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SELLING COMPROMISE

Toys, Motherhood, and the Cultural Deal

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The turbulent social conflict over what counts as good-enough mothering and the greedy institution of work leaves many women trapped in what Joan Williams called the gender system of domesticity. Like self-help books, advertisements can lead mothers toward a culturally sanctioned compromise. This article looks at the "cultural deals" being offered for mothers by toy catalogs. The author examined the marketing of more than 3,500 toys in 11 catalogs from the 2000-2001 holiday season. She found that the catalogs presented toys as solutions that would allow mothers to be good mothers without having to physically be there, even as the advertising copy evoked images of companionship and togetherness. Catalogs also emphasized skill building over fun, defined only certain skills as skills in the first place, and dismissed nurturing as feelings at best worth of expression and not of practice. The author argues that the toys promise to perpetuate for the children the same contradictions the catalogs purport to solve for their mothers.

Keywords: *motherhood; childhood; consumption; work/family; culture*

American women with children live within a hotly contested cultural space, in which different cultural dictums about the terms and obligations of caring for children battle for primacy, both for mothers to enact them and for policy makers to codify them (Arendell 2000; Garey 1999; Hays 1996; Hertz 1997; Hochschild 1997). Common beliefs diverge about women's paid work and their family responsibilities, for example, about father involvement and about the nature of the child (Coltrane 1996; Gerson 1985; Glass 1998). In this environment, mothers cannot mother, cannot construct a childhood for their charges, without forging some path through this thicket of cultural schemas, or scripts for action (Blair-Loy 2003;

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Ortner 1996; Swidler 2001). But these choices—and the cacophony of voices that arise to steer through them—can generate anxiety in mothers about whether they are making the right decisions, even if lack of resources or information limits how much they are actually “choices” (Ehrenreich and English 1978; Lasch 1977).

When people feel anxiety as they construct their lives from a range of only partially sanctioned cultural choices, they turn to cultural intermediaries for guidance. Arlie Hochschild (2003b) contends self-help books serve as one such intermediary, acting as a social barometer of our cultural clashes and offering a compromise between competing notions of cultural ideals. Self-help books tend to “clear an emotional pathway to a line of action that seems problematic,” she maintains (Hochschild 2003b, 261). In this way, they are at once a measure of and a salve for individual anxiety and a flag for collective uncertainty.

In the same vein, perhaps, is the realm of advertising. In some ways, we can view advertising as a cultural intermediary akin to self-help books, proffering its audience the same sort of cultural deal between contradictory ideas that compete for allegiance in the same person. To be sure, the advertisement’s often abbreviated form stops short of the narrative that in self-help books provides explicit coherence to such a deal (Giddens 1991; Hochschild 2003a). Yet advertisements rely on a shorthand of coded language and images to point simultaneously to the clashing ideals (e.g., how can I be there enough for my child?) and to the compromise at hand (e.g., I can value my child’s needs but not have to be there myself by buying a caring substitute).

I looked at advertisements to see what they tell us about modern dilemmas of motherhood by targeting the anxieties and hopes of mothers for and about themselves, fathers, and children. I analyzed the marketing of more than 3,500 toys in 11 toy catalogs from the winter of 2000-2001. I found that marketers offered cultural deals that mostly charted the ways mothers could accomplish the disparate component parts of maternal practice—in particular, the tasks of nurturing and training—without having to be there. In what follows, I consider the compromises these consumption opportunities are suggesting. Finally, I look at how these toys serve to perpetuate for children the same contradictions the catalogs purport to solve.

DILEMMAS OF CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD

Contemporary mothers, whatever their care/work configuration, suffer from the constraints of domesticity, a gender system Joan Williams (2000) describes as distinguishing between market work and family work in a way that marginalizes and denigrates those who perform the latter. Domesticity also relies on a particular, and gendered, vision of an ideal worker as one who works full-time and overtime, who can move “if the job requires it,” and who takes little or no time off to have or rear children. The penalties thereby incurred by those workers who engage in child rearing are steep. “Our economy,” Williams writes, “is divided into mothers and others” (2000, 2; Crittenden 2001).

Notwithstanding the constraints of this system, many mothers are also paid workers. In 1975, 47 percent of mothers with children younger than 18 were employed or looking for work, but by 2002, 72 percent were (U.S. Department of Labor 2004). The increase was the most rapid for married mothers of children younger than 6, who went from 30 percent employed or looking for work in 1970 to more than twice that at 61 percent in 2002 (U.S. Census 2003a). Of the nation's families with children younger than 18, only about one in five follow the domesticity model, with the father employed and the mother not engaged in the paid labor force (U.S. Census 2003b).

At the same time, the work of mothering has paradoxically increased, as notions of what makes for adequate child rearing evolved during the past half century. As Sharon Hays (1996, 131) argues, "all mothers ultimately share a recognition of the ideology of intensive mothering," a "logic" that incorporates beliefs about how mothers should be the ones to mother children who need sacrifices of considerable time, money, attention, emotion, and intellect. Ideals of maternal work have become more demanding, not less, even as increasing numbers of women have entered the paid labor force.

What are the components of maternal work? The philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989) contends that mothering practices involve meeting three central demands—for fostering children's growth, preservation, and social acceptability. Mothers foster children's growth by nurturing them, they fight for their preservation by protecting them, and they concern themselves with their children's social acceptability by training their children to live in their social world. Ruddick notes these tasks reflect the concerns and luxuries of white, middle-class, heterosexual mothering of healthy children and nods to the cultural and historical specificity of mothers' ability to meet these demands as well as their manner of doing so. Still, she insists on a certain universality of these demands stemming from children, no matter their backgrounds.

Care scholar Joan Tronto, writing with Berenice Fisher, suggests there are four different processes of care: caring about, taking care of, care giving, and care receiving (Fisher and Tronto 1990). Heretofore, ideals of mothering have largely been the province of "care giving"—the direct physical and emotional shepherding of a dependent other. To the extent that they are at all involved, fathers have been more in the range of "caring about," involving the recognition in the first place that care is necessary, or "taking care of," which entails assuming some responsibility for the identified need and how to respond to it, although not actually delivering the care one's self (Tronto 1993).

