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An Examination of the Representations of Motherhood in American Popular Culture, with Specific Reference to the Works of Tori Amos.

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Abstract

The dissertation examines how singer-songwriter Tori Amos challenges the unfair and judgemental representations of motherhood that permeate American popular culture through analysis of four of her songs: 'Spark' and 'Oysters' in Chapter One, and 'Playboy Mommy' and 'Promise' in Chapter Two. Many of Amos's musical compositions concern female experiences that are often stigmatised and overlooked in society and seldom explored in popular culture, such as miscarriage and the figure of the mother itself. In her semi-autobiographical songs, she portrays the complex emotions that come with these experiences through her intense, unique, and multi-genre piano compositions paired with her honest, relatable, yet often surreal lyrics. The dissertation analyses her compositions in contrast to the dominant representations of motherhood in American popular culture, which are perpetuated through social media and through misleading and fantasised depictions of maternity. Amos's music is worth discussing not only because it is intricate and unusual, but because it is one of few genuine representations of motherhood in contemporary American pop music culture.

Through close musical analysis and reference to feminist scholars such as Julia Kristeva and Simone de Beauvoir, the dissertation discusses the extent to which Amos's music challenges the hegemonic depictions of motherhood. The study seeks to demonstrate how Amos's music is a mouthpiece for the mother-figures who are underrepresented in popular culture, and how she attempts to normalise all experiences of mothering by drawing on her own to encourage other women to do the same.

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Introduction

> The mother-as-she-is-written is contested by the mother-as-she-writes.
>
> – Susan Suleiman

Sarah Boak states that 'the pregnant or maternal body is conspicuously absent within popular music. The dominant representation of female bodies – sonically, visually and spatially conceived – is that of a sexualised body [. . .] existing under the male gaze. The figure of the pregnant, maternal or motherly body is marked as Other' (Boak 2015, 296). She goes on to assert that Tori Amos uses her music as a space in which 'normative conceptions of 'mother' and 'mothering' can be troubled', (2015, 296), something which this dissertation will demonstrate.

In popular culture, miscarriage, breastfeeding, the postpartum body, menstruation, and the role of the mother itself, are just some of the issues around motherhood that are stigmatised. These very real elements of motherhood are seldom explored within American popular culture, with images of celebrity mothers and their 'babies as the latest must-have fashion accessory' being widely circulated and accepted as an 'unattainable ideal' (Goc 2007, 3) for ordinary mothers. The identity of being a mother has become a lucrative selling point for many celebrity mothers. For example, influencer and star of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, Kylie Jenner is somewhat the paragon of 'commodifying [her] maternal identity' (Moir 2015, 50); she often posts pictures with her three-year-old daughter Stormi, the first of which quickly becoming the 'most-liked photo on Instagram' (Entenmen 2018), demonstrating how she uses these images to increase her social media popularity. Jenner created a 'Stormi' collection in her cosmetics line, hosts lavish birthday parties for her, and is notorious for their matching outfits, provoking controversial responses from images in which they match swimming costumes and ballgowns (Appendix A). *The New York Times* termed these celebrity mothers 'momtrepeneur[s]' (Moir

2015, 51), and this notion is continually damaging to ordinary mothers, since it reinforces this 'unattainable ideal' and does not represent the reality of motherhood, consequently resulting in feelings of inadequacy. This has recently been challenged by companies such as Nike and Frida Mom, who have both released short films that question the societal silencing of issues such as breastfeeding and postpartum recovery. Nike did this to advertise their maternity range, featuring a diverse range of female athletes training while pregnant or postpartum, and Frida Mom, who specialise in birthing and recovery products, showed their film 'Stream of Lactation' at the 2021 Golden Globes. Furthermore, feminist theorist Luce Irigaray suggests that there must be 'authentic self-images and self-representations' (Ives 1996, 38), which is something that is often ignored in the patriarchal monopoly of the media. While Nike and Frida Mom demonstrate this concept of 'authentic self-images' through their campaigns, Amos was arguably ahead of her time here; one of the promotional pictures for her album *Boys for Pele* (1996) depicts her breastfeeding a piglet (Appendix B), emphasising her effort to remove the stigma around the natural functions of the female body, which she continues to do in her music. However, despite Amos's efforts and the campaigns of Nike and Frida Mom demonstrating how the stigma around these functions of the female body is being challenged, there is still progress to be made here.

Another way that the trend of celebrity motherhood has permeated popular culture is through the pregnancy photoshoot, first popularised in 1991 by Demi Moore's *Vanity Fair* cover, by photographer Annie Leibovitz. In the image, Moore poses completely nude, with one hand cradling her baby bump, the other concealing her breasts. This image is 'credited with starting the media obsession with celebrity motherhood' (Goc 2007, 2), and thus it is now common practice for pregnant celebrities to pose for a photoshoot. For example, in 2017, Serena Williams paid homage to the iconic Moore image in her pregnancy shoot for *Vanity Fair*, also shot by Leibovitz (Appendix C). She too is naked, wears minimalist jewellery, and

stands in an almost identical pose. Although the fact that they are naked merely emphasises the historical sexualising of the female body in popular culture, it is possible that they are instead rejecting how 'the pregnant body is considered to be outside the realms of sexual desire' (Boak 2015, 297), and by doing so they are demonstrating 'the new sexualisation of the pregnant woman' (Goc 2007, 2). However, while this is a problematic notion since it assumes that women will always be subject to the male gaze, both the images of Moore and Williams are empowering as they showcase the pregnant body in all of its beauty and strength, something which is rarely acknowledged in the media.

