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The Consumption of Children in a Capitalistic Society

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Studies and English. The research for this project was conducted under the mentorship of Professor John Mulrooney in his Recent American Poetry course. Jessica will attend Emerson College's creative writing M.F.A. program next fall with a concentration in poetry.

Audre Lorde's, "Now that I Am Forever with Child", and Sharon Olds', "The Moment the Two Worlds Meet," juxtapose the natural aspects of childbirth with late capital methods of consumption and reproduction. In "Now that I Am Forever with Child", Audre Lorde describes her fetus as a budding flower but feels detached from it during and after delivery. Sharon Olds also uses the metaphor of an opening flower to demonstrate the climax of delivery in "The Moment the Two Worlds Meet." In both poems, the birth of the child is anticlimactic and disappointing for the mother who feels like an empty vessel. This dehumanizing of self is evident in both poems. These poets share a non-traditional, perhaps radically distorted, view of motherhood. This transformation, in which mothers are cold machines, allows the poets to critique the capitalistic system which necessitated that transformation in the first place. The contrast between nature and industry, presented in these works, illustrates capitalism as a negative effect on society, as far as the value of human life is concerned.

Audre Lorde uses her poem, "Now that I Am Forever with Child," to draw comparisons between natural childbirth and the capitalistic exploitation of fresh ideas. Lorde's speaker views herself as a shell carrying precious cargo rather than as a mother. The child is "blooming within" her (2) like a flower. She "remembers each upon each" (3) day that the baby grows like the development of "each" (3) new blossom. At a particular moment during the pregnancy, she recalls that she "thought" (6) the "fluttering" (5) baby "was [her] heart" (6), establishing the tangibility of life inside of her. Prior to this, the "swelling" (4) of her "body" (4) made her pregnancy obvious, but not "heart" (6) stopping. She credits the "swelling planes of [her] body" (4) with the "blooming" (2) of the baby. As the geometric proportions of her body "swell" (4), like a balloon, the flower grows. The realization that her "heart" (6) is not "fluttering" (5) indicates that she views the baby as having taken over her body. The fetus is valued higher than the vessel as she loses sight of her individuality.

Lorde uses time as a way to fuse nature with industry. She explains that "the days wound down" (7), like a clock, and that "winter" (8) approached, like the "turning" (8) of a page. These harsh depictions of winter and time correlate with her speaker's attitudes alert the baby, who is "growing heavy/ against the wind" (9/10) and sucking the life out of her. This stark visualization

directly relates to her speaker's lack of emotion as the birth approaches. Instead of warm excitement, she robotically lists the developmental progress that the child is making. She says, "now her hands/ are formed" (11/12), "now her teeth are done" (14) and "now she sneezes"(15). As time passes, she starts to depict herself as an oven waiting for the baby to reach the right temperature. The more Lorde's speaker humanizes the child within her womb, the less alive she seems.

The birth of the child separates Lorde's speaker from the baby and establishes a narrative in which the natural is divided from the unnatural. Lorde uses sexual imagery during the birth, as the act of "sneezing" (15) initiates the opening of the "seed" (16). Sex is natural and brings warmth into the poem, establishing the ultimate setting for its climax. The "sneeze" (15) is the orgasm and the "seed" (16) that "opens" (16) is her speaker's cervix. As the child passes through, the umbilical cord functions as the stem and the uncurling baby is the blossoming bud. The child initiates the sexual activity as it transitions from a fetus to a flower. Opposing this verdant illusion that the child is a ripening flower unfolding itself for the first time is the corresponding abrasiveness of the mother as a machine.

Lorde speaks as though it is an obligation and duty to birth the fetus. She unemotionally and methodically states, "I bore you one morning just before spring" (17). The colorful feelings associated with "spring" (17) and "morning" (17) are darkened by the coolness of the word "bore" (17). As the child is "blooming" (2) from her uterus, like a flower in "spring"(17), she turns her attention to the inner workings of her brain. She uses the explosive imagery of a mechanism to recall how her "head rang like a firey piston" (18). Her "legs" (19) become "towers between which/ a new world [passes]" (19/20). These references to machinery and industry reflect Lorde's perspective on childbirth as mechanical productivity.

Lorde, a New Yorker of Carribean decent, describes a "new world" (20) that passes through the "towers" (19) of her speaker's legs. It is not too far to suggest that this is collinear with tower constructions such as the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. It is the birth of a conscious thought that Lorde is describing in "Now that I Am Forever with Child". As the "new world" travels through the "towers" of her "legs," it is physically being consumed by capitalism. After the thought is formed, birthed, and initiated it is automatically reproduced as a new product to be shared and exploited. This models a capitalistic approach to reproduction. The idea, like the "blooming" (2) flower, will be cut and sold creating the necessity for replenishment. Because she is hanging on by a "thread" at the end of the poem, "flowing through selves/ toward [the thing produced]," it is clear that the speaker is

reliant on the process that validates her existence (24/25). Thus, the mother's value is only sustained through frequent reproduction.