Mothers live at the convergence of these social messages: (1) that the successful worker is the unfettered, totally committed, ideal (and thus gendered male) worker as Williams (2000) outlines; (2) that the work world is more valued and valuable than the domestic sphere; and (3) that the best mothering is hands on, intensive, all consuming, and altruistic. That these messages are contradictory has been noted by many scholars (Blair-Loy 2003; Garey 1999; Hays 1996; Williams 2000). These contradictions express a deep-rooted cultural ambivalence that surrounds the work

of child rearing. At the same time that individual children become more “priceless,” to use Zelizer’s (1985) term, requiring intensive nurturing and development, they are collectively degraded, with a shrinking basis for moral claims to social funding of schools and other programs (Katz 2004). The work of raising children then is both exalted and dismissed.

Employed mothers, who live at the heart of these contradictions, have responded in various ways. Some seek to redefine mothering as “taking care of” instead of “caregiving,” and to reframe child care work as “custodial,” as Lynet Uttal (1996) observed. These women are akin to “manager mothers,” good mothers because they arrange for on-site care by others (Glenn 1994; Katz Rothman 1989). Other women engage in what Arlie Hochschild has dubbed a needs reduction strategy, contesting cultural standards of how much children should rely on mothers, emphasizing the independence and resilience of children, for example, as opposed to their fragility (Blair-Loy 2003; Hochschild 1997).

At the same time, research suggests working mothers are not immune to the cultural dictates of intensifying mothering. Scholars have found that working mothers spend more time with their children than did unemployed mothers 40 years ago and that they cut back on sleep and leisure to be able to do so (Bianchi 2000; Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). The personal sacrifices they make to meet the twin demands of working motherhood can be great, as Garey (1995) documented in her study of night shift nurses.

Despite these findings, working mothers report feeling anxious about the amount of time they spend with their children (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1996). The juxtaposition of these findings—that working mothers are spending more time with their kids even as they attest to worrying about spending enough—is evidence of the cultural trap of domesticity in which they find themselves, in which, one might say, they can’t win for losing. Mothers’ quest for social honor—no matter how they handle market work and family work in actuality—can founder on the mutually exclusive expectations with which they are faced.

In this context, then, a promised “third way” is a seductive call indeed. Arlie Hochschild describes advice books as “cultural intermediaries” that broker deals between competing groups that hold warring ideas about how people should act (Hochschild 2003b). These deals offer a compromise, a way out of irreconcilable differences in the ideals of mothering, working, or other occupations. Culture, she writes, “is the result of continually renegotiated deals”; how the deals are structured determines how much wiggle room people have to act and still be socially honorable. She argues that advice books lay out the current proposals for acceptable behavior and reveal “the amount and the nature of the cultural room they leave women” (Hochschild 2003b, 60).

I would argue advertisements are a sort of shadow cultural intermediary that, like advice books, ground their appeal in naming problems in a particular way and then offering solutions. To be sure, people seek out advice books, consulting them for the diagnoses and solutions they portray, while advertisements such as toy catalogs more often arrive at one’s doorstep unbidden and might frequently end up in

the trash. But the point here is not that people seek out the cultural deals at work in toy catalogs but that those deals—the contradictions they call on, the problems they frame, the solutions they urge—form part of the sales pitch. In addition, I would argue that advertisements express more than just ambivalence or anxiety; while we can surely read into them for both what we desire and what we fear, advertisements are also trying to work a certain alchemy, to name the problems borne of our ambivalence and then turn them into priced and marked solutions. Borrowing from Hochschild (2003b), I am naming that alchemy the “cultural deal.”

Catalog advertisements for toys and other equipment of child rearing aim straight at the challenges of contemporary mothering to suggest compromises of ideal types. Women are sold the notion that a certain product allows them to do the work of mothering well despite competing social directives. The currency of these deals is consumption, and ultimately, like advice books, “agreement is shown not by a raising of hands, but by a ring of the cash register” (Hochschild 2003b, 60).

I looked at toy catalog advertisements to ascertain the choices marketers offered mothers and thus the problems they named in their push to solve them with their products. While these problems had a practical cast—Who will teach my child to play chess? How will my children learn to go to sleep alone?—they reflected larger questions about mothering, childhood, and the social context in which they take place. What kind of cultural deals are mothers being sold? What compromises are being marketed as the “possible” ones, the ideals that could be sacrificed and still preserve one’s image as a good mother? How are marketers reconstructing the meanings of “good mother” to enable her to pursue other tasks as well, even to be, as it were, a “good worker?”

Over the course of the twentieth century, toy advertisements have gone from selling to the mother to addressing the child directly. The rise of television and subsequently of its deregulation, the ever more specific age grading of markets such as teens and tweens, and the greater role children play in household buying are some of the factors inviting marketers into children’s lives (Cook 2004; Cross 1997; McNeal 1992). But as Ellen Seiter (1995, 222-23) notes, toy catalogs in particular remain more the province of adults, a prerogative they pay a premium for:

For a higher price than parents would have to pay for similar items at Toys “R” Us, parents can avoid public skirmishes with children over toy selection. The parent selects the items and makes a phone call, and the goods appear at the door—thus circumventing the child’s attempt to participate more directly in the selection of toys.

Some catalogs do, of course, target children (the American Girl catalog is one notable example); certainly catalog makers aspire to having children peruse them, circling what they want (and some catalogs offer stickers or exhortations to encourage kids to do exactly that). Still, the catalogs sampled for this article are mostly aimed at mothers of younger children, however, to whom Seiter’s observation applies. In addition, that children are looking through the catalogs does not preclude mothers from doing so. This research focuses on the texts of advertisements, which targets

mothers even as pictures might try to entice their progeny. Last, the catalogs' language belies their true audience, as when Rosie Hippos suggests, "You can put a few chunks [of modeling beeswax] in a little yogurt container in your purse for doctor's office or plane rides, etc." (30, \$19.95; subsequent quotations from the data will follow this format of noting the catalog, page and toy price) or when Creative Kidstuff sells a secret black-light-illuminated diary with the query, "Where was this when we were kids and sneaky siblings were making our lives miserable?" (42, \$19.95). Marketers frame their sales pitch accordingly, and the cultural deals they offer in toy catalogs are thus aimed at the mother.

