy, serene, simultaneously relaxed and vigilant and in control’ (2004, p. 300). Although writing from the US, the trans-national social and political changes Douglas and Michaels refer to (eg. the commodification of parenting and proliferation of parenting advice tomes), and popular culture texts they reference (eg. the television shows *Thirtysomething*), makes their argument pertinent to Australia.

Challenging the saint/sinner dualism

In her memoir of motherhood, Cusk (2008 p. 14) writes that to be a mother in this contemporary cultural environment ‘is a fraught occupation’, attracting both approbation and condemnation:

⁴³ And as I discussed in Chapter 2, O’Brien Hallstein (2010) has similarly documented how the rise of the various “mom” labels have rhetorically colluded to ramp up women’s responsibilities, as well as anxieties and expectations, over ideal mothering.

the demonology of parenthood is so catholic, drawing to itself epithets of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are largely absent from our experience of ordinary life. As a mother you learn what it is to be both martyr and devil. In motherhood I have experienced myself as both more virtuous and more terrible, and more implicated too in the world’s virtue and terror, than I would from the anonymity of childlessness have thought possible.

More recently, Walters and Harrison (2014, p. 39) have offered a way out of what seems to be relentlessly oppressive constructions of motherhood: they suggest images of ‘aberrant’ mothers are beginning to appear, cutting through a ‘toxic haze of moralistic norms and obsessive childcare dictums’. Pointing to a new breed of wayward TV mothers exemplified by Nancy Botwin, a pot-dealing mother who turned to crime after her husband died, and Nurse Jackie, a drug-addicted hospital worker carrying on an affair with a co-worker, they suggest ‘contemporary representations of motherhood often break new ground’ offering ‘counter images’ of motherhood: ‘Neither monster nor angel, this aberrant mom is not quite a twenty-first-century heroine but she does upend more traditional depictions of maternal identity’ (2014, p. 40). Including the Wisteria Lane mothers of *Desperate Housewives*, and the emotionally complex and sexual lawyer Alicia Florrick in *The Good Wife* in their analysis, Walters and Harrison describe a new, ‘strikingly innovative’ mother, one who is ‘Unabashedly sexual, idiosyncratic to a fault, and seriously deleterious in her caretaking skills, she seems to live largely in the high end of popular culture...premium cable’ (2014, p. 40). The pot-dealing ‘Nancy is the aberrant mother we guiltily enjoy’ while ‘Jackie is the aberrant mother we root for and secretly identify with’ (2014, p. 44). As Walters and Harrison note, what is particularly interesting about these ‘images of out of control mothers’ – mothers ‘careening off the grid of recognisable parenting’ – is that they emerge at the same historical moment in which ‘intensive parenting’ or ‘parenting out of control...is defining the ideological terrain’ (2014, p. 51).

Like Buchanan, who argues that the rhetorical code of motherhood is so powerful it provokes feelings that happen ‘below the level of conscious awareness’ (2013, p. 117), Walters and Harrison (2014, p. 38) suggest that ‘images of motherhood remain both template and signpost

upon which we project our desires for kinship and care and our most vexed understandings of womanhood and femininity'. But they argue, and I think convincingly, that where once uniformity ruled, multiplicity is now evident: 'ideologies of motherhood are one of the more contested and confused sites of popular meaning. "Mother" is [now] so overdetermined that a singular hegemonic trope rarely emerges' (2014, p. 39). What aberrant, or non-normative, tropes of motherhood emerged then in Pryor's and Freedman's stories?

Pryor and Freedman as aberrant mothers

In their texts Pryor and Freedman present themselves as mothers who can, in many ways, be read as real-life versions of the fictional aberrant mothers Walters and Harrison identify: mothers who upend old binaries of mothers as selfless 'sacrificing saints, or smothering, viperous spiders' (2014, p. 38). And while Pryor's and Freedman's parenting practices aren't so deleterious as to threaten their children's lives in the way Nancy Botwin's erratic parenting does, both authors model a version of motherhood which refuses to place children and selfless nurturing at the centre of her tale. Pryor's story recounts a cocktail party (presumably child-free) where she not only confesses to her own 'pharmaceutical overshare', but she tells readers the great benefit of her confession for other party goers is the permission to similarly spill the beans about their own messy lives and imperfect parenting: 'custody battle, affairs...parental ambivalence'. Pryor mentions children in passing as one aspect of a life that involves full-time medical studies, writing a column for a national paper and gossipy cocktail parties.