While I will argue that Amos's music challenges the glamorised and idealistic representations of pregnancy and motherhood due to the attention she pays to miscarriage and difficulty conceiving, she did in fact conform to the trend of celebrity motherhood; in 2000, when she was pregnant with her daughter Natashya, she too posed for a *Vanity Fair* pregnancy shoot (Appendix D). Unlike the shots of Moore and Williams, Amos only has her bump uncovered, and there is a serene and ethereal quality to the images, reinforcing her connection to Mother Nature and Demeter who became her spiritual guides during her difficult journey to motherhood. Moreover, Amos somewhat adheres to the idea of the 'momtrepreneur' since she featured duets with her daughter on the albums *Midwinter Graces* (2009), *Night of Hunters* (2011), and *Unrepentant Geraldines* (2014). Although through this Amos explores the mother-daughter relationship that she so longed for after the loss of three pregnancies, this may also have had a commercial incentive.

However, while these *Vanity Fair* shoots appear to be celebrating the capabilities of the female body and acknowledging the beauty of pregnancy, they appear to be somewhat censored. For example, there is no evidence of stretchmarks, which are a hallmark of maternal identity that women are shamed for revealing, and are so often airbrushed out of photos. Julia Kristeva describes how after childbirth, 'the skin apparently never ceases to bear the traces of

such matter. These are persecuting and threatening traces,' (1982, 101). The adjectives 'persecuting' and 'threatening' that Kristeva uses to describe these marks are fitting since they evoke how women are so often 'mom-shamed' for bearing their scars and feel pressured to have them removed via a 'mommy makeover', thus effectively removing the physical identification of motherhood. These marks place the both the post-partum and the pregnant body in a 'liminal, in-between space' (Boak 2015, 299), which mainstream society is reluctant to represent.

The dissertation examines Amos's representation of motherhood, along with that of American popular culture in general, with reference to the theories of Julia Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigary, Hélène Cixous, and Nancy Chodorow. Chapter One discusses Amos's experience of miscarriage and how this manifests in her musical output, thus resulting in a call for normalising this often stigmatised subject. This is done through analysis of the songs 'Spark' and 'Oysters'. Chapter Two investigates how Amos seeks to redefine how the mother-figure is represented in mainstream culture through her presentation of the marginalised 'Playboy Mommy' figure, and her exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in 'Promise'. The songs that have been selected exemplify the broad scope of mother-figures that Amos seeks to give voice to through her music.

Chapter 1: Normalising the Effects of Pregnancy Loss

When examining Tori Amos's musical representation of the experience of motherhood, it is useful to apply the feminist ideologies of Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva. Whereas Kristeva celebrates the maternal body as a biological entity in which 'cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm', Beauvoir's nightmarish rhetoric takes a rather more radical stance, implying that maternity is a process that 'obliterates female subjectivity' (Zerilli 1992, 112). Beauvoir's description of pregnancy as being 'rather horrible that a parasitic being should proliferate within her body' and 'monstrous swelling [. . .] tearing, hemmorhage' (Beauvoir 1949, 360), is a discourse that is somewhat more suited to Amos's sombre and troubling musical portrayal of the process in her album, *From the Choirgirl Hotel* (1998).

Amos's journey to motherhood was complex, primarily because she suffered three miscarriages. She composed *Choirgirl* after her second miscarriage and has stated that she 'took on the subject of [her] loss directly in those songs. The album clearly came from a place of grief' (Amos and Powers 2005, 163). In the album, Amos challenges hegemonic perceptions of the maternal body through her unrelenting honesty about the emotional and physical pain of miscarriage, through both its lyrical and musical techniques, and in doing so she gives voice to the often dismissed women who have experienced it. A definitive example of this is 'Spark', in which Amos explores her own experience of miscarriage, as well as the complex emotions that come with it, through the intricacy of the music.

'Spark' demonstrates Amos's distinctive musical style due to its fusion of rock, classical, alternative and arguably experimental elements, however her classical piano training is in evidence, particularly during the intense middle eight section (2:46). This can be seen through the polyphonic texture and accented staccato counterpoint, illustrating the complex

emotions – such as confusion, self-doubt, and grief – that come with experiencing a miscarriage. The middle eight is just a small segment of this musically complex piece, the structure of which signifies Amos's own experience of unsuccessful pregnancy due to its cyclical structure. The song begins and ends with the same verse:

> She's addicted to nicotine patches
> She's addicted to nicotine patches
> She's afraid of the light in the dark
> 6:58 are you sure where my spark is here here here

This cyclical structure not only symbolises Amos's experience of miscarriage, but also the repetitive nature of trying to conceive and carry a healthy baby to term. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in both the first and second verses, Amos's musical choices reflect the tone of her lyrics. For example, she sometimes chooses to omit the third within the chord, which is a pivotal note as it determines whether the key of the phrase will be major or minor. The omission of the third, in addition to the use of accidentals and the narrow range of the melody, create tonal uncertainty which reflects the precarious experience of the mother-subject that she is representing. However, Amos chooses to include the major third on the phrases 'light in the dark' in the first verse, and 'baby alive' in the second, to create a sense of hope in these more optimistic lyrics.

