The escalating price of motherhood: Aesthetic labour in popular representations of 'stay-at-home' mothers

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ABSTRACT

Situated in debates on the visibility of the maternal in contemporary neoliberal culture, this chapter focuses on the construction of the 'stay-at-home' mother (SAHM) in popular representations. We look critically at the construction of celebrity Jools Oliver and fictional character Bridget Jones (Fielding, 2013), to show how aesthetic labour has become a central feature demanded of the good SAHM, while it is simultaneously naturalised, marginalised and masked. We argue that the hiding of aesthetic labour functions to support SAHMs' construction as dependent and domestic carers, rather than active aesthetic and maternal labourers. Thus, we conclude, contemporary representations inscribe the SAHM into the realm of 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015) through her individualized, autonomous, 'free' choosing to exercise aesthetic labour and body self-disciplining, and collude in its masking.

Introduction

The devaluation of domestic, reproductive, emotional and maternal labour has been extensively critiqued by feminist scholars and activists. Women's domestic labour is normalised as 'housework', considered to have no material or economic recognition (Federici, 2012), and childrearing and looking after the home are still often equated with 'doing nothing' (Crittenden, 2010). Many have argued that cultural and media representations play a constitutive role in normalising the devaluation and thus exploitation of women's productive and reproductive labour. The media legitimize the continuing lack of social, political and economic recognition and reward of motherhood by symbolically naturalizing and masking maternal labour, e.g. by representing mothers' work as 'natural' and a product of intrinsic maternal love (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Building on this scholarship about the cultural construction of maternity, in this chapter we highlight

aesthetic labour as a new(ly) added, previously unrecognised dimension of contemporary maternal labour that has emerged under neoliberalism.

In contemporary popular representations the 'good mother' is frequently articulated through, and celebrated and praised for, her sexually attractive look (e.g. Lachover, 2013; Littler, 2013; Tyler 2011). As noted by Jo Littler (2013: 229): "now mothers themselves are encouraged to look 'hot'". However, we would argue that the immense *labour* required for this idealised maternal image is largely masked; the beauty *practices* involving self-surveillance, self-disciplining and self-blame underpinning a 'hot' look are denied.

Our analysis focuses on the middle-class 'stay-at-home mother' (hereafter SAHM), a maternal figure who, supposedly, is outside the neoliberal sexual contract (McRobbie, 2009) which requires women to perform successful femininities simultaneously, as mothers and economic labourers and/or consumers. The SAHM's counterpart, the 'career mother' who participates in the workforce, is implied to invest in her appearance and aspire to normative beauty and active femininity (manifested in the glamorous images of attractive career women who successfully combine a job with motherhood). This contrasts with many popular representations depicting the SAHM's position outside the labour market, and her prime (perhaps exclusive) association with the domestic sphere which seemingly 'exempts' her from the demand to perform sexuality. The SAHM is supposedly not upheld by neoliberal demands of aesthetic labour and performance of attractive sexual appearance.

However, the following analysis shows that in some current popular representations the 'good' SAHM is required simultaneously to be a carer *and* to engage in intense aesthetic labour, which involves the exercise of bodily and beauty disciplining practices. Yet both the maternal labour of caring – which historically has been concealed and unrecognised – *and* the intense aesthetic labour she is now demanded to perform, are marginalised, obscured and denied.

We start by briefly contextualising the remarkable visibility of the maternal in contemporary neoliberal media and culture in existing research, focusing on the construction of the SAHM. We then present our study of popular representations

of SAHMs, based on two examples of SAHM figures: Jools Oliver and Bridget Jones. Our analysis highlights how aesthetic labour has become a central, even constitutive, feature of the good SAHM, and, while strongly demanded of SAHMs, is simultaneously masked. Thus, we conclude, echoing Ann Crittenden (2010), that aesthetic labour is now part of the endlessly rising and heavy 'price of motherhood'.

Maternity, neoliberalism and aesthetic labour

Images of glamorous working mothers have come to typify the normative ideal of the woman who smoothly and successfully combines paid labour and maternal labour. Endlessly replicated in images of working mothers, most notably in women's magazines and advertisements, "the woman with the flying hair" (Hochschild, 1989: 1), is a (often white, middle-class, heterosexual) woman whose appearance connotes confidence, empowerment and a sense of liberation (Gill & Orgad, 2015; Lachover, 2013). Working on one's appearance has become a requirement for women to successfully combine motherhood and a career (see Introduction to this collection). Yet, as Hochschild (1989: 59-60) observed some time ago, this image hides the "intricate webs of tensions, and the huge, hidden emotional cost to women, men, and children of having to manage inequality". This image obscures another fundamental aspect which has received prominence (and attracted scholarly scrutiny) more recently, namely, the pervasiveness of aesthetic labour in women's lives.