Freedman, similarly, recounts a (mildly) deviant – or at least non-normative – picture of mothering: she describes her workaholic tendencies ('I have an intensely intimate relationship with my laptop'), her story is unabashedly about herself (as mentioned earlier, she uses the word 'I' 204 times, while her children are only referred to nine times). At a health retreat she contemplates a threesome with an older couple ('I graciously declined'), and she admits her

response to an earlier stint of healthy living was to eat ‘the biggest Kit Kat I could find washed down with a Chocolate Moove’ as soon as it was over. Like the aberrant TV and movie moms Walters and Harrison identify, motherhood in both Pryor’s and Freedman’s accounts appears ‘narratively secondary’ (2014, p. 48). For Freedman, her identity as a woman, a worker and a friend is foregrounded, and her story is illustrated by holiday snaps of herself, hanging out on the beach, on a surfboard, and posing with adult friends – no partner nor children in sight.

Despite the boundary pushing of the non-normative mothers Walters and Harrison (2014, p. 48) identify, they note these mothers occupy a ‘camp’ or ‘humorous location’: ‘true non-normativity, it seems, can only be offered up if it is taken with a grain of comedic salt’ they observe. Pryor’s joke about being ‘stripped’ of her laurel if she was ever to ‘win a medal in the Working Parent Olympics’, and Freedman’s similarly self-deprecating tone – returning from her health retreat and ‘spending hundreds of dollars on Amaranth flour, organic activated walnuts and Australian-grown chia seeds’ – seem to bear out Walters’ and Harrison’s observation that non-normativity needs to be presented with humour to be palatable.

Nevertheless, Walters and Harrison (2014, pp. 49-50) contend that part of the pleasure of images of aberrant mothers is:

their absolute indifference to the normative regimes of mothering, even when they get censured by arrogant men. These moms are not reading the endless streams of motherhood how-tos, desperately anxious to find the perfect admixture of care and concern that will turn little Susie into an upright and successful citizen.

If, as Douglas and Michaels (2004) suggest, the ‘new momism’ replaced subservience to men with women’s subservience to children, then Walters and Harrison make the convincing claim that ‘bad mothers’ of the likes of Nancy Botwin and Nurse Jackie – and, I’d add, Pryor and Freedman – have at least partially ‘circumnavigated this normative ideology’ (2014, p. 50).

Freedman and Pryor, like Lopez’s mommybloggers, dare to suggest ‘Not all women enjoy being mothers or know what to do once they become one’ (Lopez 2009, p. 744). As Lopez notes,

women writing honestly about motherhood online can acknowledge that ‘motherhood can be overwhelming and exhausting, hilarious and exuberant, dirty and disruptive, all at once’ (2009, p. 744).

Resuscitating the mommy myth

Whilst Walters and Harrison (2014, pp. 50-51) are ‘strangely hopeful’ about the new representations of motherhood ‘careening off the grid of recognisable parenting’, they note that ‘motherhood in the new millennium is marked by an excess of meaning’: ‘the older ideologies haven’t wholly given way and they are often reconstituted with a veneer of post-feminist gloss that only makes them more pernicious’. In fact, they point out (noting *Mad Men*’s Betty Draper and other fictional maternal figures) ‘leftover maternal tropes continue to be mixed in with today’s tastier menu’ (2014, p. 51). Following Walters and Harrison, I would argue that many of the responses to Pryor’s and Freedman’s columns, particularly Mark Latham’s, represent leftover maternal tropes.

In his response to Pryor’s *Good Weekend* column, Latham (2014a) produces, unabashedly and uncritically, an idealised code of motherhood as an ahistorical, natural phenomenon, a code Buchanan (2013), Friedan (1963) and Summers (1975) (as well as others mentioned above) have suggested is problematic. His column, ‘Why left feminists don’t like kids’ (2014a) begins by describing the raising of children as ‘one of life’s great responsibilities’. But crucially, for Latham, childrearing is a responsibility that is largely women’s work, one that’s regarded by ‘western Sydney women’ as a ‘joy’. Furthermore, in Latham’s vision motherhood is idealised as a place of idle pleasure for the suburban mothers he speaks to:

Financially, if they can avoid work, that’s their preference. Home life gives them [stay-at-home mothers] the freedom to pursue their recreational interests and bond with the most important people in their lives, their children.