How do we know that advertisers are talking primarily to mothers in these catalogs, and not parents or grandparents, for that matter? The above reference to a purse notwithstanding, catalogs are usually careful to avoid gendering their reader. Ellen Seiter's (1995) studied gender neutrality in the above quote resembles that of the toy catalogs in much of their text, which most often avoids explicitly naming the reader they target, instead addressing them directly as "you," or other times using the word "parents," as in "kids (and parents too) will fall head over heels in love with [this toy]" (Constructive Playthings, 2, \$39.95). Nonetheless, I base my assumption on three factors: First, the catalogs do pepper their pages with references to mothers, as in the "mom-to-mom" sidebars in the Fisher Price catalog. Second, when fathers are the target, or women shopping for fathers, they are explicit, mentioning men or fathers, marketing toys with labels such as "Just like Dad's" and other strategies (although there was only a handful of such approaches in the sample). Doing so emphasizes that women are the unmarked category, the default buyer. Last, and most important, mothers are the primary caregivers of children, responsible for 80 percent of the child care by one measure (Williams 2000). Care giving involves buying, as a growing number of scholars have found (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998; Pugh 2004; Zelizer 1985), and for children in the developed world, some of those caring purchases include toys. With gender-neutral language, marketers avoid alienating men caregivers and women who do not want to downplay some men's active child rearing, but their sales pitches must still win over mothers to be effective.

The mothers whom most toy catalog marketers are courting are middle class, as Seiter (1995) contends, and thus the cultural deals on the table are shaped for their consumption. The problems the marketers purport to be solving—to meet the meanings these mothers impute to the core tasks of mothering—are particularly middle-class ones. For example, scholars have documented the seriousness with which middle-class mothers regard the task of training children through skill building (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003; Ruddick 1989, 1998). In *Unequal Childhoods*, Annette Lareau (2003) dubs middle-class parenting "concerted cultivation" to capture this sense of the paramount importance of developing skills. In contrast, in her study, low-income parents by and large strove for "the accomplishment of natural growth" in their children. The distinction implies a certain role for consumption: as opposed to the accomplishment of natural growth, concerted cultivation clearly

involves buying the right toys to appropriately “cultivate” children’s skills, these catalogs would aver.

THE SPECTRUM OF SELLING: METHOD AND SAMPLE SELECTION

In this research, I undertook an in-depth analysis of toy catalogs and the ways in which they marketed their wares. Direct mail composes but a small fraction of the \$23 billion annual “traditional” toy market (excluding video games) in the United States, responsible for just 5 percent of sales in 1999. According to the trade group Toy Manufacturers of America, most people bought toys at national discount chains such as Wal-Mart or at national toy chains such as Toys “R” Us; together those two types of sales outlets compose 60 percent of the market (Toy Manufacturers of America 2000).

But several factors make toy catalogs perhaps one of the most useful windows into the marketing of good mothering, particularly good middle-class mothering. First, as collections of text about toys, catalogs are a frozen moment of representation, offering a vision or set of visions particularly accessible to research and in-depth analysis. Second, catalog buyers are predominantly women, and toy catalog shoppers are predominantly parents. Third, catalogs are sent to addresses carefully culled for demographic purposes—the most likely buyers are in households with more than \$80,000 in income—suggesting the sales pitch is sharply honed for the presumed members of these households (Beaudry 1999).

For this article, I chose 11 catalogs from the December 2000 holiday season. Using purposive sampling, I aimed to capture the broad groupings of the toy catalog industry. Seiter suggests that mail-order catalogs mimic the markups, merchandise, and sales strategies of upscale toy stores; she describes a mainstream set of catalogs from relatively small companies and another set devoted to an “alternative, ‘green,’ hippie aesthetic” relying on images of “natural mothering” and folk traditions (Seiter 1995, 221; see also Bobel 2002). I sampled catalogs in each of these two groupings and then added another grouping of catalogs affiliated with larger toy stores or manufacturers, such as FAO Schwartz and Fisher Price (see Table 1 for a description of the sample). With an average of 345 products per catalog, I analyzed the sales pitch behind approximately 3,770 products. In steps described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), I identified several “themes,” or observations about repeated tactics the catalogs use to sell these products, and the larger issues to which these tactics appear to be linked. Themes included such repeated topics as the ability of toys to stimulate children, the claims of toys to authentic simulation (“just like a *real* cash register”), or the difference in parent and child perspectives (“sounds awful to adults, totally awesome to kids”). I gathered together instances of these themes to develop them into analytic memos, which subsequently guided my evaluation about those themes most pivotal in structuring the marketing that is the subject of this article. This analytic process involved an interactive effort that