A growing body of scholarship on maternity under neoliberalism interrogates the incorporation, intensification and legitimation of aesthetic labour into maternal subjectivities (e.g. Allen and Taylor, 2012; Boyer, 2014; Ekinsmyth, 2013). Mediated figures such as the 'yummy mummy' (Littler, 2013) or 'pregnant beauty' (Tyler, 2011) have emerged recently, emphasising how maternal identities are increasingly reliant upon and articulated through beauty practices and body projects such as dieting, exercise and cosmetic surgery (e.g. Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010). Such practices are deeply entrenched in self-surveillance, self-regulation and "disciplinary neoliberalism" (Gill, 1995),

underscored by the commodification of maternity under neoliberalism (Tyler, 2011).

However, less scholarship explores how maternal subjects considered 'outside' of the labour market by 'choice' are shaped and affected by the demands of aesthetic labour. On the one hand, unlike her counterpart, the SAHM seemingly is outside the new sexual contract. She has 'opted out' (or never entered) the labour market, and her femininity relies exclusively on and is articulated through her role as carer. Indeed, the figure of the SAHM embodies the two fundamental prohibitions that 'good mothering' is often predicated in western popular representations: sexuality and work outside the home (Danuta and Harrison, 2014). On the other hand, the SAHM differs from the traditional housewife due to her distinct positioning as a postfeminist neoliberal figure: "she is not a productive labourer contributing directly to the neoliberal economy, yet she embodies the […] values of choice, agency, individualization and female liberation" (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015). Specifically, SAHMs' decisions to leave paid employment are depicted mostly as personal empowering choices, with the related barriers, constraints or regrets barely mentioned (Kuperberg and Stone, 2008; Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015). It is within this positioning, and the SAHM's embodiment as a postfeminist neoliberal figure, that aesthetic labour comes to play a constitutive (but simultaneously masked) role in her construction.

Popular representations of SAHMs

We examine the construction of the SAHM figure in popular culture – a key site where ideas, fantasies and judgements about femininity and maternity are articulated, often becoming "new forms of common sense" (McRobbie, 2009: 33; Littler, 2013). Specifically, we analyse two SAHM examples in popular media: celebrity Jools Oliver and the literary character Bridget Jones in *Mad About The Boy* (Fielding, 2013). Our choice of examples was informed by a content analysis of news media representations of SAHMs (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015), which examined press coverage of SAHMs in UK newspapers during recession and post-recession (2008-2013). Situated in debates on mediated constructions

of maternal femininities, postfeminism and neoliberalism, we explored whether the depiction of SAHMs reflects and reinforces neoliberalism's and postfeminism's entangled embrace of market values and emphasis on economic productivity through participation in the labour force, and consequently critiques SAHMs' 'opting out' and return to the domestic setting as attacking market productivity and capitalism. Contra to the expectation that the SAHM figure would be derided and denigrated for her absence from the workforce, we found that the SAHM is represented as "a largely positive figure, whose 'choice' is valued, recognized and endorsed, including by government (as long as she is middle-class and not dependent on benefits)" (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015: 15). This emphasis on SAHMs' decision as a private choice obscures the larger societal, political and economic explanations of SAHMs' experiences and enables their husbands' economic ultra-productivity, naturalising and re-securing gender inequality.

Our focus in this chapter on Jools Oliver and Bridget Jones, illustrates the features of the white middle-class SAHM we identified in the content analysis: highly individualized, agentic and embodying personal and positive choice through stay-at-home motherhood. Developing this analysis, in what follows we critically unpack how the SAHM's maternal femininity – and its coupling with notions of agency, choice, individualisation and liberation - is predicated on naturalizing and masking her maternal labour.