In Latham's construction, a woman like Pryor, whose abiding priority isn't childrearing, can't be a *real* woman: rather she is a manifestation of a distorting ideology of feminism, 'a political hoax' that diverts women from following their true natures: 'They [inner-city feminists and working mothers such as Pryor] use political feminism as a release valve, trying to free themselves from nature's way'. For Latham a *real* mother is someone who is selfless and sacrificing. Women like Pryor, writes Latham, who don't subjugate themselves to the service of children, must be mentally unwell: 'left feminism is akin to a psychoneurotic disorder: externalising personal feelings of distress and deficiency into the demonisation of children' (2014a).

Friedan observes (2013, p. 220) that along with the spatial segregation of women and children and the growing importance of the nuclear family as society's basic economic and emotional unit, came the popularisation of psychoanalytic discourse in America which placed good mothering at the centre of individual psychology (and pathology):

Under the Freudian microscope...It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost everything. In every case history of troubled child; alcoholic, suicidal, schizophrenic, psychopathic, neurotic adult; impotent, homosexual male; frigid, promiscuous female; ulcerous, asthmatic, and otherwise disturbed American, could be found a mother. A frustrated, repressed, disturbed, martyred, never satisfied, unhappy woman. A demanding, nagging, shrewish wife.

Sounding like an echo of the Freudian thinking that, according to Friedan, made women responsible for children's healthy emotional development, Latham (2014a) claimed Pryor's children risk being damaged by her failure to make them the focus of her life: 'Why do people like this have children in the first place? How will the children feel when they grow up and learn that they pushed their mother onto anti-depressants?'

While each woman is responsible for herself and her choices under neoliberal ideologies (as discussed in chapter 3), paradoxically women – or specifically mothers – are still regularly blamed for their children's problems, and *social* problems, when they make the *wrong* choice. Linda Jean Kenix (2011, p. 43), in an analysis of newspaper reports of two separate stories about the deaths

of two children, found the children's mothers were more likely to be mentioned than the perpetrators of the crimes: while the father's role as caregiver is 'never mentioned', the reports frequently positioned mothers 'as responsible for deaths because of their absence from home, either because of their hedonism (their own partying) or their work commitments (in a can't win bind)' (2011, p. 46). Kenix argues such narratives worked to 'obfuscate the underlying causes of social problems while also elevating the maternal role of caregiver to unreachable heights.

Problems in society and in individuals immediately can be traced back to an unloving maternal presence, rather than to any number of other possible causes' (2011, p. 43). It's an argument that resonates with Latham's construction of 'good' suburban mothers who love their children versus inner-city mothers who 'demonise' children and therefore risk damaging them. As Kenix writes: 'Mothers are heralded as the saviours of our society, while also bearing the brunt of responsibility for so many social ills' (2011, p. 43).

Latham's characterisation of the suburbs as a utopian place of love and emotion, away from the alienating but necessary human distortions of work and commerce, is strikingly at one with the mythology of family life that Australia, according to Summers (1975), was founded upon. The middle-class notion of family was adopted more readily in Australia than it was in Britain, writes Summers, and from the 1840s onwards 'the idea that the bourgeois family was the ideal way for men and women to reproduce was shared by ruling class and immigrants alike' (1975, p. 295). As Summers observes, immigration policy favoured married couples and young people, meanwhile strong economic growth and plentiful housing – young families could purchase their own detached cottages for exclusive use – as well as higher wages for the working man in comparison to Britain, made pursuit of middle-class family life possible in a way it hadn't been at home (1975, p. 307):

conditions⁴⁴ in colonial Australia enabled working-class individuals and families to adopt the bourgeois family as their lifestyle... Wages were high enough for a man to be able to support his wife who needed no longer slave in factory or mill but could remain at home, engaging in the never-before-experienced task of having an entire house to care for, and babies – who thrived instead of dying in their first year – to look after.