The double tracked vocals produce a greater depth of sound, and they are accompanied by rhythmic percussion and a repetitive electric guitar riff, creating a distorted effect. These elements create a sonic representation of the amniotic sac[1], with the rhythmic percussion, for example, somewhat representing the baby's heartbeat. This is reinforced by the water imagery

[1] A fluid filled space inhabited by the foetus, in which said fluid protects the baby and is discharged when the waters break or in the event of miscarriage.

in the music video for ‘Spark’, in which Amos, wearing a sheer, floaty dress – evocative of the foetal movement in the womb – is blindfolded and walks into a lake in which she submerges herself under the water, imitating this foetal environment.

The specificity of the time ‘6:58’ reinforces the fact that miscarriage is often placed within medical discourse in which it is ‘typically treated as a nonevent’ (Markin 2017, 368). It reiterates how in this song Amos is attempting to represent the complex emotions and interior state of mind of her miscarrying mother-subject through the medium of music. However, this is also evocative of how the traumatic event of a miscarriage is an experience that is never easily forgotten. This specificity of time is reflected in the musical accompaniment, due to its irregularities in the time signature, for example switching from the lilting 6/8-time to the irregular 7/8, thus unsettling the conventional verse/chorus structure that Amos follows. Additionally, the 6/8-time signature is often used in nursery rhymes, giving a dancelike feel especially to the chorus, yet this also reinforces the underpinning theme of an unrealised childhood. Moreover, the second verse follows the same chord pattern and melody as the first:

> She's convinced she could hold back a glacier
> But she couldn’t keep baby alive
> Doubting if there’s a woman in there somewhere, here here here

This verse perfectly encapsulates the subject matter of *Choirgirl*. The image of a ‘glacier’ in the first line is a fitting metaphor for the bleeding which is commonly associated with miscarriage, since due to gravitational force, glaciers collapse into an avalanche of ice, snow, and rock. The fact that the speaker in ‘Spark’ is ‘convinced she could hold back’ the sheer force of a glacier implies that she is in a state of disbelief that she has lost her pregnancy. This is followed by the overt implication that the mother-subject has experienced a miscarriage,

as ‘she couldn’t keep baby alive’. For some women, becoming a mother and the relationship with their unborn child begins at the moment of a positive pregnancy test; although there is a lack of research on the psychotherapeutic elements of miscarriage, it has been found that pregnant women will likely ‘develop rich mental representations of the unborn baby and attach relatively early on in the pregnancy’ (Markin 2017, 368). Amos explores this element of motherhood in ‘Spark’, as the titular ‘spark’ is symbolic of the miscarried child by whom *Choirgirl* was inspired. The following lyric, ‘doubting if there’s a woman in there somewhere’ suggests that a woman’s sole purpose is to procreate, yet women need not reject maternity itself, but must reject the notion of being automatically assigned to the mother role if they want to successfully challenge the intrinsic patriarchal ideals that permeate the experience of motherhood. This rejection ‘cannot be challenged by assigning woman a place outside discourse but only [by] altering her place within it’ (Zerilli 1992, 132), and this is precisely what Amos does through the medium of her music, by giving voice to the often dismissed and stigmatised mother figure.

Furthermore, Esther Rodríguez suggests that the feminist poetics of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray connect with ‘a music that has been either lost or characterised by its association with an undermined ‘feminine’, dangerously at the borders, or outside, of a dominant masculine system of representation’ (2009, 31). This ‘masculine system of representation’ is what many depictions of the maternal body have been subject to in the pop culture arena, such as the aforementioned trend of celebrity pregnancy photoshoots, therefore in her music Amos seeks to confront this. This idea is manifested in the music video for ‘Spark’ by the fact that Amos is blindfolded with her hands tied behind her back, symbolising the systematic silencing of mothers who miscarry by the patriarchy, and therefore by society itself. This image further suggests that she is being held hostage by her situation, illustrating this lack of control. The expectations put upon women by these systems are symbolised by the anonymous male figure

in the music video, and reinforced through close-up shots of his watch. This is demonstrative of the pressure put on the idea of a woman's reproductive 'clock' ticking, and also the fact that Amos would have felt this pressure, as she was in her thirties when trying to conceive due to her commitment to her career. Not only does Amos use her music video to tackle the taboo of miscarriage, she also does this to confront the taboo of the female body itself, by using imagery of menstruation, for example. The final image is of blood dripping from her finger onto a leaf, the bright red standing out from the dark colour palette of the video. This may represent how menstruation will resume after a miscarriage, yet it also undoubtedly evokes images of the excessive bleeding associated with it. Moreover, the video features a car that has crashed into a tree, symbolising the miscarrying body through its broken bonnet, open doors, and liquid leaking from it, and during the middle eight the car explodes. This imagery indicates how many women who experience miscarriage come to doubt themselves and their bodies, and also the catastrophic nature of experiencing a miscarriage. Furthermore, the video closes with Amos's character approaching two women in a car who refuse to help her, thus representing how society may choose to eschew the women who are perceived as not fulfilling their intrinsic purpose.