TABLE 1: Description of the Sample

Catalogs Sampled	Number of Pages	Approximate Number of Toys	Average Price (\$) ^a	Additional Notes
<i>Mainstream, small</i>				
Constructive Playthings	52	260	52.06	Affiliated with 7 stores nationwide.
Creative Kidstuff	56	390	29.93	Most kid-friendly display of catalogs sampled, but most text still targets adult consumer. Most kids of color pictured of sampled catalogs (31 out of 97).
Playfair Toys	40	280	49.39	Motto on title page: "Non-violent, educational fun for boys and girls . . . because all children are created equal."
Sensational Beginnings	60	420	34.18	Opening "letter" from company president: "As always I encourage you to spend as much time with our children as you can. That is my dream for you."
<i>Mainstream, large</i>				
Back to Basics	87	520	196.99	Affiliated with the Internet giant Amazon.com. Company address: "One Memory Lane."
FAO Schwartz	108	400	163.28	Cover motto: "Wish big." Includes a \$650 stuffed elephant and a \$12,000 Range Rover ride-on "toy," as well as items standard in other catalogs.
Fisher Price	60	150	35	Bright colors and roomy layout make this eye-catching for kids, but the text aims straight at mothers with features such as the "Mom-to-Mom" testimonials and "Play & Learn" insets with expert advice about children's development.
Lilly's Kids	80	400	32.13	All but three toys sold for a child's solitary play.
<i>Alternative</i>				
Magic Cabin Dolls	48	300	26	Dubs itself the purveyor of "childhood's purest treasures." Prices range widely, from \$2 doll socks to \$250 wooden houses.
Natural Baby Company	48	300	22.99	Includes clothing (not analyzed here). Toy section features five-point treatise on the superiority of wooden toys.
Rosie Hippos	48	350	29	Family business introduced on first page (with kids aged two and seven). Unusual among sampled catalogs for sometimes selling sheer fun, still includes heavy emphasis on skills gained.

a. Average price represents the average cost of all toys listed on the first five pages of each catalog, in 2000 dollars, unadjusted.

included exploring several themes, returning to the catalogs to test the salience of these identified themes, and using that dance of exploration and testing to siphon out a sense of which themes are more present, more apt, or more explanatory than others.

There are specific claims that I can and cannot make based on this research. This project cannot address the ways in which the consumer receives or even shapes the messages these catalogs purvey. Scholarship in the sociology of consumption and in cultural studies generally has sought to demonstrate the variety and unpredictability of consumer response; these studies assert a place for agency and resistance in studies of cultural discourse (Holt 1997). In other work, I analyze why parents buy, developing a typology to capture the variety of motivations I found in interviews and fieldwork (Pugh 2002). People alter, view askance, and even play with cultural images, however carefully they are constructed or soberly they are tendered (Chin 2001). This article cannot broach that process.

Nonetheless, as a study of text, indeed a study of deliberate propaganda, my data allow me to consider the ways in which these catalogs are purveying a particular image or set of images in their efforts to sell. With these data, I analyze how catalogs attempt to hook the buyer, and I look beyond the marketing claims to consider what broader visions they are selling. I identify and elaborate on the themes underlying toy catalog marketing and demonstrate the specific kinds of anxiety and reassurance catalogs bring to bear in their efforts to sell.

I organize the following material within the frame of Ruddick's (1989) core tasks of mothering, looking at the "cultural deals" toy catalogs offer with regard to maternal tasks of nurturing and training. I found that in this sample, few data coalesced around the third task Ruddick outlined, that of protection, at least not in the way Ruddick intended, as the preservation of children during their long state of fragility and dependence. Rather, catalogs focused on property and privacy, offering mothers means of surveillance of kids, of ensuring kids' privacy from sibling incursions, and of protecting against thieves. Other kinds of catalogs—the Safety First brand comes to mind—certainly frame their products as (maternal) protection for sale,¹ but their wares do not generally overlap with that of toy catalogs in general, such as those sampled here, which have more products in common than not.

Most of the data did fall within the categories of nurturing or training, however, which itself suggests something about the cultural space in which these mothers and marketers operate. Marketers could have put forward ideals of mothering to include providing for their children, for example, solving the contradictions faced by white, middle-class, working mothers in a more gender-radical way. Such a redefinition would bring their mothering ideals closer to low-income and nonwhite mothers, who have long been both providers and caregivers (Collins 1990; Segura 1994). I outline these potential marketing alternatives to emphasize the paths these catalogs did end up taking—not because I expect marketers will lead the way to the revolution but rather because their decisions reflect the horizons of what seems possible for their target market. In this case, marketers restricted their bargaining to white, middle-class concepts of what constitutes maternal practice, suggesting that

women themselves do not have a lot of cultural room to transform idealized motherhood into providing, even though for most mothers, white women as well as women of color, their actual practices involve doing just that.

NURTURING: "EVERYTHING'S FRIENDLIER WITH TWO"

In the coveted last-page spread in the Fisher Price holiday catalog, a young white boy is pictured sitting cross-legged on the floor, one arm around the big yellow teddy bear on his lap. The boy and the bear both have on red shirts, and each holds open purple plastic "books." This picture covers two pages, with the headline announcing, "Disney's Winnie the Pooh." A speech bubble is drawn to come out of the bear's open mouth, saying, "Tigger bounced by with a new orange ball." Winnie the Pooh is "reading," while the boy looks down, involved, intent, raptly following the text. With this battery-operated toy, Pooh comes with two books, and when the child turns pages, Pooh "magically turns pages in his book too." Afterwards, the bear asks questions about the stories. The ad copy declares, "Everything's friendlier with two . . . especially when you're reading with Pooh" (59, \$43.00).

Many expert voices exhort parents to read to their children, often for at least 20 minutes a day. From government organizations to private foundations to published child-rearing experts, these messages point to research demonstrating that kindergarten readiness and other measures of success reflect exposure to books. In addition, reading is portrayed not only as important to the child's academic future but as a way to bond with the child. The Association of Booksellers for Children, for example, launched a national outreach literacy program featuring books and posters and supported by Rob Reiner and Hillary Rodham Clinton; it was titled "The Most Important 20 Minutes of Your Day . . . Read with a Child." While the language of these campaigns most often uses the gender-neutral terms "parent" or "primary caregiver," the message is clear: Good mothers are those who introduce their children to reading. A parenting advice Web site maintained by the same company purveying the catalog, Fisher Price, joins the chorus: "Perhaps nicest of all, books foster a sense of intimacy. Reading together offers your child the chance to have your undivided attention and a cozy cuddle, too" (Fisher Price 2004).

Pooh the reader promises to fulfill half of that ideal. In the end, the child gets exposure to words, and some cuddle time in the bargain, but not with the mother. The mother's task to read to her child, as dictated by experts, is redefined as the child's need to be read to, and not necessarily by a person. The cultural deal offered by this type of toy preserves the need for nurture, but redefines nurture as the act—of reading, of putting the child to bed, of cuddling—and not the relationship.

