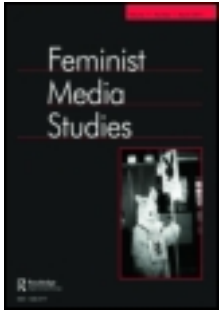


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NOT READY TO MAKE NICE

Aberrant Mothers in Contemporary Culture

Suzanna Danuta Walters and Laura Harrison

The story of motherhood in popular culture has never been a simple one. Cross-cut by race, class, and sexuality (and, importantly, marital status), interwoven with changing psychological and biological theories and fantasies, tied up with nation-building and citizenship claims, images of motherhood remain both template and signpost upon which we project our desires for kinship and care and our most vexed understandings of womanhood and femininity. This essay examines fictional motherhood in an era of real-life Octomoms and presidential candidates. We argue that a new type of mother has emerged—particularly on TV—that presents a radical departure. From the suburban mom/drug dealer of Showtime's outré series Weeds to the vapid 1960s wife of Mad Men, aberrant mothers abound in contemporary culture. But, unlike aberrant mothers of earlier eras, these mothers are by and large heroines, unapologetically non-normative in their maternal functioning. The parenting is cursory at best and often downright neglectful, behavior that has typically resulted in sure death for Hollywood mothers of earlier eras. We examine these images as a challenge to normative familialism and rigid gender ideologies.

KEYWORDS celebrity; feminism; film; "mommy wars"; mothers; non-normative mothering; representations of motherhood; sexual freedom; television; work/family debate

Introduction

The story of the representation of motherhood in popular culture has never been a simple one. Cross-cut by race, class, and sexuality (and, importantly, marital status), interwoven with changing psychological and biological theories and fantasies, tied up with nation-building and citizenship claims, images of motherhood remain both template and signpost upon which we project our desires for kinship and care and our most vexed understandings of womanhood and femininity. For those of us especially attuned to motherhood tropes, it can sometimes seem that whatever the ideological orientation, we can never seem to make up our minds about either Mother or the more mundane process of mothering.

If, as the UN assures us, a nation's well being is measured by how it treats "its women," surely a nation's deep angst over continuing struggles for gender equity can in part be seen through the frenzied and fraught representations of motherhood. Not a simple barometer of course, but a shifting site of congealed anxieties and unacknowledged resentment, the overloaded sensibility around motherhood is never far from the surface.

One would think that—almost half a century after *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963) and decades after the explosion of feminist work on family—we would be done with all this, that the overweening anxiety surrounding mothers (most especially “working mothers,” a phrase that by now should be obsolete but remains anachronistically active) would have finally given way to a more profound recasting of the work/family dilemma.

But mother anxiety runs deep, even when the discourse surrounding it is remarkably shallow. For all the silly talk of post-feminism (as silly as post-race or post-gay), debates about motherhood continue to rage. Whether as the recently renewed and media-trumped “Mommy Wars,” where blissfully “opted-out” stay-at-home moms apparently waged holy war with the satanic forces of frenzied working mothers (who, needless to say, must have been worn out from all that juggling of work and family), or the fascination with celebrity motherhood in all its scary permutations, ideologies of motherhood are one of the more contested and confused sites of popular meaning. “Mother” is so overdetermined that a singular hegemonic trope rarely emerges, although there have certainly been historical moments (say, the immediate post-war period) when the power of the dominant produces a more singular frame (say, the bad working mother) that coheres all too well with normative understandings of women more generally. And significant social movements (feminism, for example) show their mark on cultural imaginings, if only in the backlash and more elliptical rebuttals.

For much of the history of the representation of motherhood, though, mothers have been depicted along the binary lines of saintly sacrificers (think *Stella Dallas* or, more recently, the kidney-donating mother of *Steel Magnolias*), giving all for their progeny’s upward mobility and emotional sustenance, or viperous spiders—weaving webs of neurosis and deceit that endlessly entrap hubby and kids in a mire of unrequited love and emotional bankruptcy.

