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Brangelina: The Fertile Valley of Celebrity

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Family photos are probably never politically neutral, but this one is especially overdetermined. A testament to the Jolie-Pitts' cosmopolitanism, freedom from race bias, and twenty-first-century internationalism, the photo also participates in an imaging of family that has become ubiquitous in contemporary culture. In a neoliberal era in which confidence in most forms of social and institutional organization is eroding, an intensely idealized vision of the family, endowed in its most privileged incarnations with a vast expansiveness, has flourished. While tableau scenes of large nuclear families have become prominent in postfeminist popular culture, the inverse image of the abject female singleton has likewise proliferated. (Jennifer Aniston isn't physically present in the photo but implicitly juxtaposes it.)

The celebrity-driven "family values" representational regime suggests that forms of social, racial, class, and even international inequality can be resolved through the assembling of families in the ultimate "privatizing" gesture. An important ideological corollary to neoliberalism, "family values" in its most intense stagings, as in the photo here, proffers a familial expansiveness that is biological, adoptive, racial (the racial meanings of this photo are heightened by a white and off-white aesthetic), and even (as in the case of the Jolie-Pitts, who refract and intensify the mobility of the new professional class Peter T. Kilborn writes about in *Reloville*) geographical. It is this version of the wealthy celebrity family that is symbolically positioned to solve economic and social justice problems.

Images such as this one center a representational economy that favors the expansive family even while U.S. family size has been shrinking (outside of a small, privileged demographic). A pervasive impulse in celebrity culture has been to assemble but also to undo such families (witness the travails of the eponymous reality stars of *Jon*

& *Kate Plus 8* and in the case of the Jolie-Pitts the ceaseless tabloid speculation that their relationship has ended or will end). In the current representational economy, family ties not only confer the most significant forms of

Figure 1. The Brangelina informal family portrait (*People Magazine*, 2008).

identity capital but also are endowed with the power to stabilize and recuperate identity crisis. Such a narrative of stabilization was written around Jolie, whose one-time persona as a bisexual, incestuous, blood vial-wearing vi-rago has transformed to centralize motherhood in both her "private" life and creative work (Jolie now frequently and earnestly plays crusading mothers or mothers-to-be on-screen). Similar transformative narratives of motherhood as recovery have been crafted around "lower grade" but commercially significant stars like Ashlee Simpson and Nicole Ritchie.

The plenitude of the privileged family stands in stark contrast to the vituperative and condemnatory discourses that often circulate in regard to single women and mothers

who are seen to squander or misuse their fertility. The birth of the Jolie-Pitt twins preceded by a little under a year the emergence of two spectacularly controversial single women whose positioning as cultural provocateurs was decisively linked to their single status and/or association with the wrong kind of family formation. California “Octomom” Nadya Suleman (already a mother of six whose poignant attempts to physically make herself over in Jolie’s image added fuel to the fire for some) made headlines in early 2009 when she had octuplets, appearing to give hyperbolic credence to the conservative stereotype of the single mother as voracious overconsumer of public funds. Calls for Suleman’s sterilization were not uncommon in the weeks following the delivery of the octuplets.

The controversy over Suleman was shortly followed by the emergence of Susan Boyle, the frumpy forty-seven-year-old whose beautiful, composed delivery of “I Dreamed a Dream” on reality series *Britain’s Got Talent* made her a worldwide Internet sensation in May 2009. Boyle seemed to hit a strong cultural nerve in the initial audacity of her self-presentation as an ambitious, confident, and even sexual (she executed a brief bump-and-grind move prior to her performance) midlife woman, and the frenzy of press coverage that played up the contrast between Boyle’s dowdy appearance and obvious musical talent generated watercooler fodder for weeks. Interestingly, Boyle’s unapologetic failure to comply with postfeminist corporeal and sartorial norms also elicited some testimonials from women asserting that their own lives were lived off the postfeminist grid. A 25 April 2009 article in the *New York Times* entitled “Yes, Looks Do Matter” spawned the following posted response from Angela469 in New South Wales, Australia:

As a baby-faced, plump 47yr old frumpy dresser, I share a lot in common with Ms. Boyle. My dress style has been described as

“Christian bank teller.” However, no one who has locked horns with me would find me “unthreatening.” I’m sharp-witted, intelligent and have a bulldozer personality. There are many mangled (usually male) egos lying dead on the battlefields of my professional life as a poverty lawyer. I dress cheap because I get paid peanuts, but frankly I don’t give a toss about clothes or status symbols, including a botoxed, gym-tortured body or expensive hairdos. Such things are extraneous to my life, but you would dismiss me at your peril if you just formed an opinion based on my looks. There are millions of women like me out in the world, and we live our lives as we please.

The spectacle of an unprettified midlife woman claiming public visibility briefly opened the door to a different kind of understanding of the single woman but then firmly closed it again. (At this writing the Boyle story has largely collapsed into a mental health narrative, with Boyle herself depicted as an emotionally fragile woman withering in the media glare and increasingly spoken for by a trio of male figures with financial interests in her celebrity: her brother, *Britain’s Got Talent* judge Piers Morgan, and producer Simon Cowell.)

I suggest that the rapt attention paid to the Jolie-Pitts and their seeming shadow Jennifer Aniston, Jon and Kate Gosselin, Nadya Suleman, and Susan Boyle reflects a heavy investment in cultural panics and controversies that dramatize neoliberal selfhood and reveal the centrality of gender archetypes and anxieties to the current cultural climate. Generally presented as if they are wholly unrelated to the weighty world of the market (though the \$14 million obtained for the first photos of the Jolie-Pitt twins reminds us of the fallacy of such a view), such sensationalist images and narratives throw into sharp relief anxieties about intimacy, kinship, success, wealth, and power. Images such as these are worth a second look if we want to hone critical modes of interrogating and interrupting the false dichotomies of idealized familial plenitude and vilified abject singlehood that currently prevail in U.S. popular culture.

Errata for Issue 65

Unfortunately, issue 65 of the *Velvet Light Trap* (Spring 2010) was published with two errors. First, the piece by Diane Negra was improperly entitled “Brangelina: The Fertile Valley of Celebrity,” whereas it should have been “Picturing Family Values.” Second, on page 60—again in Diane Negra’s piece—there was a reference to a book called *Reloville*, but that book’s proper title is *Next Stop Reloville*. The editorial staff of the *Velvet Light Trap* would like to apologize to Professor Negra for these two oversights.