But the catalog does not merely offer this toy as the happy compromise, the cultural deal, for the busy mother. As are most of the children pictured in the sampled catalogs, the boy in the picture is alone. By using the words "Everything's friendlier with two . . ." as a caption for a picture in which the child in question is not actually with anyone else, or at least not with anyone animate, the ad copy is highlighting a

central tension underlying the cultural deal at stake here. The marketers stoke a very particular maternal anxiety—is my child lonely? If I am not here to give him what he needs, will he be lonely?

In the Pooh ad, the copy meets the anxiety it elicits with the second half of that sentence, “. . . especially when you’re reading with Pooh.” Thus, the catalog first raises the mother’s guilt and concern about her ability to be there. Then it offers consumption as the honorable solution, one that allows her to be a good mother, who effectively manages and meets her child’s need for nurture, even if she must be absent.

Pooh here offers a cultural deal that I found again and again in my analysis of toy catalogs. One of the most important tasks of mothering is to nurture, or provide loving, attentive primary care for children, according to Ruddick (1989). Yet this task is also one of the most challenging, for every mother to be sure, and particularly for the employed mother, who cannot be in two places at once. The toy catalogs offer their readers cultural deals that appeal to the mother torn by competing demands on her time and presence.

If the child is afraid of the dark, for example, Fisher Price has the nonparental solution: “This huggable friend helps kids fall asleep as he hums a lullaby, talks and softly glows when his tummy is squeezed” (57, \$14.00). Parents struggling with sleep issues are urged by Fisher Price to buy an electronic aquarium with classical music, lullabies, and twinkling lights, “activated by remote control, so you won’t disturb baby.” (The picture shows baby asleep with an inset of a woman holding the remote.) A “testimonial” in the catalog—titled “Mom-to-Mom”—reads, “We struggled to get our twins to sleep by themselves. . . . Night after night, nothing helped but holding them. [After buying the aquarium,] soon we’d creep out of the room, and before the aquarium turned itself off they’d fallen into a peaceful sleep. Our boys use this wonderful product every night!” (43, \$30.00). Note that in this advertising copy, the problem is that “nothing helped but holding them.” Indeed, the last line turns the consumption over to the children, and the parents are absent altogether: “Our boys use this wonderful product every night.” Like the reading Pooh, the aquarium product is billed as weaning the children of their parents so that they can still be nurtured but without the parents (or another adult caregiver) to provide it.

As mentioned, the vast majority of ads depicted children as playing alone. “Just fill the vinyl mat with warm water, place it on the floor and let your baby play away,” Constructive Playthings (8, \$8.95) urges, in just one of plentiful examples. Just as Sutton-Smith (1986) contends, toys are given for solitary play, paradoxically even as they are most often given in communal settings such as birthday or Christmas celebrations. Nonetheless, the catalog copywriting reflected a sense of unease about that: Marketers who sold toys to be played with alone did so by promising the child would find companionship in it. Advertisements express and legitimate ambivalence, as Hochschild (2003a) argues, including the social ambivalence whirling around child rearing.

Upscale FAO Schwarz addresses mothers' conflicting desire for their child's solitary play and their fear of that child's loneliness with the most technologically advanced toys in its arsenal; it sells toys that use voice technology and artificial intelligence to make for more lifelike companions. The catalog urges, "Parents can program a 'Barney' doll to become a child's very own, one-of-a-kind, talking friend, so that Barney knows the child's name, birthday, favorite things and more. Just squeeze Barney's hand and all the customized fun begins" (63, \$69.95). Another doll "grows physically and emotionally," the catalog promises (42, \$99.99). (The only abilities the catalog mentions, however, are skills in numbers, letters, and vocabulary.) "When is a doll more than a doll?", FAO Schwarz asks, and answers, "When she is made with breakthrough technology that customizes her 'memory' to form a one-of-a-kind friendship with a child. . . . Tell her your secrets . . . she'll remember!" (47, \$69.99). For older kids, a set of dolls "talk and have life-like conversations with you or each other about things like self-discovery, sports and fashion" (91, \$39.99). Other catalogs use technology to the same ends, as when Fisher Price offers a similar pet-friend: "He listens and responds only to you . . . can sense and respond to your touch . . . has all the actions and emotions of a real dog . . . is so lifelike, so convincingly canine. . . . It's Rocket and he is looking for a loving home here on earth!" (23, \$105.00). FAO Schwarz also sells responsive toy canines and other animals, which change their projected emotions depending on whether the child has been playing with it. "The more care and attention he receives, the more he is willing to do tricks," FAO Schwarz writes (73, \$49.99). The toy and the ad text accompanying it thus transfer the "need" for companionship from the child to the toy; the ad promises an interactive and emotional connection for a child, albeit with an inanimate object.

The Reading Pooh ad, and others like it, maintains the contemporary received wisdom of children as needing nurture or an emotional connection but with one important compromise: The child does not need people, specifically a mother, to actually provide it. The child will get what he needs (and the child pictured is male), which is to be nurtured. The sleight of hand underlying this cultural deal is in the passive tense "to be nurtured" as applied to the child, which elides the question of exactly by whom, or in this case, by what.

TRAINING: "THE RIGHT TEACHER CAN MAKE THE WORLD OF DIFFERENCE"

While nurturing and protecting may be central maternal tasks, toy catalogs focus their efforts most aggressively on the work of training, or rearing children to be acceptable within their own social milieu. That training can be in skills or values. As in the cases of nurture and protection, toy catalogs perform the same sort of magic for the work of training. Even though a mother might conceivably have more invested in the particular content of the child's training—what skills get explained and emphasized, what values get introduced—the promise of these products is that

her absence will not matter. As before, the catalogs separated the fact of training from the relationship that formerly served as its conduit and context. Once again, however, the catalogs remind the mothers of their anxiety before they assuage it.