Performing and masking aesthetic/maternal labour

Jools Oliver: The successful SAHM

Celebrity Jools Oliver is an exemplary figure of a SAHM whose successful maternal femininity is predicated on her (constructed) ability to simultaneously perform the role of a caring mother outside the labour market, with being very attractive physically according to the heteronormative definitions of beauty. Jools is constructed across various popular representations as one half of the celebrity couple, Jamie and Jools Oliver. The couple began to occupy the media spotlight when Jamie became a celebrity chef through the UK television cookery programme, *The Naked Chef* (1999-2001). Since then the Olivers have retained a

consistent presence in the media spotlight. Jamie's media narrative is emphasised as one of humble, working-class Essex roots, which he has transcended through his talents as a chef, sheer determination and hard graft to become a celebrity. Like celebrities more generally (see Littler, 2004), the Olivers occupy a neoliberal vision of individualisation, meritocracy and social mobility, and represent the benefits of the traditional nuclear family and familial harmony.

Whilst Jamie's media persona is largely constructed through his success as a celebrity chef, television personality and health and food advisor, Jools' celebrity persona rests on, and is constituted in relation to, her role as a wife to Jamie, and mother to their four children. The repetitive narrative that is told across media sites is of Jools having been a model prior to meeting Jamie, and subsequently deciding to be a wife and SAHM. Jools was also employed as a television researcher, but this role receives little attention in her mediated representations. Her subjectivity is continually constructed in relation to the aesthetic, maternal or domestic, but the actual labour associated with these aspects is rarely made visible.

Jools is preened to perfection in public appearances and media interviews, the wife and mother who juggles responsibilities, but has not a hair out of place, and never displays a drop of sweat or remnants of baby vomit. The ex-model glides seamlessly and consistently between a slim pre-, during and post-natal body showing no markers of the huge labour required to achieve this appearance. Her beauty practices and fitness regimes are marginalised and barely commented on, as illustrated by her claim of just using organic face wash and moisturiser (Oliver in Everrett, 2012). She is positioned as simultaneously 'naturally' glamorous and sexual, and wholesomely motherly and domestic. The masking of the aesthetic labour needed to achieve this celebrity image is further enabled by the visual construction of her figure through a retro and austerity type aesthetic. The marketing for Jools' Mothercare clothing range, Little Bird, plays upon the notion that her 'paired down' look and 'ordinary' angle of her celebrity persona, are effortless, usual, waking states. Photos taken through a Vaseline-smeared, Instagram-like frame, muted colours, and homemaking set-ups reinforce a

'smooth' and soft image of Jools as a 'natural' feminine wife and mother, blurring the labour this image underpins. This echoes postfeminist recessionary media culture, whereby "conspicuous consumption accommodates a modesty that respects the economic times", creating social distinctions and moral consumer citizenship (Nathanson, 2014: 140). On the very few occasions when her 'bodywork' is addressed, Jools is constructed as not only blessed with "good genes" and "metabolism" but also as refusing to partake in "all this dieting rubbish" (D'Souza, 2015). Her daily exercise is constructed as being *not* about aesthetics, but rather about health and strength.

The masking of Jools' aesthetic labour is coupled with the naturalization of her maternal labour, exemplified by her repeated self-account of a woman who "always knew" she "wanted the babies, the baking and the roses round the door" (Oliver, 2006: np). Crucially, Jools' role as wife and mother is constructed as an active choice. She comes into being in the media spotlight through a stated 'natural' calling to be a SAHM and to pursue motherhood as a career and, consequently, has not "had a lie-in for about ten years" (Oliver in *The Daily Mail*, 2012). The decision to be a SAHM is represented as necessary and ultimately Jools' choice, naturalising her maternity as an individual, instinctive life-calling, driven by 'natural' and 'innate' maternal feelings. She is constructed as always knowing that she "didn't want a career" and was "uncomfortable" in previous jobs, whereas now she is "comfortable being a mum" (Oliver in Ford-Rojas, 2012). Jools is represented as hovering in the wings to willingly support and complement her husband as they combine to form the image of the harmonious celebrity couple and nuclear family. She is depicted as dependent on her husband, Jamie, while his persona can stand alone as celebrity, chef or father. By contrast, Jools' celebrity is constructed exclusively through the prism of being an ex-model turned wife and mother. This construction, compounded by the rhetoric of choice, diffuses any tensions and the price that this 'choice' may entail.

Jools' lack of career gumption is sometimes represented as problematic between the couple:

> [Jools] hasn't got a mission, she just wants to be married to someone she loves and have a family and that's it, end of story. […] It baffled me for ages, I almost felt she had a part of her life missing, then I thought, it's sweet and quite refreshing (Sawyer, 2002)

In this extract, Jools' choice initially is presented as difficult but then as agentic, courageous and refreshing. She is constructed as shunning the postfeminist dictates of contemporary society for middle-class mothers to 'have it all'. In turn, staying at home comes to signify Jools' difference, novelty and uniqueness, despite this role having a substantial history in relation to the gendering of labour. Thus, Jools' representation as a SAHM would seem to defy the 'new sexual contract' (McRobbie, 2009). She is constructed in opposition to postfeminist maternal figures that come into being through the emphasis on their roles as both economic labourers/consumers *and* carers (Allen and Taylor, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2013; Littler, 2013).