Women in Australia had a higher overall marriage rate than women in Britain in mid-nineteenth century (Summers 1975, p. 306) and their special role as mothers was bolstered by ‘kindergarten unions and mothers clubs’ established by middle-class women in slums to instil ‘middle-class attitudes to child-care and family living’, (1975, p. 336). Thus motherhood became a ‘special vocation which required special, scientific training’ to prepare women for their central role in their children’s educational, civic and spiritual development (1975, p. 377). Summers goes on to outline how, as in America, Australia saw a ‘reaffirmation of “the family” ideology in the immediate post-war period’ (1975, p. 426): Australia’s birthrate rose spectacularly in the 1940s, large estates of new housing grew up in the suburbs, and ‘Family life and suburban life quickly became synonymous and were idealized as the most desirable way to live and the best environment for raising children.’ Echoing the processes Friedan outlined in *TFM*, Summers’ 1975 text describes how, by the end of the 1960s, Australian women’s magazines focussed on recipes and child raising, and paid ‘scant attention’ to ‘political issues of relevance to women – such as abortion law reform, equal pay, child care, equality with men in the workforce and in society generally’ (1975, p. 438). And, as Friedan argued of the US in relation to women’s magazines, Summers argued that Australian popular magazines had ‘as their principal *raison d’être* the codification and constant updating of femininity’ (1975, p. 239).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Summers elsewhere notes that unions focussed on the eight-hour day, male wages and rights and the male vote (1975, pp. 310-311)

⁴⁵ The Summers’ quotation continues like an echo of Friedan’s critique of the feminine mystique, updated with an Australian accent and a decade delayed: ‘By consulting these magazines women can gain a pretty good idea of how to behave and dress and whatever else is deemed to be consonant with or compulsory to being a woman.’

Latham echoes the pro-nuclear family ideology Summers wrote about 40 years ago: the belief that ‘women’s separate and unequal position is “natural” and [therefore] feminists are trying to tamper with something which has divine sanction’ (1975, p. 250). When Summers adds that ‘Feminism itself is dismissed by men as a trite and unnecessary ideology’, she could be referring to Latham’s dismissal of contemporary feminism as a ‘hoax’ and a ‘psychoneurotic disorder’ (2014a).

It would be tempting to disregard Latham’s comments as outlier views, representing a barely accepted, archaic position about women and feminism. But (as briefly mentioned in chapter 2) his column’s popularity, as well as the response to his resignation from the *AFR*, indicate otherwise. In a non-bylined *AFR* article (Staff Reporters, 2015) that outlined the supposed reasons for Latham’s departure from the paper, Latham was favourably described as having ‘controversially covered social issues from a self-styled western Sydney perspective, including sharp critiques of feminism, the medicalisation of mental illness and anti-domestic violence campaigns’. The article couched a defence of Latham’s writing in terms of free speech: it noted that *AFR* editor Michael Stutchbury⁴⁶ has ‘defended the *Financial Review*’s right, and even duty, to publish provocative opinions that some might find offensive, as this was a hallmark of a vibrant democracy’,⁴⁷ and quoted John Roskam, executive director of the right-wing think tank the Institute of Public Affairs, remarking that Latham’s resignation meant the public debate had gone ‘beyond creeping political correctness to outright authoritarianism’.

⁴⁶ Quoting Mr Stutchbury’s comments regarding Latham, the *AFR* article continues: ‘No person or idea should be out of bounds for criticism because that would prevent them from being properly tested by the marketplace of free speech.’

⁴⁷ Five months later, when the *Age* was reported as intending to reprise Latham’s column, a similar appeal to the free circulation of ideas was reported to have been called upon by the then *Age* editor, Andrew Holden, in a staff meeting (Robin, M. 2016). ‘It’s understood in the meeting, Holden initially defended Latham’s writing and the questions it raises.’

Noted left wing *Crikey* columnist Guy Rundle (2015), in a similar vein, wrote on Latham's resignation that "The real shame [that he is gone] was that some of the things Latham was saying needed to be said...a certain strand of feminism has become special pleading.' Here, Rundle seemed to accept Latham's conflation of Freedman and Pryor with a distorted form of feminism. When Rundle added that 'depression narratives have started to entrench the very narcissism they are produced by' he also implied that women who talk about the difficulties of juggling motherhood, work and study are necessarily indulgent, narcissistic and immature. Lying behind all these quotes appears to be an assumption that feminism's gains are now so advanced, so taken-for-granted, that feminism must now be subjected to the level playing field of liberal democracy's free speech: the vilification of feminist writers is re-framed as healthy public debate.