One electronic language toy, dubbed "Little Linguist," is sold on the pretext that it would "let children learn other languages the way they learned their first: by hearing a word, associating it with an object, and using it in simple sentences" (Back to Basics, 28, \$69.99). At first glance, we might be surprised that the copywriter seemed to forget that the way children learn their first language is through constant interaction with a primary caregiver. Notice, however, that the structure of the passage produces the same emotional trick as earlier examples: recalling for the reader that idealized image and then tucking it neatly away. Like the pitch for the reading Pooh ("Everything's friendlier with two"), copy for the Little Linguist effectively brings up the notion that infants first learn within a caring, nurturing, dyadic relationship, subtly reminding the mothers of that caring ideal, and then reshapes that learning experience into a solitary phenomenon, something the mother can "take care of" by consuming.

Fisher Price straddles the same line in a different way, by emphasizing the relationship that undergirds childhood learning and then transforming that relationship into something the child can have with branded characters: "When children interact with characters they already know and love, they play longer. And the longer they play, the more they learn. Help your child find out how the right teacher—the right friend—can make a world of difference with learning toys" (50). The mother reading this text can be forgiven for a moment of anxiety or guilt when she reads the words "the right teacher," as she has perhaps been told that she is her child's first teacher. But in keeping with the pattern thus far established, just as quickly, the catalog assuages that guilt with a new image—"the right friend"—to promise all the learning for her child that she would have provided.

Training is a central motif for these catalogs, particularly skill building. To at least some degree—and sometimes for almost every toy—each catalog espouses the stimulating, educational value of its toys, positing them as worthwhile because they deliver more than "just" fun. A toy "combines the fun of playing store with the value of learning basic math skills," contends Sensational Beginnings (28, \$39.95). Or, to sell a water table, Playfair Toys asks, "Will a rock float? What is erosion?" (26, \$249.99). Natural Baby Company, in selling the Skwish, a toy for children aged four months to two years, intones that it "demonstrates the engineering principle of tensegrity: the wood rods always pop back into place because of the evenly placed tension of the plastic" (catalog insert, \$18.95). As Lareau (2003) documents, the development of skills is a central component of the middle-class mother's child-rearing strategy of "concerted cultivation." In these catalogs, the steady drumbeat of learning, learning, learning itself evokes some anxiety in the reader, which is fed and soothed by the same products promising to teach the necessary skills.

What counts as skills for these catalogs and their audience? In most instances, certain physical skills and select academic skills are worthy of targeting through

play. Physical skills such as manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination are relentlessly advertised in toys sold for infants and toddlers but also in copy describing timed board games, arcade games, and sports toys sold for older kids. "Used by coaches and trainers," Back to Basics promises, "strengthens the muscles and develops coordination" (12, \$54.99). "Hopping along this brilliant playmat, children develop coordination, balance and number recognition as they're having fun," observes Constructive Playthings (32, \$24.95). Academic skills are generally pushed in toys aimed at preschoolers up through preteens, from letters, numbers, and math symbols to geography, chemistry, and programming. "This set has really helped my son to understand basic math concepts," Rosie Hippos noted (11, \$31.95). Creative Kidstuff (47, \$20.95) offers "fun experiments about solids, liquids and gases every child should do before the 4th grade. If air is colorless, odorless and tasteless, how can you prove it's there?" Particularly for the younger set, the more of these skills a toy includes, the better. "Sorting board teaches them a lot more than a thing or two! It helps them learn about hand/eye coordination, counting, size order, shapes and colors" (Lilly's Kids, 74, \$14.98). Another toy "offers tactile and visual stimulation," then "becomes a path to encourage motor skills and crawling," finally to offer "peek-a-boo activities and shape-sorting" (Sensational Beginnings, 38, \$49.95). As always, all of these skills come about via the child's solitary play.

Rarely are other skills described, making their occasional appearance particularly noteworthy. The gendered nature of which skills are valued as such and which skills are not is ever present, albeit hidden by the mostly gender-neutral language. Interests commonly coded as masculine, such as those in math or science, are always referred to as skills, while those commonly stereotyped as feminine, such as role-playing or caring, are most often not. As an exception, Fisher Price sells a supermarket checkout set with the tag line "smart little shoppers love all the activities and sounds," suggesting shopping as a skill unrecognized in the other sampled catalogs (9, \$21.50). Most important, only one of the sampled catalogs refers to the "nurturing skills" that might arise from doll play. "What better way for children to practice their nurturing skills than with this soft, natural baby doll?" asks Magic Cabin Dolls (17, \$99.95).

The other catalogs momentarily abandon the skills discourse to sell dolls, appealing instead only to the notion that the toy will "steal your child's heart" (Rosie Hippos, 24, \$8.95), noting "the instinct to love and nurture" (PlayFair Toys, 17, \$49.98), or calling them "nurturing feelings" that can grow with the right toys (PlayFair Toys, 14, \$29.98). Recognizing nurturing feelings seems a step forward from leaving them unnamed, and surely close to recognizing nurturing skills, but PlayFair Toys ends up lumping together nurturing feelings and aggressive feelings, suggesting that what they are talking about here is very different from skill. "We all have nurturing feelings, and this easy-rocking cradle gives your child a good way to express them," PlayFair Toys suggests (9, \$39.98), and just a few pages later, it notes, "We all have aggressive feelings. This [boxing] set gives kids an acceptable way to deal with them" (13, \$19.98).

While Lareau (2003) finds that middle-class mothering is dedicated to the development of skills deemed useful for future success, these catalogs are offering that plus something more. The promise of these toys is twofold: (1) Yes, your child will learn the skills and values that matter, but also (2) no, you do not have to be there to do it. These catalogs, then, are selling mothers a cultural deal that allows them to be concerted cultivators of their children while they are absent.

Part of training also includes values, and catalogs offer products to provide that as well. Creative Kidstuff sells a video that it bills as a “tool for improving self-esteem, strength and respect for nature,” family values perhaps but in this case taught by the TV (16, \$15.95). In case kids will not sit still for values teaching from nonhuman objects, PlayFair Toys promises “eight catchy original songs with danceable beats and sing-along lyrics hold kids’ attention as they teach valuable lessons about accepting people different from ourselves” (8, \$17.95). Readers might think cultural values are passed down via continued observation or thought-provoking conversations. Now, these catalogs promise, even off-site mothers can ensure that their children develop core social values and personal strength, managing the process from afar by buying the right product.