In a postfeminist twist, therefore, Jools simultaneously is represented through active femininity and an attractive appearance, and constructed as a dependable wife and mother. Jools has capitalised upon her celebrity status as a SAHM to write children's books and design children's clothing lines that have become best-sellers for Mothercare. Yet, her maternal entrepreneurialism is constructed as only undertaken in her spare time and as 'small' sideline projects. Thus, Jools' role as an economic labourer is totally diminished, whilst the maternal and domestic are upheld as her main roles.

In sum, Jools' maternal and feminine body are the focus and site of her celebrity persona, her body and physical femininity are foregrounded in her mediated representations. Her figure as a SAHM and wife to Jamie underscores stereotypically feminine maternal and aesthetic roles to define her subjectivity. However, neither the labour these roles involve, nor the labour she performs which is considered socially to be economic (researcher, writer, designer) are acknowledged or recognised. Her sexual appearance and entrepreneurial subjectivity work to substitute Jools' 'lack' of overt economic labouring, as well as her presented lack of drive to forge a career separate from her stated calling

as wife or mother. Moreover, the aesthetic labour that is necessary to be the 'yummy mummy' she is, and the economic labour, emerges as 'naturally' constitutive of her persona, rather than the result of intense aesthetic and entrepreneurial labour.

Bridget Jones: The failing SAHM

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones: Mad about the Boy* casts the postfeminist zeitgeist 20 years on from her 'girly' singleton days as a SAHM. Bridget Jones is now a 51-year-old widow and mother to two small children, residing in a middle-class North London neighbourhood. Bridget recounts her experiences in the familiar diary form and writing style of her early diaries (e.g. daily statistics) enhanced by her bemused experimentation with new media technologies like Twitter. She writes about her emergence from grief over her husband Darcy's death four years previously, her everyday struggles as a mother, and her consequent return to dating.

Darcy left Bridget financially secure, with no financial need to return to the workforce and she is represented as neither willing nor fit to do so. Her capacity to be an economic labourer is ridiculed through various grotesque meetings with the potential film production company that considers buying her contemporary adaptation of *Hedda Gabler*. These meetings specifically highlight the 'clashes' between Bridget's maternal identity and her (vaguely aspired to) professional identity. Bridget is never properly prepared for or focused during her meetings with the production team, almost always because she is preoccupied with issues related to her kids and their school.

Mothering is a new important object of Bridget's self-governing. The "disciplinary neoliberalism" (Gill, 1995) that in her 20s focused on self-monitoring of her calorific intake, fluctuating weight and romantic relationships now extends to her maternal practices through Twitter and numerous parenting self-help books whose expert advice she tries to follow. Bridget constantly demands of herself and feels that she is being demanded by others (her mother, her children, other parents, her children's teachers, experts) to be a 'good

mother'. This demand is accentuated and legitimized by her 'stay-at-home' status. Bridget is not in paid employment and, thus, has no 'real' career to excuse anything but 'perfect' mothering. When her son's teacher criticises her for neglecting his homework and assigning greater importance to "sitting in the hairdresser's" (Fielding, 2013: 233), echoing the stereotypical image of the lazy self-indulgent SAHM who deals with her 'excess' time by working on her appearance, Bridget defensively explains: "I am a professional woman and am writing an updating of Hedda Gabbler by Anton Chekhov" (ibid.). Thus, Bridget marginalises her investment in and concern with her appearance, to highlight her focus with the 'important' matter: her professional identity.

But Bridget fails continuously. She and the readers know that rather than focusing seriously on her professional career, she has been procrastinating, working on her improbable screenplay and thinking about her toyboy, Roxter. When she is about to give a presentation after proudly describing her play as a "feminist piece" (221) she opens her laptop to reveal a girly homepage of Princess Bride Dress Up – a mark of her two incompatible worlds: career and mothering - in both of which she repeatedly fails. Thus, while Bridget's ability to be an economic labourer is deeply questioned, so is her ability to adequately perform her mothering role. She aspires to be a 'perfect mother' (134), but consistent with her younger incompetent self, Bridget makes a clumsy mother, finding herself in endless comical situations related to parenting and schooling.