McRobbie writes that one feature of postfeminism – which she defines as the notion that feminism, whilst accepted, is both complete and therefore repudiated – is the technique of provoking 'feminist condemnation as a means of generating publicity' (2004, p. 259). We can see this phenomenon in the pile-on by Latham and his (albeit sometimes reluctant) barrackers who queued for a moment in the feminism-knocking ring. As Walters and Harrison note, and as this chapter has argued, representations of motherhood are not static or simple: they are places where 'a shifting site of congealed anxieties and unacknowledged resentment...is never far from the surface' (2014, p. 38). And aberrant mothering, they point out, 'is always a double-edged sword; while it provides a respite from the virgin/whore dichotomies it also can be easily morphed into a new version of that tired classic "blame the mother"' (2014, p. 51).

Conclusion | Selling feminism or selling *out* feminism?

Reading this thesis can be like flicking through the pages of a lenticular picture book. Depending on the angle from which we observe these media events, and the particular turn in the story we are contemplating, we can see images and representations of women, mothers and feminism that appear contradictory and ambiguous, feminist and post-feminist, normative and aberrant. At one moment we see a feminism that is cheerfully progressive and hopeful, the next moment we see a feminism co-opted by neoliberalism. We can see images of mothering that are both refreshingly updated and predictably traditional. The sign of motherhood is, as Buchanan writes, ‘contextually defined, contingent, and changeable, its associations forever in flux rather than fixed’ (2013, p. xix). And it is this very flux, she notes, that means ‘maternal rhetorics...may be used to promote conservative, progressive, or feminist ends, a capacity that is important to remember in light of critiques holding that they invariably perpetuate the status quo’ (2013, p. 22).

In chapter 1, I argued that both Pryor’s and Freedman’s stories represent an updated form of second-wave feminism’s consciousness raising; by relating personal stories about the difficulties of managing mothering and work, these texts allowed readers to experience relief and identification by presenting experiences and situations that mirrored their own lives. In chapter 2, I argued the first-person storytelling genre has a history of critical diminishment of women who tell personal stories: women writing about their lives in mainstream media formats risk being subjected to harsh criticism. I also contrasted Pryor’s and Freedman’s use of the first person voice with the way their chief critic, Mark Latham, used the first-person voice. In chapter 3 I argued that in their emphasis on individual choice, individual empowerment and *personal* transformation, rather than *social* transformation, and their construction of a self that is entrepreneurial, constantly self-monitoring and making good choices, Pryor’s and Freedman’s texts align with neoliberal ideologies and even postfeminist ideologies. In chapter 4, I suggested

these texts could also challenge normative parenting by representing images of mothers who put themselves first, and who are, at times, indifferent to idealised expectations of ‘good’ mothering. I also considered discourses of the good mother that continue to circulate in Australia.

Key lessons

While I have not settled on any one ‘correct’ viewing position for this event, my analysis does lead me to more pessimistic conclusions about the state of feminism and gender debates in the mediasphere than a feminist theorist might hope for. Though small, these two case studies suggest that women telling personal stories in the mainstream media can come at a huge personal and political cost. The questioning by commentators of not just individual women’s parenting and career choices, but the related, and extraneous, criticism of feminists and feminism, can be seen as the logical conclusion of a regressive strain of thinking about women and mothers that has proved strikingly resilient in Australian discourses. As no other than the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott said on Mother’s Day 2015 (Abbott 2015), when announcing the Barnardos Mother of the Year:

A mother is someone who never puts herself first. A mother is someone who wants the best for everyone except herself and that is the quality of selflessness that marks out motherhood and which we celebrate today.

The case study described in this thesis suggests the abuse and vilification of women and mothers online is not simply the result of isolated incidents and outlier individuals producing unacceptable discourses: Abbott’s comments here, and the commensurate views about women and mothers Latham expressed in his own columns and tweets, suggests personal abuse directed at female writers is often simply the extreme manifestation of stubbornly residual and oppressively normative ideologies about mothers and women. And they are views and ideologies that are both sanctioned by newspaper editors and prime ministers, and justified by commentators in terms of ‘free speech’.

A clear-sighted analysis must also consider what is, arguably, third-wave feminism's dominant speaking mode. Where for second-wave feminist journalists such as Friedan and Summers the personal story was a *starting* point, for feminist journalists such as Freedman and Pryor the personal story is, oftentimes, the *whole* point. Third-wave feminism's strength – its unwillingness to speak for others in eschewing universalism, and its focus on personal empowerment – is also, I contend, its weakness. Third-wave feminism's personalising approach means it all too frequently forfeits the power to make any larger political or social claims. And when individual problems become the responsibility of each individual to solve, it's a short step for anti-feminist rhetoric to thus blame individuals for any difficulties they might experience.