TOYS FOR THE SOLITARY CHILD: “ADULTS NOT INCLUDED”

It is also worth attending to what these advertisements do not offer. They are not suggesting that, for example, children still need nurturing or training within a relationship, but that a father, other relative, or paid caregiver could provide it. They are not selling toys as the means for deepening the bonds between other caregivers and children or as a way for groups of kids to establish friendships and community. Rather, in these catalogs, the child has no other human option for attachment or love but the mother; without her, the child can turn only to toys.

A handful of the toys I perused did make reference to fathers, but mostly by offering to replace the absent father. “Yees! A weekend of fishing, canoeing, cooking-out and more. Great fun . . . even if it’s only pretend!” Constructive Playthings crows, under a “camping” set with dolls (a man and a boy), tent, and other equipment. “These two articulated figures can spend lots of quality time together, in touch with nature” (3, \$29.95). Once again, the language of the text is designed to tug on normative values of what should be, as in the notion that fathers and sons should go camping together—“great fun . . . even if it’s only pretend”—while meeting those anxieties with the “two articulated figures” who actually get to spend the “quality time.”

Back to Basics offers an electronic toy that teaches the child to pitch, taking the place of any human tossing balls back and forth in the backyard. “A personal pitcher to follow your batter’s development,” the catalog declares. “Radio-controlled bat works with speed control dial to let kids be in charge of when and how fast the pitch flies” (77, \$59.99). FAO Schwarz, which targets the uppermost

end of the mail-order class ladder, sells an electronic chessboard named Ivan that will “teach you, then play you with a 500-word spoken vocabulary, with Ivan commenting on your play . . . in a most amusing way” (98, \$100). These catalogs seem to be holding out the promise that, thanks to these toys, children will not miss fathers who are not around to camp, toss balls in the backyard, or teach them to play chess.

The limited options, the sense that the woman has to go it alone—if it is not she who will solve a child’s needs, it is no one, not the father, not another caregiver—hearkens back to Hochschild’s (2003b) study of Japanese and American advice books. Unlike the Japanese ones, American advice books present social bonds not as a help but rather as a hindrance to a woman’s achieving her goals. Perhaps that is one reason why there is no one else there in the catalog text. It is also possible that advertisers do not want the toy to provoke in the mother/buyer jealous feelings about a child’s attachments to other caregivers. In the toy catalog venue, toys must meet the anxiety they stir up.

FATHERS: “IT DOESN’T GET ANY BETTER THAN THIS”

While the vast majority of toys in these catalogs were sold with the image of the child in solitary play, promising that he or she would be nurtured, protected, and trained without the mother, a small subsample of toys were sold with the image of the child in relationship. Some of these relationships invoke a mother, others invoke a father, and still others a larger community. These toys numbered only one or two out of hundreds in most of the catalogs I sampled, although in the “alternative mothering” subset of catalogs I sampled, as many as 10 to 15 per catalog fall under this category.

Similar to the “fun” traditionalism Hochschild (2003b) found in those advice books preaching allegiance to the “domesticity” system, toys sold with the image of mothers and children together did so most often by saying it was fun. Creative Kidstuff notes, “Delightful game for preschoolers and adults to play together” (29, \$7.50). Back to Basics lures adults into sledding fun: “The snow family toboggan lets parents ride too” (85, \$109.99). Rosie Hippos, aimed at mothers who aspire to construct a “simpler, gentler” childhood, describes one product as “a neat project to do with the wee ones” (25, \$15.95) and says another is “an adventure game designed for parents to play with their children” (33, \$14.50). At Fisher Price, sections titled “Mom-to-Mom” attest to the parent-child play value: “We immediately set up camp and began roasting marshmallows with the delightfully realistic ‘crackling’ sounds stick. We listened to all the outdoor sounds as we sat under the tent for a long while and ‘camped’ ” (11, \$29.50).

In a context in which literally thousands of toys are sold on the basis that they will develop skills—with ad copy that mentions fun, if at all, only as a reward, lure, or smokescreen for kids who are really practicing skills—the use of “fun” to sell toys for mother-child play is noteworthy. In these rare instances, toy catalogs lure

mothers with portrayals of quality time: conflict-free, playful moments with their child free of pedagogy or pressure.

Even fathers were able to have fun in a few advertisements. As Magic Cabin Dolls puts it, a tree fort they sell is “guaranteed to captivate children 3 years and older (especially men—they love this)” (30, \$199). Yet the language here underscores that the cultural deal at stake—that the father will be so entranced by the toy that he will get involved in the child’s play—is one for the mother. By infantilizing men, this sales pitch is offering the mother another sort of cultural deal bent on resolving the collision between market work and family work, and the attendant devaluation of the latter. By turning men into children, the toy marketers are recovering for the mother the superior vantage point of moral adulthood from the rational autonomous worker, the father. She remains the mother, buying a toy so that it will “captivate” her charges, and she becomes the adult, surrounded by children, who include even their father.

Other catalogs offered a more potentially satisfying cultural deal, however, by taking on the “stalled revolution,” or women’s primary responsibility for caregiving. Several catalogs sold toys, like the dollhouse above, with the “guarantee” that it will bring the father into the home, lure him into playing with children, perhaps entice him to assume more caregiving responsibilities. This might be the wish of many mothers, employed or not, but it is the key to validation for the stay-at-home mother, whose social denigration rests in part on the fact that so few men “mother” (Hochschild 1989; Williams 2000).