After her third miscarriage, Amos decided that she 'would never seek to be a mother again' (Amos and Powers 2005, 167), something she anticipates in the chorus of 'Spark'. The lamenting vocal melody moves in parallel sixths with the piano, and the lyrics illustrate how the mother-subject is attempting to convince herself that she never wanted a baby, to help her process her loss. The simple musical change to a major key signifies her acceptance that it may not be possible for her to have a successful pregnancy, however the powerful use of instrumentation and the variation of the melody in the final chorus express her heartbreak and grief.

Amos frames her experience of motherhood by her identification with Demeter, whose daughter Persephone was taken from her and forced to marry Hades, ruler of the underworld, leaving Demeter distraught and in pain due to the greatness of her love for her daughter. Amos is very much grounded by her connection to the Earth and to these mythological female figures who acted as spiritual guides during her difficult journey and enabled her to situate her role as a mother who was not yet given a child. Therefore, the cry of maternal loss displayed in the melodic variation in the final seconds of 'Spark' is akin to the 'cry of Demeter' (Amos and Powers 2005, 167), thus placing Amos in the Demeter role.

This somewhat spiritual dimension to Amos's music, especially that which concern issues surrounding maternity, resonates in 'Oysters' which features on her most recent studio album, *Unrepentant Geraldines* (2014). Amos was able to accept her loss by connecting with the Earth and understanding that the cycle of birth and death is intrinsic to it. She states that, 'I laid myself on the earth and the message came to me. The earth said, "Surrender this to me. You've lost a few babies. I lose babies every day. I understand this pain [. . .]" And I almost felt as if the earth and I became blood sisters' (Amos and Powers 2005, 171). Through this, it is evident that Amos decided to use her music as an outlet for her grief and yearning for her lost baby. In doing so, she personified her songs which became her 'sonic children' (Amos and Powers, 172), whereby she saw her songs as 'children who had found another plane, or mothers who had gone before who had experienced this loss, and they came to share my grief [. . .] These songs were the supportive, nurturing women. We walk into Demeter, not Aphrodite' (Amos and Powers 2005, 163). By creating these 'sonic children', Amos creates a space for women who identify with the grieving Demeter, instead of the fertile Aphrodite, to openly process their loss, a space which they have been denied due to the hegemonic attitudes towards their experience. It seems that 'Oysters' was inspired by her third unsuccessful pregnancy in which she lost her unborn baby girl, who she had named Phoebe. In the song, she uses the

image of an oyster and its pearls as a metaphor to illustrate how ‘not every girl is a pearl’, the ‘girl’ likely being a reference to Phoebe. This lyric reiterates that not every oyster will have a pearl in it, thus implying that not every pregnancy will be successful. Additionally, the interior of a wild freshwater oyster that contains pearls bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the female reproductive system – the pearls resembling the eggs in the ovaries (Appendix E) – demonstrating why the metaphor of the oyster is perfectly suited to the subject matter Amos wanted to portray.

Unlike ‘Spark’, ‘Oysters’ is a piano ballad, and is thus a subtler handling of the subject of miscarriage. This song undoubtedly has a tone of grief, but also a sense of calm and acceptance, supported through the repetitive nature of the broken chord piano accompaniment and use of the sostenuto pedal to sustain the notes that are played. This accompaniment reminds one of ‘Le Onde’ (1996) by prolific Italian pianist Ludovico Einaudi, translated as ‘The Wave’. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Amos, who is notorious for her piano-heavy compositions, was inspired by this piece or even by Einaudi himself, she uses the same piano technique to create the effect of rolling waves. The delicate piano accompaniment is primarily in the mid- to upper range of the instrument and it does not make use of the lower range until the final minute of the song, adding musical depth and emotion to the subject matter. The minimalist use of the piano accompanies Amos’s vocals, which are high-pitched and have an ethereal quality due to the use of reverb, occasional double tracking, and harmonies in octave unison. Oftentimes, vocals in the chorus of a song are double tracked to emphasise them amongst the song’s instrumentation, yet this is somewhat unnecessary over the gentle piano accompaniment of ‘Oysters’. Therefore, this was a stylistic choice on Amos’s part to add a greater depth of sound to her heartfelt vocals.

Although some of the vocal harmonies are more settled, the majority are unusual and discordant, and when analysed, these harmonies are evocative of those used in grunge music.

Amos, whose music primarily fits into the genre of alternative rock, was evidently inspired by the conventions of grunge, since she covered Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' on the deluxe edition of *Little Earthquakes* (1992). Her use of double tracked vocals, reverb, inverted chords, and uncomfortable harmonies are characteristic of the genre, and her music shares the same intensity, emphasised through these elements. This intensity is certainly demonstrated in 'Spark', however 'Oysters' has a much more reflective tone. This may be because Amos composed it sixteen years after 'Spark', when she was fifty years of age, had her daughter Natashya, and was moving towards the menopause. Therefore, her perspective on motherhood would have changed over this time. This further enhances the resemblance of the female reproductive system to the image of the freshwater oyster and its pearls, as the menopause evinces the next stage of a woman's life in which she is unlikely to reproduce thereafter, and is another stage of womanhood that is seldom given voice in mainstream media. This once again evokes Amos's affinity with Demeter, who she describes as 'the sacred Womb Mother of all [. . .] With her always, and within, was her daughter, as a seed is encased in the moist flesh of the peach [. . .] Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, came to be seen as two – mother and daughter, separate but inseparable' (Amos and Powers 2005, 155-6). The simile Amos gives here of a seed in a peach is very much like the pearls 'encased' in an oyster, the eggs 'encased' within the ovaries, and thus the 'separate but inseparable', somewhat symbiotic, nature of the relationship between mother and foetus.