So how are today’s celluloid (digital, televisual, cinematic) moms faring? What of fictional motherhood in an era of real-life Octomoms and (maternal) presidential candidates? Have the cumulative effects of the feminist incursion into everyday family life finally altered the archaic oppositions of sacrifice and malevolence that have persistently ruled? Is the gap finally closing between the idealization (or demonization) of motherhood in popular culture and the actual lives of real mothers, for whom meaningful social supports (federally funded daycare, flextime work schedules, equal pay, etc.) are woefully absent? Feminists have long railed against the damage done to women and children by the disconnect between the public perception of ideal motherhood and the much more complicated (and often harsher) realities of everyday life. Are we seeing representations that at least address this gap or ameliorate the inconsistency?

For most feminist scholars, the situation is both dire and depressingly familiar. Douglas & Michaels (2004) in *The Mommy Myth* and Warner (2005) in *Perfect Madness*, for example, have dissected the recent iterations of normative maternalism, exploring in detail the intersections between consumerist ideologies, anti-feminist double-binds, and familial norms. For these and other contemporary authors, the “new momism” idealizes mothers, holding them to impossible standards, while simultaneously blaming them for every misstep and wrong turn of their progeny. If anything, claim these authors, maternal anxiety has been ratcheted up in recent years, due in no small part to the larger cultural ether that has created a toxic haze of moralistic norms and obsessive childcare dictums, perpetuating “a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet” (Douglas & Michaels 2004, 4). Indeed, these mommy

wars—always more media created than everyday lived—continue to frame the debate even as feminist critics challenge the legitimacy of the trope itself.¹

While some focus on the detrimental effects of a culture of increased maternal idealization and perfectionist striving, others see an equally pernicious rise of a kind of obsessive cultural surveillance. The editors of a recent anthology exploring the maternal in film argue that we are in the midst of a period of “remarkable maternal visibility” where pregnant women and mothers are increasingly brought under the critical gaze of the media apparatus (Addison, Goodwin-Kelly, & Roth 2009, 5). These authors, however, see little new in these images, claiming instead that there is “a striking consistency in Hollywood’s constructions of the maternal” (Addison, Goodwin-Kelly, & Roth 2009, 4). In short, then, the consensus (at least among scholars and popular feminist pundits) seems to be soundly pessimistic. As Warner (2005, 134) notes, “motherhood has been made into an overdetermined thing, invested with quasi-ecclesiastical notions of Good and Evil,” locking women into a claustrophobic cell of anxiety and insecurity perhaps even more damaging than maternalist ideologies of the past.

While these authors are right to point out the persistence of motherhood myths in our most modern of times,² we believe that contemporary representations of motherhood often break new ground, even as they shore up old ideologies and entrap women in new ones. While we do not contest the prevalence of the tropes described in such books and articles, we argue that novel counter-images have surfaced, especially in television. Of course, monster mothers (*Precious*) and idealized mothers (*The Blind Side*, *Changeling*) still populate our cultural imagination, in their predictably racialized forms; but in the last few years a type of mother has emerged that seems strikingly innovative, although surely not without some historical precedents. Neither monster nor angel, this aberrant mom is not quite a twenty-first-century feminist heroine but she does upend more traditional depictions of maternal identity. Unabashedly sexual, idiosyncratic to a fault, and seriously deleterious in her caretaking skills, she seems to live largely in the high end of popular culture, those cultural venues much beloved by critics and by advertisers looking for viewers with sophistication and disposable income. We speak here, of course, of premium cable.

Mommy Dealer

Perhaps the most compelling new anti-heroine is the mom turned drug dealer of Showtime’s hit series *Weeds*. Starring Mary-Louise Parker as Nancy Botwin, the series—garnering one of the highest ratings for the network—began in August 2005. Like much of the quirky/artful output of premium cable, *Weeds* turned the family sitcom on its head by portraying the saga of a California suburban mom who goes into the drug-dealing business when her husband suddenly drops dead, leaving her with two sons to raise and no apparent source of income or other (legitimately) marketable skills. The series begins innocuously enough, and Nancy’s motivation for dealing seems wholly born out of a need to provide for her children. Indeed, in an early episode Nancy explicitly if sardonically resists her new identity: “I’m not a dealer, I’m a mother who happens to distribute illegal products through a sham bakery set up by my ethically questionable CPA and his crooked lawyer friend.” And, anyway, it’s only pot. At the beginning. But as the episodes progress, and as Nancy gets deeper into the drug business—eventually marrying a major Mexican drug kingpin—our ability to see her as just a wacky well-meaning mom out to maintain her kids