Magic Cabin Dolls offers several dollhouses with which, it suggests, adults—even men—will want to play too. “Our unique treehouse has been designed to cross the lines of gender and age,” it maintains (31, \$249). FAO Schwarz offers a “Just like Dad’s” line of toys, endorsed by baseball player Cal Ripken Jr., which are essentially collections of tools, baseball equipment, and other items transformed into “Dad Gear” with the help of childlike lettering (a backwards “S” in “Just” completes the look). FAO created the line “to give children the chance to celebrate—and emulate—one of their very favorite role models,” the catalog reads (69, \$20-\$34). Natural Baby advertises a potty for kids with a telling portrayal: “Just imagine, Dad on his potty, you on yours. He’s got his toilet paper, you’ve got yours. He’s got his newspaper, you’ve got your nursery rhymes. His feet can reach the floor, and so can yours. It doesn’t get any better than this” (29, \$69.95). In this scene, of course, the connection portrayed is perhaps a tenuous one—Dad and child are not talking with each other, not playing together, not interacting, but rather just sitting side by side in the bathroom. For a cultural deal that portrays men and children together, however, constrained of course by the limits of what seems culturally possible, perhaps “it doesn’t get any better than this.”

The cultural deal offered here has transformative potential: Mothers can fight off the tyranny of domesticity by enlisting their husbands in domestic tasks. Yet even in the utopian world portrayed in advertising, the father’s involvement in child care is weak in these examples—at best, he is playmate, role model, or bathroom companion. To the extent that he is a dabbler in a series of tasks still maintained by the

mother, she retains the moral accolades and the social contempt of domesticity and, if she is a working mother, most of the second shift as well (Hochschild 1989).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Toy catalogs offer the middle-class mothers who read them “cultural deals” that promise a resolution to the conflicts that bedevil them, conflicts rooted in the contradictory valuing of market work and family work. Most of the toys are sold with the promise that the child will be as nurtured, developed, and stimulated as middle-class child-rearing norms dictate, but with the innovation that the mother need not be there to have that happen. Some toys are sold with copywriting pitches that nonetheless recall ideals of companionship and togetherness, even as they are selling assurances that the child can grow up appropriately in solitary play.

The anxieties that coalesce around these deals might conceivably fester within any middle-class mother beset by the dictates of the intensive mothering ideology that Hays (1996) outlines, wondering whether she is doing enough to properly develop and nurture her child. Nonetheless, I would argue these ads seem to be more directly stoking and targeting the anxieties of working mothers, who, like the innovative professional mothers of Mary Blair-Loy’s study, still “mourn the time they have lost with young children” (2003, 141). Working mothers may actually be spending more time with young children than they did previously, perhaps in an effort to assert their adequacy as mothers, but they are still combating the stern legacy of domesticity, which requires that they prove it again and again.

If it is the working mother to whom these toys are directed, these ads free her up for the demands of the workplace by redefining what counts as good mothering. The child’s needs are held constant—he or she needs to be read to, needs to be distracted from imminent sleep, needs to be cuddled—but the mother’s obligations are reshaped significantly. These catalogs are giving mothers, arguably working mothers in particular, permission to remake their caregiving, in Fisher and Tronto’s (1990) terms, into “taking care of,” as in buying the toys that will take care of the particular maternal task. The reading Pooh and other such sales pitches enable women to be good mothers and still be away from their children, by extension to be good workers, just as reliably available for the long hours in the workplace as the ideal (male) worker Williams (2000) identified as the social standard. The employer’s needs, meanwhile, are not redefined at all; in the zero-sum battle for the mother’s time, this toy offers a compromise between home and work in which only home is compromising.

It is worth noting that these toys actually do not free mothers, or adults more generally, from child care. Children can play by themselves, but at the young ages for which these toys are developed, they certainly still need adult supervision. What these toys offer is the promise that it will not matter who is there—that the caregiver

could be even a nonnative English speaker with a relatively low level of education, say, without detriment to the child's accumulation of social and personal capital.² These cultural deals thus open the way to the global commodification of love subject to Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild's recent scrutiny (2003).

While these cultural deals might feel like salvation to those mothers trying to wend their way to an honorable life through the thorny thicket of opprobrium, they do not ultimately make that thicket disappear. Marketers sell toys that will nurture and train children on their own and that will turn men into children or helpmates, in part because mothers are trapped in a system that devalues care work and defines the ideal (paid) worker as a (male) person with no caregiving responsibilities. Yet as we have seen, the toys these catalogs sell replicate this value structure: They focus almost exclusively on teaching skills, they emphasize only certain skills as skills at all, and they dismiss nurturing as "feelings" at best worthy of expression but not of practice.

Most important, perhaps, most of these toys take the relationship out of child rearing. They redefine mothering as something the child can do on his or her own, with the help of the right toy. It is not that with this transformation, middle-class child rearing comes closer to that which Lareau (2003) finds practiced by low-income families, for example, "the accomplishment of natural growth." Rather, these catalogs do not abandon the primacy of skills that is central to "concerted cultivation" but instead use toys to do the cultivating. By eliding the relationship that is the basis of mothering, the catalogs help accelerate the further marginalization of care stemming from the system of domesticity. These toys push care, and children, ever more into the margins, until they do not even need an adult to do the caring.

I argue that like self-help books, advertisements act as cultural intermediaries, carving out these alternative paths through cultural conflict. As such, their analysis highlights the fissures that make for that conflict and that threaten to split apart the lives of women who try to straddle them. Further scrutiny would be useful to explore the visual dimension of these advertisements. While space did not permit such an analysis here, the power of advertisements is often visual and can also underscore certain messages that the text ignores or de-emphasizes. An analysis of visual imagery in toy advertisements might expand or add to the themes explored here.

The toy advertisements scrutinized in this research worked their cultural alchemy on meanings of motherhood, childhood, and fatherhood. The work world, and meanings of a good worker, escaped intact, free of the need for compromise. We can explain this omission by the power of work in U.S. society, but we can also anticipate it might have been exaggerated by the fact that this study looked at toy catalogs as opposed to, say, those selling office supplies. Nevertheless, mothers' lives and choices about market work and family work will continue to rest on seemingly irreconcilable contradictions until both mothering and working are redefined to make space for the other.

NOTES

1. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.
2. Thanks to Amy Hanser for clarification of this point.

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