Pryor's and Freedman's texts suggest the solutions for managing conflicts between public and private responsibilities lie in personal transformation. The need for social or male change is relegated to the background. Worse, their apparent failures as mothers, and the supposed problem of feminism, is subsequently foregrounded by critics. This is not to suggest that in a feminist utopia mental illness would not exist. But it is to suggest a feminist response to mental illness would not be to first ask (or *only* ask) what the individual can do to fix herself; a feminist response would also ask what in the individual's social world might be contributing to her situation. Furthermore, this small case study suggests that even when women speak personally in the media to relay an individual story, commentators are prone to reframe their speaking position as a feminist one – and a distorting, unattractive version of feminism at that. Feminist writers would therefore be advised to articulate and frame their *preferred* version of feminism – before it is done for them.

While academic texts, as Friedman (2013, pp. 3-4) notes, can't provide the consolation and relief personal stories provide, it would be fair to say that third-wave feminist journalists can sometimes forget the lessons of second-wave feminism: placing personal stories in the wider context of analysis, data, evidence, and sociological analysis. This is not to say this second-wave

style of writing does not persist in contemporary discourse – Annabel Crabb, author of the recent, though very second-wave-like book *The Wife Drought* (2014a) wrote one of the most coherent (and readable) responses to Latham’s attack, calling for men to tell their own transformative househusband stories – for the ‘new stay-at-home-man’ to come out of the closet.

Recuperating *The Feminine Mystique*

Women’s failure to cope with their multiple public and private responsibilities might lead some to argue (as Latham did) one of second-wave feminism’s key projects – women’s right to equality in the public sphere – was misguided. But I would argue, instead, the often unreasonable pressure on women to successfully manage private and public responsibilities suggests that we need to re-read and incorporate some of the more radical messages that can be detected in a text such as *The Feminist Mystique*. A careful rereading of Friedan (see particularly 2013, pp. 2-22) would see she pre-empted contemporary feminist critiques of the intensification and professionalisation of parenting, of over-organised, over-scheduled children’s lives; and she warned about the illusions of choice, particularly for women, and especially when that choice is framed as consumer choice and the ‘freedom’ to perform normative versions of scripted femininity. Although in recent decades feminists have criticised Friedan for representing the accommodating, liberal feminism of ‘white, middle class-women’ (for example, Hayden and Hallstein 2010, p. xxi) *TFM* constantly critiques the requirement that women adjust to society (Friedan uses the word ‘adjustment’ constantly and critically). She reserved particular scorn for Freud, who was ‘concerned not with changing society but in helping man, and woman, adjust to it’ (2013, p. 129). Friedan calls, in her penultimate chapter ‘The Forfeited Self’, for individuals to live self-actualised lives, shaping the future and realising one’s full human potential (2013, p. 373-406). And although it might seem utopian now, in her words one can read echoes of Marx’s notion of unalienated labour. While the causes of mental illness are clearly complex and multiple,

I think it is worth revisiting Friedan's prognosis. In 1963 she warned that the frustration of a woman's 'individual abilities could result in neurosis' (2013, pp. 378):

Her anxiety can be soothed by therapy, or tranquilized by pills or evaded temporarily by busy-work. But her unease, her desperation, is nonetheless a warning that her human existence is in danger, even though she has found fulfillment, according to the tenets of the feminine mystique, as a wife and mother.

Do we now need to consider whether women and mothers could be equally frustrated from being subjected to too *many* expectations?

Areas for further investigation

The emergence and popularity of amateur bloggers writing personally has, I would suggest, seen the mainstream news media respond by incorporating some of the features of the successful online blogger, while also harking back to this magazine tradition of personal storytelling. The feminisation of the media Lumby identified two decades ago (1994) appears to have morphed once more, with major media companies developing online sites aimed at female readers. Freedman's Debrief Daily, as well as Daily Life (Fairfax Media), and Rendezview (News Limited) are sites that combine *feminised* media (with stories about cooking, childrearing, relationships and fashion that appear to directly inherit the tradition of women's magazines) with a *feminist* sensibility (with articles on domestic violence, the gender pay gap and women on corporate boards). It's a fusion that I suggest leads these sites to deliver an often contradictory message about gender and feminism. I referred in the introduction to the contradictions and tensions that exist for feminist journalists: feminist theory has identified the media industries as a place where many sexist myths and images are produced, yet feminist journalists have used the media's communication and storytelling tools for feminist ends. I have touched on this question throughout this thesis, and a detailed study of these new female-focussed sites is a research topic that I believe offers a productive area for further investigation.

