

## Coalition Talk: Finding their Voices: Feminist Intervention, Public Narratives, and Social Media

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This project is made up of many stories, some perhaps that you know or have heard parts of, and others, still unknown, are incomplete. And so, this is a project about listening for voices and looking for ways to interrupt public narratives.

### Part One

The first, larger narrative begins twenty-eight years ago when the Saturn Automobile Corporation was created as “a fully owned subsidiary of [the monolith] General Motors” (Sloop 67). The goal was to allow GM to compete with Japanese auto makers. This story was made public from the very beginning, intimately connected to marketing, to what was the described revolution and rebirth of the American automobile industry, and what would become the public Saturn narrative. From its inception, the Saturn Corporation branded itself “a different kind of company” characterized by quality, affordability, no-haggle pricing, and, most importantly, a new vision of automobile manufacturing that had the potential to revolutionize the assembly line and factory production in the United States. The founders of this “different” idea, the famed group of ’99 as they have been called since the beginning, realized that in order to *be* different—to do something that had not yet been done in automobile manufacturing—they would have to radically rethink every part of the process. Their vision was guided by and grounded in a cooperative model, one that included everyone: parts suppliers, workers, management, union representatives, dealerships, and even the customer for whom the automobile was being created. All would be named “team members”

in the process. For factory workers entrenched in the *old way of doing things* at other General Motors (GM) plants, or what would be referred to throughout Saturn as “the old world,” this new venture—or *experiment* as it continually would be described—offered change, job security, and an opportunity to have a say—a *voice*—as a team member and not merely a lineman or woman with no personal stake in the work.

Much has been written about Saturn, its organizational structure and innovation, with many describing “[t]he labor-management partnership between the Saturn Corporation and the United Auto Workers (UAW) [. . . as] the boldest experiment in U.S. industrial relations” (Rubenstein 197). Within this workplace, according to written accounts within popular media, academic journals, and full-length texts, all operations were driven by a “high level of organizational commitment and strong horizontal communication and coordination” (Rubenstein 206). Even beyond the production line, what was really *different* about Saturn was how it reinforced this coordination and communication at every level, grounded in a metaphor of community. You, too, might remember the ubiquity of this metaphor in advertisements featuring the rural landscapes of Spring Hill, Tennessee, of ordinary Americans setting out to do something extraordinary, and of retailers who did not assume a female buyer is only interested in the vanity mirror. Perhaps you remember the commercial from the mid 90s, featuring Erin Walling a young woman so pleased with her experience purchasing a Saturn that she, too, joins the team. And maybe you owned a Saturn, or drove one once, or visited a retailer where you were treated as part of the team and invited to join the Saturn family. And perhaps, as part of the family, you attended the reunion, the Saturn Homecoming in 1994 in Spring Hill, where more than 44,000 Saturn owners and their family members came together to tour the plant, to meet the people who had built their cars, to share a meal, and to celebrate their community.

This metaphor of community has been explored through various lenses, most often by scholars interested in the “public story,” to use John Sloop’s words, “utilizing Saturn’s story as it is represented through advertising, news stories, and trade books” (69). In their analysis of Saturn ads, for example, sociologists Mills, Boylstein, and Lorean explain that for the consumer, this ideal community constructed through Saturn’s public story was one “in which every individual is not only heard, but

recognized and respected” (130). Yet others have questioned whether this cooperative model was successful and the extent to which it truly benefitted the workers. Some accounts, though less public than the more pervasive story, suggest that team members were under enormous peer pressure, given the structure of team accountability; that the revolutionary contract guiding Saturn actually rolled back some worker rights; and that decisions often were made by management without team members’ input. Slowly, over time, what was once unique about Saturn began to more closely resemble business as usual in the old world, and eventually, a majority vote among team members ushered in a much more traditional labor contract.

The story of the Saturn Corporation is long and complicated, much longer than I can recount here, and, in 2009, in the midst of economic downturn and after the Big Three CEOs had flown on private jets to beg for a bail-out, the original Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee closed its doors without any say from its “community.” Various deals to sell Saturn had fallen through, and in the months leading up to and immediately following the end of the brand, women and men were laid-off or transferred from Tennessee to various GM plants around the country. Within the media, the public story continued to take shape. David Hanna, for example, a consultant in strategic HR and leadership, argued that “Saturn [. . .] ultimately failed because senior GM leaders couldn’t see the benefits of new ways of doing things.” Others argued that Saturn’s demise was connected to its inability to turn a profit. Largely absent from this public story, however, and from the larger narrative that preceded it, were the voices of Saturn’s team members, the women and men who worked together to make that difference.

## Part Two

In late 2009, just a few months after the last car had come off the line in the original Saturn plant, and with the help of my father, a Saturn team member, I discovered these voices that had been excluded from the larger narrative in an unlikely place: Facebook. In the months that followed the end of the Saturn brand, some team members gained agency by co-opting and re-envisioning Saturn’s metaphor of community for themselves. Through Facebook groups identified by the cities to which team members had been or would be transferred (Lansing, Fairfax, Kansas City, for

example), the team members created webs of support within a unique rhetorical space (Koerber).