On the one hand, Bridget recognizes the substantial labour involved in being a single SAHM. She reports in her diary on thoughts and moments that do not normally enter the dominant highly idealised 'Mommy Myth' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004), such as exhaustion, annoyance and frustration with childcare. Bombarded by her children's relentless morning demands, she writes: "Suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion and desire to read paper in echoing silence. […] Why can't everyone just FUCKING SHUT UP AND LET ME READ THE PAPERS?" (Fielding, 2013: 87-8). Simultaneously, she repeatedly rehearses to herself that her children must come first (Fielding, 2013: 158) and she should not focus on men (133), puncturing the "masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 6) that mothers are expected to adopt. Writing

from a maternal perspective, in such a way that does not idealise, silence or denigrate the maternal, but rather attends to the mundane, messy realities and frustrations of motherhood, may contribute to complicating dominant maternal narratives (see Baraitser, 2009). Thus, the character of 51-year-old Bridget might be argued to contribute to challenging the stronghold of the 'perfect mother' myth by voicing the difficulties and frustrations of maternal experience and by making visible the huge labour that mothering involves.

On the other hand, this recognition is constantly diffused and undermined. The comic, satirical features of Bridget's chaotic and clumsy parenting mask the immense labour demanded by and involved in single stay-at-home motherhood. Amusing situations, such as having to wash and change her children's diarrhoea and vomit-soaked sheets, largely obscure the physical and emotional work Bridget's mothering entails. They also diffuse the very painful feelings of self-blame and self-hate that she sometimes experiences as a mother, exemplified as she writes: "Everything is completely intolerable, I hate myself, I'm a rubbish mother" (Fielding, 2013: 135).

Recognition of Bridget's maternal labour is further obfuscated by her depiction as desperately dependent on her *au pair* to manage herself and her kids, from doing the daily school run to looking after sick children – 'simple' and 'basic' tasks that Bridget is constructed as too inept (and lazy) to do alone. Bridget's self-mocking and self-disparaging of her poor performance in these maternal tasks reinforce the marginalization and misrecognition of the significant labour they involve.

Importantly, Bridget's self-beratement, and others' judgements of her 'poor mothering', rely on oppositional figures of the 'perfect mother', against which such judgements are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) made. Specifically, it is the SAHM mediated figure, such as Jools Oliver's, that is evoked: not only is she the perfect SAHM who has an absent partner and who (seemingly) has no childcare help, Jools (and similar SAHM figures) is also the sexual 'perfect body' model whose images Bridget frustratedly consumes in magazines. The perfect sexual SAHM is not only mediated; there is 'perfect Nicolette', a mother in

Bridget's son's class, who constitutes an important reference point in the book (the stereotypical 'yummy mummy') against which Bridget measures herself: "the Class Mother (perfect house, perfect husband, perfect children) […] perfectly dressed and perfectly blow-dried with a perfect gigantic handbag" (Fielding, 2013: 4-5).

Just like 20 years ago, now in the shadow of these successful maternal feminine figures, Bridget aspires to "*work on herself*" (Gill, 2007: 227, original emphases). Her body is still presented as equally (if not more of) a fundamental source of her feminine identity. Twenty years wiser, struggling to control her unruly maternal body, Bridget recognises the acute oppressiveness of the unattainable and untenable beauty standards which women are demanded to meet. She questions: "Why are bodies so difficult to manage?", stressing that bodies "splurge fat unless you, like, STARVE yourself", subsequently listing 13 high-calorie foods she has consumed before noon and concluding: "Put that in your pipe and smoke it, society!" (Fielding, 2013: 58-9).

Yet Bridget is depicted as unable *not* to surrender to a sisyphic body project to re-attain "her sense of sexual self" (Fielding, 2013: 33). She constantly self-monitors and struggles to discipline her body's shape and size, through endless dieting, physical exercise and reduction of alcohol intake. Echoing the (Christian) 'prohibition' on sexuality as underpinning 'good mothering' (Danuta and Harrison, 2014; Littler, 2013), Bridget is temporarily resolute about a "focus on being a mother instead of thinking about men" (Fielding, 2013: 33). However, she swiftly concludes that this prohibition is out-dated; the age of 50s, she observes, was "the age of Germaine Greer's 'Invisible Woman', branded as non-viable, post-menopausal sitcom fodder", however "now with Talitha school of branding combined with Kim Cattrall, Julianne and Demi Moore, etc. is all starting to change!" (Fielding, 2013: 152).