Freedman's Debrief Daily site, for example, appears at first glance to exemplify McRobbie's and Gill and Scharff's neoliberal and postfeminist subject – offering, as it does, a smorgasbord of areas for readers to monitor and improve their lives and fashion their selves: the website's home page is divided into sections including 'lifestyle', 'health', 'career', 'finance', 'relationships', 'reinvention', 'beauty and style', 'inspiration' and 'more'. The site mixes news with personal stories and advice articles, often within the framework of the author's personal experiences. Friedan critically listed the contents page of an early 1960s edition of the women's magazine *McCall's* as an example of how the feminine mystique was created (2013, pp. 25-26), and it's instructive to see that Debrief Daily carried almost directly parallel articles in 2015. In *McCall's* 1960s content page Friedan notes: 'A lead article on increasing baldness in women...an article on the Duke and Duchess of Windsor...and an article titled "An Encyclopedic Approach to Finding a Second Husband"'. In 2015 Debrief Daily, meanwhile, carried articles titled: 'Please Explain: Why does women's hair thin out?', 'The newest Princess has a name – and it is beautiful' and 'The four reasons why second marriages are happier marriages'. While Friedan mocks the modern housewife's obsession with 'clean sheets twice a week' (2013, p. 286), in 2015 Debrief Daily published (seemingly without irony) an article, 'This is how often you should wash your sheets', which included advice from 'cleaning experts'.

Women's magazines are 'mass vehicles for inducing women to spend money' wrote Summers (1975, p. 436). The advertising-reliant economic model of women's online sites (one that works through identifying problems in all areas of life, and providing solutions through products and services advertised, alongside articles replete with advice) means the same conclusion must be reached about a site such as Debrief Daily. It's this model (combined with the triumph of neoliberal ideologies) that I argue can, in part, explain the emergence of an anaemic version of feminism in Australia this small case study suggests. This thesis also suggests the emergence of a particular strain of feminism built on the appeal of the confessional-style narrative story. As a

recent New Republic article (Zarum 2015) argues, the personal story has reached new confessional heights in today's online media world: revealing one's most personal, painful and shameful stories has become a tried and tested way for young aspiring female writers to kickstart a career. This brings to mind the scene in Episode 9 of *Girls* Season 2, where aspiring writer Hannah is pressed by her editor to reveal increasingly personal and shocking stories to make her book commercial. *Slate's* Laura Bennett (2015) calls it the 'first-person industrial complex'. And while this speaking mode is clearly often an offspring of second-wave feminism's consciousness raising tradition, it is a child whose maternal DNA is sometimes difficult to discern.

While Mia Freedman's anxiety story has some parallels with the consciousness raising tradition of second-wave feminism, Freedman's use of the personal story also reflects McRobbie's observation that feminism is now 'a heavily named and signed activity' (2013, p. 133). Furthermore, Freedman's story, published to coincide with the launch of her site Debrief Daily, demonstrates how star feminists have now recruited the personal story as a marketing device. Freedman's feminism, it seems, invites you to consume her story, her brand and, finally, a drug she recommends literally consuming: anxiety is 'a problem that can be fixed' she writes, after outlining her medication regime: 'I take Lexapro every day and it has changed my life'. As I write the final pages of this thesis, I note Daily Life has now published its own twin to Freedman's anxiety tale, 'Why returning to anti-depressants was an empowering choice' (Nguyen 2016).

If sites such as Freedman's Debrief Daily, and her competitors such as Daily Life, are indeed at the 'epicentre of the mainstream Australian women's movement' (Hooper 2014), then the feminist scholar must be interested in how often they are selling feminism, and how often they are selling *out* feminism. Understanding how personal stories are told and circulate is one of the keys to answering this question; in other words, do these sites and stories represent an updated form of feminism, or just an updated version of the feminine mystique?

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