is thoroughly compromised: she is a truly heinous mother—neglectful, disengaged, absent. Her maintenance of her children (food, shelter, school, some semblance of a life) segues from charmingly whimsical (take-out Chinese by the pool!) to irredeemably irresponsible. She burns her own house down, takes the kids on the run, relocates, turns the other way as her eldest starts his own drug business, and stands idly by as her pre-pubescent son is left to his own devices (of drugs, alcohol, sex, violence), eventually getting literally caught in the crossfire of his mother's drug business. If in the first season she subsumes her dealing under maternal imperatives, by the end of the third season she has explicitly "owned" her new "gangster" identity and, further, the kids now become cathected to the family business: Silas becomes an adept grower and young Shane assists in reconnaissance and surveillance techniques.

Nancy's frenemy, the booze and drug addled Celia Hodes, is even worse to her children, disowning her young daughter when she comes out as a lesbian and—when not spewing homophobic asides—constantly ridiculing her weight, finally disposing of both her children as easily as last year's wardrobe.³ While earlier episodes delighted in the dethroning of our visions of maternal solicitude—and did so with a nod to the continuation of maternal care—later seasons gave up on that and instead went full throttle on Nancy's (and Celia's) maternal delinquency. Granted, this is a problem seemingly inevitable in chic series as they age. What was once witty and sly and unnerving becomes over-the-top, shark-jumping, cringy, slapstick. And, true enough, parents behaving badly have been a trendy TV and film topic for a number of years. But *mothers* behaving badly (really badly) have typically precipitated a celluloid slapdown. Even when the youngest is depicted as clearly troubled and neglected (and then shot) and the eldest (who is, after all, still a teen) becomes a drug-dealing layabout, Nancy retains her charm and—unlike the bad mothers of years past—remains fundamentally unpunished. Indeed, the punishment is directed to the children, particularly her youngest son who becomes a pint-sized Soprano wanna-be, eventually killing Nancy's rival.

Nancy is, then, a bad mother who is also a heroine, albeit an anti-heroine of sorts. In episodes from the 2010 season, the self-awareness of her maternal failures seems to finally register but she inevitably manages to sweep them under the rug and redeem herself with a showy display of motherly devotion. So, for example, armed with a cross-bow and hotpants she rescues her son from his kidnappers, telling her estranged druglord ex (who ordered the kidnapping) that his paternal "instincts" can never match up to her maternal ferocity. "I'm a mother lion," she tells Esteban's voice mail as she drives away in yet another stolen car, "and you can't defeat a mother lion when you threaten her cubs." The animal metaphors abound in this episode as perennial second man/brother-in-law Andy tells elder son Silas that his mom "is a lone wolf. Always has been, there's nothing we can do about it." Indeed, these aberrant mothers are often explicitly vengeful when they perceive a threat or even a minor slight to their children.

If Nancy cares but is careless, Betty Draper of *Mad Men* doesn't even seem to care. The put upon wife (then ex) of roving ad exec Don Draper is wholly disinterested in her children . . . when she's not actively mean to them. Betty's parenting—which is all this suburban 1960s mom is supposed to be doing when she's not mixing her husband a drink or being amiably charming to his colleagues (she doesn't cook much—that's for the almost mute black maid)⁴—is cursory at best and often downright dismissive of any demands on her attention. She treats her daughter as an irritant, demeans her constantly, and even slaps her across the face when she walks in—defiantly—with a short haircut.⁵ During a Thanksgiving

meal with the uptight and disapproving family of her new husband, Betty virtually force-feeds her daughter sweet potatoes, causing her besotted hubby to shrink in disgust. Loving engagement is seemingly as rare as a smoke-free living room. Betty alternates between dumping them with Don and preventing real contact and engagement between him and the kids.⁶ Betty's bad mothering, however, could at least partly be understood as a response to her "problem that has no name." A former model and obviously intelligent woman trapped in suburbia with little to do, she seethes with resentment and regret and the children become yet one more sign of her narrowed life. But, like Nancy in *Weeds*, it is not at all clear that she is unequivocally intended to be "read" as a bad mother. In an interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*, Terry Gross pushes *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner to reckon with Betty's mothering. "You've kind of turned her into a pretty bad mother," she notes, adding that "she's very self-centered, she offers no comfort to her children when they really need it, she doesn't really take their needs into account" But Weiner defends Betty, claiming that

she's doing the best that she can . . . I think she is self-centered and she is a little childish (but) the things she says to her kids are very parenty to me . . . they sound really harsh but this is a whole generation raised on "go watch TV," so I don't know why everybody's judging it that way. (*Fresh Air* 2010)

Others, however, are not so forgiving. *New York* magazine ran a widely circulated video mash-up of "Ugly Betty" moments of maternal meanness and blogs are filled with Betty bashing; even January Jones, the actress who plays Betty, has confessed that she finds her a pretty awful mother!