Following on from this, the lyric 'Did I somehow become you/ Without realising' emphasises this 'separate but inseparable' relationship between the mother and foetus and demonstrates the all-consuming nature of the processes of pregnancy and pregnancy loss. Although the proceeding lyric, 'Found a little patch of heaven now', may indicate that the mother-subject has found some solace within her situation, it may also imply that this is because the spirit of her child is resting in peace. There is a tone of sorrow and acceptance

throughout the song, but especially in these reflective lyrics, illustrating Amos's thoughts that after the loss of her baby girl: 'I was willing to do whatever it took to bring her back [. . .] Not accepting that she'd moved on and picked another mommy, which is very hard to come to terms with' (Amos and Powers 2005, 157). The song ends with a short piano solo, of the same repetitive broken chord pattern in the top register of the piano, and it finishes on an imperfect cadence giving the sense that the song is unresolved, much like the feeling Amos expressed that she 'surrendered' her loss to the Earth and '[came] to terms with' it.

Chapter 2: Redefining the Mother-Figure

In post-war America, before the trend of celebrity mothers, the idealisation of motherhood in society was displayed through family values and conventional gender roles. An example of this is 'The good wife's guide' from a 1955 issue of *Housekeeping Monthly*, which outlines eighteen instructions a wife must follow in preparation for her husband's arrival home from work (Appendix F). It states to 'Prepare the children', and 'Prepare yourself [. . .] Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking'. This idealised view of motherhood, and further womanhood, was the societal norm in post-war America, and something that exemplifies Nancy Chodorow's observation that despite the capacity of most people to be parents, the responsibility of childrearing is placed upon women only. She explains that 'most analysts assume that physiology explains women's child-care responsibilities ("It is women's biological destiny to bear and deliver, to nurse and to rear children"),' (Chodorow 1978, 88). In light of this, one may question why there is still a stigma around the natural functions of the mothering body, such as breastfeeding, if it has been accepted that it is physiological factors that deem childrearing a maternal responsibility. The archaic notion of this being 'women's biological destiny' reiterates the same post-war theorising of maternity that is presented in 'The good wife's guide', and is something that is contested by contemporary mother-figures such as Tori Amos. Amos's music is a mouthpiece for all mothers who are not represented in mainstream society, and she does this through her honesty about her personal experience of motherhood, particularly in the songs 'Playboy Mommy' (1998) and 'Promise' (2014).

Amos often inhabits different personae in her music, including various mother-figures, one of which she exhibits in 'Playboy Mommy'. In the song, Amos embodies a mother who is marginalised for her unconventional lifestyle and viewed as being outside of the societal norm. The third couplet of the first verse states, 'I never was the fantasy/ Of what you wanted me to

be', suggesting that this mother-figure does not fit the 'unattainable ideal' (Goc 2007, 3) that is the dominant representation of motherhood in popular culture. Boak claims that the process of becoming a mother is 'bound up in cultural constructions of acceptable (or non-acceptable) forms of mothering' (2015, 299), the 'non-acceptable' being what Amos explores. The fact that this figure is deemed 'non-acceptable' by mainstream standards of mothering can only be challenged by changing her place within societal discourse, thus normalising her experience rather than marginalising it. Here it is useful to apply Hélène Cixous's concept of écriture feminine (female writing), whereby 'woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing' (Cixous 1976, 875) which is precisely what Amos does in this song by giving voice to the 'Playboy Mommy' figure. The second verse captures the judgement that is placed on the misrepresented narrator:

> You seemed ashamed, ashamed that I was
> A good friend of American soldiers
> I'll say it loud here by your grave
> Those angels can't ever take my place

It is evident that she blames herself for the loss of her baby, as she 'never was there, there when it counts', however it is society that has taught her that she should feel this guilt. As Patterson notes, 'for more than sixty years of the twentieth century, Western society conditioned women to become wives and mothers and made those who rejected those roles feel somehow inadequate and incomplete' (1986, 88). However, this is not merely an archaic idea from the era of 'The good wife's guide', but is still something that women who cannot conceive, who miscarry, who struggle to breastfeed as in the Frida Mom campaign, or who may relate to the 'Playboy Mommy' figure, are faced with. Therefore, by employing Cixous's écriture feminine by giving voice to these underrepresented mother-figures, Amos attempts to