Similarly, in "The Moment the Two Worlds Meet," Sharon Olds establishes a relationship between reproduction and consumption. Like Lorde, Olds's speaker lacks emotion as she describes the fetus as an "it" throughout the poem. Her position during the birth is like that of a machine producing some sort of new product. The baby is "slick" (Olds 2), "glistening" (7), "shining" (7), "with thick liquid on it" (7) and covered with "grease" (23). The people present are like workers on a conveyer belt guiding the new product along. After the "slick whole body comes out" (2), the doctors, like factory workers "pull it" (3) and "steady it" (3) as "it pushes forth, not catch it, but keep their/ hands under it as it pulses out" (4/5). The workers are the "first to touch it" (6) and the "you" (24) is last because Olds is completely separated from the occasion.

As the product is "sliding" (8) along the conveyer belt, Olds's critique of consumption becomes more evident. During this section of the poem she is conveying the image of a grocery store. She describes the "limbs" (8), as they are "compressed close to the body" (9), like a "crab's rosy legs" (10). She continues to make references to food as she describes "the/ thighs closely packed like plums in heavy syrup, [and] the legs folded like the white wings of a chicken" (11/12). She calls the baby a "juiced bluish sphere" (14). She uses the geometric "sphere" (14), like Lorde's "planes" (Lorde 4), to create distance between the child and the mother. As the "baby is/ sliding between the two worlds" (14/15), Olds declares that it is "wet- like sex" (16). The idea that consumption and reproduction unite during sex is "the center of life" (13). The consumption of sex naturally produces a child like the consumption of food always produces the need for more food. This comparison confirms that Olds is suggesting that material production is of the same importance to consumers as human reproduction.

Like Lorde's speaker, Olds's speaker uses the illustration of a blooming flower to naturalize childbirth in a highly sexualized manner. Technically, "it *is* sex" (16) because labor is like the "opening back and back" (17) of the vagina, cervix and birth canal. She refers to the cervix as a "bud" (18), reminiscent of Lorde's, "seed" (Lorde 16). Once the "bud" (Olds 18) is "stripped" (18) it "thrust[s]" (19) and "peels itself" (19) to reveal a "flower" (20). Like the "bent" (10) legs of the "crab" (10), the flower is "severely folded" (20). After it "begins to open and dry" (21), Olds's speaker abruptly changes her attitude towards the blossom because the "the moment is over" (22). The process is anticlimactic. Like a freshly birthed item on a conveyer belt, "they wipe off the grease and wrap the child

in a blanket and/ hand it to *you* entirely in this world” (23/24). Olds finally uses the word “child” (23) in the last sentence of a poem that sounds as if it takes place in a harsh, oily, factory or grocery store. The stuff produced in the factory and sold in the grocery store is valued just as high as a “child” (23). The people are “wip[ing] off the grease” (23) and “wrap[ping] it in a blanket” (23) like they are in a packaging plant rather than at a hospital. When Olds finally states that they “hand it to you entirely in this world” (24), she is speaking to consumers. “The Moment the Two Worlds Meet” is actually the moment in which the consumer purchases the products made by the machine.

Jon Clay, considering modernist poetry, noted that “western poetry is bourgeois to the extent that the society out of which it is produced is a bourgeois society” (38). For these modern poets, the tensions of late capital are even more problematic. Audre Lorde and Sharon Olds relate the reproduction of human life with the reproduction of raw material goods and parallel consumption and reproduction in both natural and industrial settings. In her book, *I Am Your Sister*, Audre Lorde says that the “capitalist structure is a many headed monster” (48). In “Now that I Am Forever with Child,” she explains that she “can only distinguish/ one thread through running hours/ You.... Flowing through selves/ toward you” (22/25). Like a woman in a textile factory reproducing the same sweater, she is holding onto “thread[s]” (23) that will always “flow through selves” (24), or through other “threads” (23), towards the final product. The title, “Now that I Am Forever with Child,” is indicative of this entrapment of self in a capitalistic society.

Sharon Olds’s critique of capitalism is less ambiguous. The word “moment” is substantial in that it transitions the poem from critique to critique. The first time that she uses it, in line one, she is a machine releasing metallic objects for factory workers to guide and sort. The second time it is used, on line 8, the thing produced is described as food being sold at a grocery store. The third time that it is used, on line 13, she is incorporating natural reproduction with sex into the rest of the poem. The fourth time that it is used, on line 22, she pulls the poem together to critique the process as a whole. As the poem progresses, the product becomes more human. At first it is an object, then it is food, then it is a flower, then it is a “child” (23). This progression of importance suggests that children are

the most desirable things to consume. Once the novelty wears off, “the moment is over” (22), and it’s time to make something new.

Audre Lorde and Sharon Olds attack capitalism in these poems. In “Now that I Am Forever with Child,” Lorde criticizes the exploitation of fresh ideas that establish industry. In “The Moment the Two Worlds Meet,” Olds positions herself as a giant machine spitting out products that are born purposely to be devoured by consumers. Both poets use the representations of flowers and babies to contrast the caustic causalities of commerce as it leads to the destruction of such innocence. In the end, however, the concept of reproducing something that is immediately going to be consumed concerns the poet. The difficulty for us, as consumers of these poems, is the anticlimactic feel of a newborn product stemming from the capitalistic approach that more is more. Hence, it is impossible to enjoy the novelty of something because it is automatically old by default. The exploitation, consumption and reproduction of babies, flowers, food, thoughts, objects and sex is making it difficult for us to quench our thirst because overabundance has made it impossible to taste anything. In these poems, Lorde and Olds are expressing their concern for the ethicality of future generations, as they fear that capitalism is creating a world in which society is increasingly incapable of satiating hunger.

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