One such group, *GM Spring Hill Families Heading to Lansing, MI*, was created by a team member with this introduction:

This Facebook group will hopefully allow people to stay connected with hometown folk, while heading to the great white north. We may not know each other; however, we can at least help, support, direct and allow each other the opportunity to say hello to someone we know, while shopping at the local grocery. Hopefully, it will also assist people in connecting for weekend carpools from MI to TN. This would also be a good source for recommendations on apartments, doctors, restaurants, schools, etc. Welcome! (GM Spring Hill)

Beyond this invitation, what was most striking about this group was how team members maintained communication (despite a lack of distributed information from GM during the transition process), offered support and resources, and coordinated activities across miles. In spite of the company's abandoning of the communal, collaborative structure and the eventual dissolution of the Saturn brand, team members found ways to write their own community and to maintain webs of relationships, reclaiming voice through social networking. All of this occurred under the Saturn logo, which became a symbol for the group.

During a nineteen-month period from December 2009 to July 2011, team members posted 169 original messages to this Facebook page with nearly 260 original responses to those messages. The messages covered a variety of topics, including praise for the group's organizer, information about places to live and finding roommates, discount flight announcements for travel between Michigan and Tennessee, general GM news, and recommendations for schools, restaurants, and places of worship. However, in large numbers, the posts addressed topics connected to the Saturn family and community, to team membership, and to sharing information that would subvert the "old world" structure of GM, precisely the kind of "difference" team members aimed to make with the founding of the Saturn Corporation.

For example, in keeping with the Facebook group organizer's call for contributors to use the page to "help, support, and direct," some

messages served as confessionals with members reflecting on the changes to come. Two members, for example, wrote about leaving family behind in Tennessee while making the solo move to MI, and each generated 5 responses, many expressing similar sentiments, solidarity, and support:

Reality of leaving is setting in. Going to miss my sons and daughter in law [sic] and grandson. Saying goodbye to the princess really sucked.

I am soooo scared! My first move with GM and leaving my real home like so many of you did for Saturn. Hope all goes well for everyone. See you there on the 25<sup>th</sup>! (GM Spring Hill)

Beyond this shared experience, however, messages referenced family and team membership as well as the Saturn legacy. For example, the group's organizer was praised for creating the space because, as one contributor explained, "It will be great to keep up with our Spring Hill Family" (GM Spring Hill). Another wrote,

Man I hate to see so many good friends leave and go to other states to finish their time with GM but I do understand what y'all have to do for your families, yourselves, and loved ones. I know, I came up to Spring Hill, TN. with a family of 4 but now my Spring Hill family is 100s. (GM Spring Hill)

The Spring Hill Family, as indicated by these messages, extends beyond *immediate* family ties, and family members are defined by their immediate connection to the original Saturn Plant in Spring Hill. Furthermore, messages suggest that this membership is exclusive and this family unique. For example, one contributor, already in Lansing writes, "Looking forward to seeing more of 'the best' from Spring Hill arrive" (GM Spring Hill). Another offers this, "Good Luck to all that are heading north! I sure wish it didn't have to be this way. But you can show them the kind of work force we've had here the last 20 years! The best to you all!" (GM Spring Hill). Here members distinguish themselves from other GM workers by using the word "best" and with pronouns like "them" to indicate an insider/outsider dichotomy, one that further signals alignment with the original Saturn vision to be different from "the old world." This sentiment is further affirmed in the following post:

One journey ends—And another one begins . . . It is amazing that so many family members are all going to the same plant to continue what we started 20 years ago. I wish everyone the very best. We did it once we can do it again. it is a different world but at least we got each other to lean on. It is somewhat of a culture shock, but life goes on and we will make it! I've been here (LDT) [Lansing Delta Township Assembly] since August and I have to say it was an adjustment. But there is a lot of good folks at LDT that have the same mindset as us, then again there is some that don't. Don't be surprised by this. Over all [sic] I have had a good experience so far. Keep in mind it is what we make it. I hope to see you all in the plant. (GM Spring Hill)

Here, too, the contributor indicates that there is something unique about the Saturn way, that membership in this family requires a specific “mind set,” and that the goal in returning to “the old world” of GM is not to abandon this mindset but to find allies with similar values. As another contributor indicated, recently transferred to a plant in Fairfax, Kansas, “sure miss Spring Hill . . . we had it made!” (GM Spring Hill).

Part of the Saturn vision—what made them distinctly different from the rest of GM—was an attempt to rethink the organizational structure. Language use was a significant part of this strategy. For example, dealerships were called retailers, customers were considered part of the family, and factory workers were members of teams, expected to take ownership of their work in many ways: coordinating scheduling; devising a process for rotating among individual jobs; ordering supplies; and assessing and improving production processes to benefit all members in a team of 10-12. Within the Facebook group, in addition to references to family and to community, messages indicate attempts to maintain or to recreate this team membership.

In reasserting the Saturn vision on the Facebook page, contributors also succeed in subverting, in small ways, some of GM's control following its decision to close the Spring Hill plant, to end the Saturn brand, and to effectively dismantle the organizational structure by dispersing team members across various plants. One contributor refers to the Facebook page as an opportunity “to keep informed” despite “be[ing] spread throughout the plant in Lansing” and as a space to “share stories

about transitioning to the new plant” (GM Spring Hill). One such story was a detailed response to a team member's request for information on orientation and “job and shift assignments” at the new plant. This coordinated, collaborative effort was praised by other contributors and described as helping team members to “be prepared for what to expect” and “put your mind at eas[e]” (GM Spring Hill).

Certainly there are voices missing from this conversation—namely those not connected to the plant in Lansing—yet this Facebook page reminds us to listen more carefully for the voices that have been excluded within the public story of Saturn and to question how a greater representation of those voices would shape that enduring narrative. How might team members complicate the Saturn story? What might they teach us about the benefits and challenges of decentered leadership? How might their experiences shape our understanding of a factory closing?

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