change their place within mainstream discourse. She also does this through the choice of instrumentation in the song, which consists of a jazz club style set-up of saxophone, bass, drum kit, and piano, with the instruction of 'moderate swing' (Appendix G). While the saxophone is often used to evoke the sleazy clubs of New York in the 1970s[1], Amos contradicts this through the subdued saxophone line. In conventional jazz, the saxophone line is characterised by its lively movement, yet in this song there is a sense of vulnerability conveyed through the plaintive solo saxophone. The instrumentation sets the scene of a late-night bar in which the 'Playboy Mommy' may be in search of a man, or the 'American soldiers' in the case of the song, who might give her a better life, whether this is the life depicted in 'The good wife's guide' or otherwise. In her commentary on Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Judith Butler states that 'motherhood is actually being promoted as the only option, i.e. as a compulsory social institution' (1986, 42). Therefore, any woman who does not conform to this is consequently judged by society, and 'Playboy Mommy' demonstrates the emotional torment that this can cause for a woman, through the feelings of self-blame, loneliness, vulnerability and guilt. These feelings are emphasised through the narrow vocal range and the tone of desperation that the vocals express, for example in the chorus the mother-figure pleads, 'Don't judge me so harsh little girl/ So you got a playboy mommy', explicitly referring to the judgement that mothers who go against societal expectations receive. It has an apologetic tone as though she believes she lost her baby as punishment for her unconventional lifestyle choices, when in fact her child most likely would not have judged her for this, as she is still a mother with enormous love for her child.

Moreover, since the lyrics are in the present tense, the listener does not realise that she is singing to her deceased child until the second verse when the mother-figure is at her grave and implying that she will always be her mother, despite her daughter being with the 'angels'

[1] For example, the *Taxi Driver* theme by Herrmann. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwmGGoGnTXk

in heaven. The song is something of an elegy to her late daughter, and this is seen in the contrasting bridge section:

> Somewhere where the orchids grow
> I can't find those church bells
> That played when you died
> Played Gloria, talking about Hosanna

This follows an instrumental break in which the slide guitar replaces the solo saxophone, however this section is accompanied by a simple piano and drum kit. The references to 'church bells', 'Gloria', 'Hosanna', and the direct address of 'when you died' imply that the mother-figure is reflecting on the symbolic funeral of her child. Here, the musical texture deviates from the syncopated melody and accompaniment to a homophonic motion with the vocals on the word 'Gloria', which is characteristic of a hymn. Furthermore, 'Gloria' may refer to the Christian hymn 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo', also known as 'The Angelic Hymn', and this in addition to the breathy and ethereal vocal harmonies reinforce how the mother-figure is singing to her unborn child in heaven. Markin suggests that stories of baby loss 'are not just stories of loss, these are also stories of love. For the depth of a parent's grief is also the heights of his or her capacity to love a child he or she never knew or will get the chance to meet' (2017, 371). This is exemplified in 'Playboy Mommy' through its dominant tone being one of sorrow and desperation, and this is intensified in the final moments of the song in which Amos sings, 'I'll be home, I'll be home/ To take you in my arms'. These words are almost spoken instead of sung, as though in desperation, and the song ends on an imperfect cadence giving the effect that it is unfinished, much like the relationship between the mother-figure and her baby. Similarly to 'Spark' from the same album, there is melodic variation in the final chorus which intensifies the subject matter and emotion of the song, and it is these elements which suggest

that the mother-figure is waiting to be reunited with her baby in heaven, which is the figurative 'home'. 'Playboy Mommy' demonstrates Amos's attempt to redefine how all strands of motherhood are represented in mainstream discourse by vocalising the experience of a mother who is subject to judgement by society for her lifestyle choices.

'Promise' is a rather different composition to the three previously discussed songs, as Amos composed it after she had become a mother when her daughter Natashya, who features on the track, was thirteen years of age. It only seems fitting that on her most recent album Amos would write her experience of being in the role of the mother, after having dedicated numerous songs and one studio album to her personal experience of motherhood. The song originates from a conversation Amos, who was fifty at the time, had with her daughter about her concerns around aging in the music industry. In a BBC interview, Amos revealed that Natashya had said to her, 'you have got to promise me you are going to get your head around this. Because if you don't get your head around this [. . .] what is your message to me mom?' (Burns 2016, 246). The fact that Amos expressed concerns about the music industry's treatment of women of this age is indicative of the inherent sexism within American popular culture. Furthermore, on the surface it seems that this is a song about a mother reassuring her daughter of the unerring support in their relationship, however it soon becomes clear that the daughter reassures and supports her mother just as much. This is signified through the balanced phrases and the repetitive nature of the lyrics 'Be there', in addition to the dialogic question-and-answer structure which create these balanced phrases. This is further reiterated in the music video in which they sing to each other, as one sits on a stool and the other peers over her shoulder, as though she is her conscience and guardian (Appendix H). The sentiment of 'Promise' and its accompanying music video echoes the 'separate but inseparable' (Amos and Powers 2005, 156) nature of the relationship between Demeter and her daughter Persephone, for example through the couplet 'Where the sun shines/ I will be there', in the chorus. This is further

demonstrated through the ascending stepwise motion of 'Where the sun shines', with the responding descending phrase 'I will be there', which exemplifies the unconditional love and symbiotic nature of the mother-daughter relationship, as the phrase itself would not be complete without both parts. The majority of the song follows the question-and-answer pattern, except for 'Look for my love' which is sung in parallel sixths. This structure, in addition to the steady tempo, suggests that although mother and daughter may not always be together physically, they will always be there for each other, for example the couplet 'You are the light/ That follows you everywhere'.