Talitha's voice reverberates contemporary culture's hailing of women to makeover their aging bodies and make themselves visible through "cosmeceutical interventions" (Dolan and Tincknell, 2013) and beauty practices. Thus, however satirical Bridget's obsessive self-monitoring is presented, as

Rosalind Gill (2007: 228) observed of the first Bridget Jones novel and film, "the satire is not straightforward", "the body is represented as a chaotic and in need of constant discipline". Just as the huge labour of her chaotic mothering is marginalised and ridiculed, so the intense aesthetic labour demanded of Bridget is masked, alongside its often painful consequences. The following example, of Bridget's dualistic self-surveillance - observing herself (in the diary) observing herself (in the mirror)- illustrates how humour and self-irony work to blur and divert difficult feelings like self-blame and self-hate, which are induced by 'body projects' and practices of "disciplinary neoliberalism" (Gill, 1995):

> Got home and surveyed self aghast mirror. Am starting to look like a heron. My legs and arms have stayed the same, but my whole upper body is like a large bird with a big roll of fat round the middle that […] is about to be served up for an extended family's post-Hogmanay breakfast (Fielding, 2013: 48).

Thus, 51-year-old Bridget continues to be the woman who is endearing by virtue of her failing (McRobbie, 2009). However, unlike her younger self, Bridget's mature self is characterised by an inner drive to compete against herself and other mothers, most notably 'perfect Nicolette'. Indeed, the 2013 diary is a space of "inner-directed self-competition" (McRobbie, 2015: 15) over becoming the "Perfect Mother" (Fielding, 2013: 134) and the perfect "sensual woman" (86). The outcome of this competitive self is constant self-beratement (McRobbie, 2015), which feeds into and perpetuates extensive and ever-expanding types of labour she must perform.

Conclusion

As SAHMs, both Jools and Bridget perform similar aesthetic practices and 'body projects' (Tyler, 2011) to those demanded from and exercised by their maternal and non-maternal counterparts within the labour market. Jools performs a successful and desirable maternal femininity, predicated on intensified aesthetic labour. Bridget performs a failed maternal subjectivity, continuously upholding Jools' norm of perfection and striving to achieve it, thus, conforming to and defining the norm by failing (McRobbie, 2009; 2015).

Yet their aesthetic maternal labour is simultaneously masked, obscured and marginalised. The intense labour Jools invests in creating and maintaining her attractive appearance is smoothed and hidden by her celebrity persona. Bridget's aesthetic labour and continuous exercise of self-monitoring and self-policing is used primarily to create comic effect, thus, even when it potentially exposes some of the painful and disturbing consequences of beauty and aesthetic practices, they are diffused and overridden by humour. The hiding of Jools' and Bridget's aesthetic labour supports their construction as dependent and domestic carers, rather than active aesthetic and maternal labourers. Thus, they demonstrate a new twist: not only must mothers look 'hot' (Littler, 2013), they should keep and/or help keep invisible the price of living up to this demand by repudiating and plastering over aesthetic labour and its consequent injuries for confident selfhood (Gill & Orgad 2015).

Ultimately, then, the contemporary SAHM figure, embodied by Jools and Bridget, is doubly subjugated: her subjectivity is increasingly constituted through intensive (and oppressive) aesthetic labour, self-surveillance and beauty practices demanded by neoliberalism, while simultaneously constructed as dependent and relegated to the domestic sphere, *outside* the neoliberal market and its exclusive valuing of economic productivity.

The SAHM, by 'self-choosing' to 'opt out' of the labour market has seemingly breached the 'new sexual contract', which demands women to be simultaneous economic labourers and carers (McRobbie, 2009). She could, therefore, be a maternal figure that voices a critique of and resistance to the increasing capitalization and commodification of neoliberal maternity. SAHM figures, like Jools and Bridget, could potentially muddy the myth of the perfect good-looking mother, and expose the enormous price women are demanded to pay in trying to achieve this myth. However, as we have shown, rather than critiquing the neoliberal sexual contract, contemporary representations inscribe the SAHM into the realm of 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015) through her individualized, autonomous, 'free' choosing to exercise aesthetic labour and body self-disciplining, and collude in its masking. In so doing, such media representations

continue to play a fundamental role in the masking and marginalisation of maternal labour: domestic, childcare, emotional, and now also the aesthetic.

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