The musical accompaniment is a simple set-up of piano, synthesised organ, and drum kit, allowing the focus to be on the mother and daughter duet. Burns observes that Amos's vocals gradually become less prominent in order to 'open the musical space for her daughter' (2016, 253). This is demonstrated primarily in the final chorus in which Natashya takes the leading part and showcases her melismatic vocals; through its musical qualities, 'Promise' puts into practice Chodorow's theory that when a child begins to turn away from their mother, they are displaying 'independence and individuation, progress, activity, and participation in the real world: "It is by turning away from our mother that we finally become [. . .] men and women"' (1978, 82). The tone of the song is one of contentment and calm, representing the natural progression that a daughter will gain greater independence from her mother, and this can also be seen in the bridge section in which Amos provides the musical responses to Natashya's calls. This tone is also created through the fact that the time signature is consistent throughout the song, and the harmonies are settled and melodious, unlike that of *Choirgirl*. This signifies how Amos created 'Promise' during a happier time in her life where she has become a mother, whereas *Choirgirl* is much more unsettled and troubled, illustrating Amos's statement that she 'generated music that reflected that time' (Amos and Powers 2005, 156). However, the dynamic is mid-range, and Amos refrains from showcasing the full range of the piano – a

feature of her music that she is renowned for – which not only enhances the sense of contentment but also suggests that she is still, as a woman, vulnerable to the judgement of American society despite conforming to normative expectations by having a child.

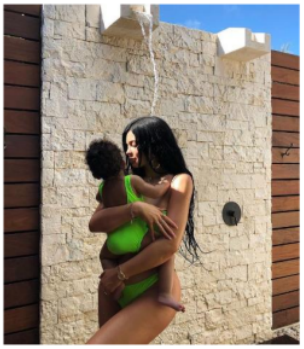
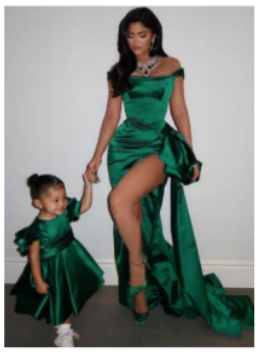
Conclusion

The songs I have analysed represent a microcosm of Amos's musical canon, which seems to follow the stages of her life chronologically. *Choirgirl* expresses the deep sadness and pain she experienced due to her three miscarriages, and *Unrepentant Geraldines* concludes her journey to motherhood with a duet with her adolescent daughter. The music of the latter album is certainly less experimental and not as quintessentially Amos, as it features the reflective piano ballad 'Oysters', and the somewhat complacent 'Promise'. We can argue that this is because Amos was finally able to have a healthy child, thus her music reflects her life at that moment, however this makes one question whether people only drive for change when they are unsettled. Having said this, Amos, when writing *Unrepentant Geraldines*, was still very much aware that she is a victim of popular culture and the music industry in particular, as expressed in 'Promise' through her fears of aging in this sphere. Therefore, despite the feelings of desperation and sorrow illustrated in 'Spark' and 'Oysters' being somewhat resolved by this point in her career, Amos represents how it is something of a no-win situation for women in popular culture; despite conforming by bearing a child, a woman must still defend herself for simply aging, much like she defends herself in the face of the judgement of the natural functions of her body.

Amos has devoted her career to 'the exploration of female histories and lived experience' (Burns 2016, 253), thus giving voice to the dismissed mother figures, such as the 'Playboy Mommy', or those stigmatised for being unable to successfully carry a baby to term. Amos contributes to redefining how motherhood is perceived in popular culture, and while she does not seek to completely irradicate the current representations of the mother-figure, since it is so ingrained into American society, she recognises that this is something that needs to be addressed. In her recent book *Resistance*, she explains that 'the conversations I have had with women [. . .] have solidified my faith in what women can achieve – especially [when] we share

our experiences with each other. Everyone has their own story and their own perspective that cannot be replaced by someone else' (Amos 2020, 87). This sentiment is in line with the feminist theories that I have alluded to – specifically Cixous's theory of écriture feminine – that maintain that genuine representations of womanhood and motherhood in popular culture are shrouded by the dominant masculinist discourse, and that advocates such as Amos, must take responsibility for changing their place within this discourse. Amos successfully challenges this patriarchal hegemony in her music by representing the mother-figures who have been silenced by this system and are consequently underrepresented, if represented at all. Therefore, her music can be used as a vehicle for change, as it promotes a much more universal and relatable depiction of motherhood, not the glamorised and idealistic representation that permeates American popular culture.

Appendix

Appendix A

(Left) Kylie Jenner. 2019. "let's get away🤍." Instagram photo, January 18, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/BsyCpXDH-4b/

(Right) Kylie Jenner. 2019. "most wonderful time of the year ✨ thank you @ralphandrusso for the custom dresses." Instagram photo, December 25, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/B6eyya8Hc5U/

Appendix B

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Appendix C

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Appendix D

Google Images.

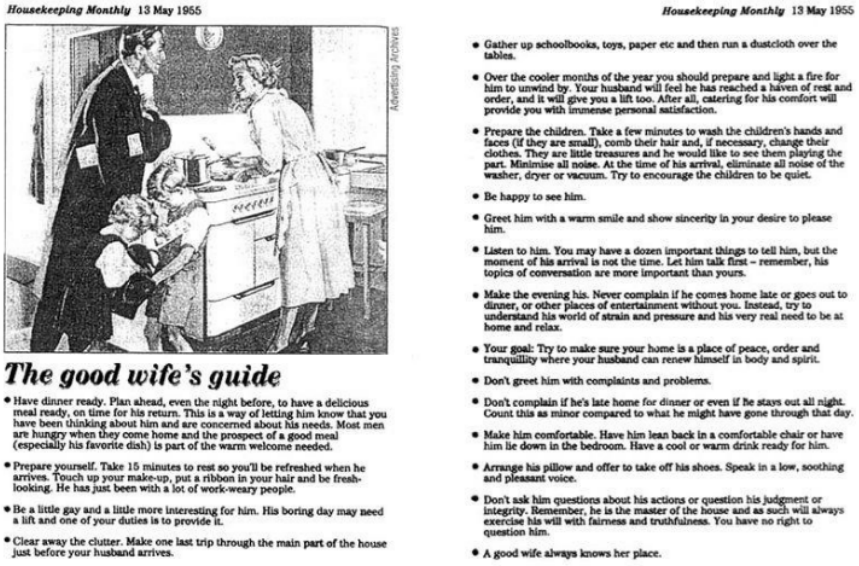
(Left)
https://www.google.com/search?q=tori+amos+vanity+fair+pregnancy&rlz=1C1CHBF_en-GBGB816GB816&sxsrf=ALeKk037_7EnbeJ0zsL9iJhI9i1dSjkGyg:1617873090506&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjo9eb2pu7vAhWY_7sIHZRVAYYQ_AUoAXoECAEQAw&biw=1280&bih=610#imgrc=_rw7KfuLziXxOM

(Right)
https://www.google.com/search?q=tori+amos+vanity+fair+pregnancy&rlz=1C1CHBF_en-GBGB816GB816&sxsrf=ALeKk037_7EnbeJ0zsL9iJhI9i1dSjkGyg:1617873090506&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjo9eb2pu7vAhWY_7sIHZRVAYYQ_AUoAXoECAEQAw&biw=1280&bih=610#imgrc=jlyOWnqUIudZdM

Appendix E

Google Images

https://www.google.com/search?q=oysters&tbm=isch&chips=q:oysters,g_1:pearl:zigfL6g_su4%3D&rlz=1C1CHBF_en-GBGB816GB816&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiRq4bx4_ruAhXD8IUKHX0aD1QQ4lYoAHoECAEQGQ&biw=1263&bih=610#imgrc=7rI_qC8fKM7XyM



Housekeeping Monthly 13 May 1955

Advertising Archives

The good wife's guide

- Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal (especially his favorite dish) is part of the warm welcome needed.
- Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.
- Be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it.
- Clear away the clutter. Make one last trip through the main part of the house just before your husband arrives.

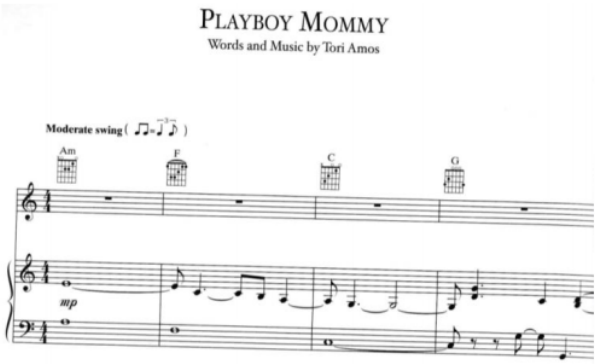
Housekeeping Monthly 13 May 1955

- Gather up schoolbooks, toys, paper etc and then run a dustcloth over the tables.
- Over the cooler months of the year you should prepare and light a fire for him to unwind by. Your husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and order, and it will give you a lift too. After all, catering for his comfort will provide you with immense personal satisfaction.
- Prepare the children. Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces (if they are small), comb their hair and, if necessary, change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part. Minimise all noise. At the time of his arrival, eliminate all noise of the washer, dryer or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.
- Be happy to see him.
- Greet him with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please him.
- Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first – remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.
- Make the evening his. Never complain if he comes home late or goes out to dinner, or other places of entertainment without you. Instead, try to understand his world of strain and pressure and his very real need to be at home and relax.
- Your goal: Try to make sure your home is a place of peace, order and tranquillity where your husband can renew himself in body and spirit.
- Don't greet him with complaints and problems.
- Don't complain if he's late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night. Count this as minor compared to what he might have gone through that day.
- Make him comfortable. Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or have him lie down in the bedroom. Have a cool or warm drink ready for him.
- Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soothing and pleasant voice.
- Don't ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him.
- A good wife always knows her place.

Appendix F

Google Images

https://www.google.com/search?q=the+good+wife%27s+guide+1955&rlz=1C1CHBF_en-GBGB816GB816&sxsrf=ALeKk02u_cVN0iQbNeV5GPU3aBTifzeafA:1618040620195&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjW7ZeDl_PvAhUjhf0HHY8GB-4Q_AUoAXoECAEQAw&biw=1280&bih=610#imgrc=_dcFwDtsbw2tdM



PLAYBOY MOMMY

Words and Music by Tori Amos

Moderate swing

Am F C G

mp

Appendix G

Amos, Tori. 2003. "Playboy Mommy." In *A Tori Amos Collection: Tales of a Librarian*. 102. London: Sword and Stone Publishing.

Appendix H

Tori Amos, "Promise." *YouTube*. 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYqA2wciaPQ

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