It's not just pay cable that produces over-the-top moms; network television and basic cable—while generally less risqué and ambitious—still push the maternal envelope. *Nip/Tuck*, another (now concluded) outré cable fixture, featured one initially normative mom who loses her footing when she falls for an evil lipstick lesbian who has managed to raise an even more evil (heterosexual) daughter, in part through maternal neglect and essentially pimping her daughter out. And the hit nighttime soap/comedy/campfest *Desperate Housewives* is a veritable motherload of aberrant images, from the almost poignant "opt-out" Lynette who confesses her discomfort with domesticity to the surfeit of cougars who corrupt the pool boys of suburbia to the scary Martha Stewart wannabe Bree who protects her murderous (gay) son while simultaneously chafing at the strictures of perfect motherhood. While structurally a more traditional series (think *Dallas* or *Dynasty*), *Desperate Housewives* has its share of (feminist) fans, some even claiming that the character Lynette in particular "speaks truth to power—the power of the updated and eternal myth of momhood" (Goodman 2004, A19).

Earlier "bad" moms may have been snarky and sarcastic (e.g. *Roseanne*), but we rarely doubted their maternal commitments and assumed that—through all the snark—a significant amount of actual labor was taking place. But these contemporary TV programs assiduously avoid actual parenting. These new aberrant moms therefore have aberrant kids—or at least strangely precocious ones who never seem to go to school or need a meal and who evince few of the characteristics of earlier sitcom children. These kids drink, take copious drugs, and have pre-teen sex without seeming repercussions, becoming—essentially—self-raised.⁷ This is an interesting contrast to the other circulating cultural phenomenon of "helicopter parents" and "tiger moms" in which hyper-involved parents keep kids firmly in their grasp. Indeed, these new aberrant moms directly challenge one of

the most sacred tenets of Motherhood: the mandate to protect. As Roberts (1999, 31) notes “mothers are held responsible for the harm that befalls their children even when they do not inflict it. The duty imposed on mothers to protect their children is unique and enormous.” The uber-responsibility placed on mothers is such that they “are far more likely to be punished for *failing to act* than anyone else in our society” (Roberts 1999, 32). In the context of a culture that chastises middle-class mothers for one missed soccer practice, this brazen disregard for maternal mandates of (over)protection is both shocking and strangely exhilarating.

While fascinating in its refusal of either of the tropes of normative motherhood, it is hard to sympathize with these women (in part because of their over-the-top and unbelievable situations and plot turns) much less identify or bond with them, as pleasurable as it may be to revel in their nose-thumbing. But one mother manages to combine a more genuine rebelliousness with a work/life grit that prompts viewer sympathy and identification: Edie Falco’s wonderful, complicated mother on *Nurse Jackie*. Yes, she is a pill popping drug addict who is carrying on an illicit affair with her co-worker, unbeknownst to her adoring and adorable husband. But, unlike these other complicated and compromised women, she is an engaged and devoted mother. In an episode entitled “Candyland,” one of her daughter’s stuck-up playmates comes upon Jackie in her basement snorting a line. Jackie manages to both take her down a notch and reassert her maternal authority at the same time. Standing on the steps, looking imperiously down at the drug-inhaling Jackie, little Kaitlyn wonders what she is doing. But this mother will not be bullied by some “big fat snot” of a kid:

Kaitlyn, you were not supposed to see that. It is a trick nurses use to dry up their tear ducts . . . because we see a lot of pain and suffering during the day and the last thing we want to do is come and cry in front of our families.

Here she upends and mocks the norms of maternalism and family and uses them to her own end. She then stares down the skeptical Kaitlyn and orders her to give her a hug: “I need a hug. Can I have one?” forcing Kaitlyn down the stairs (where she stands now in real—smaller—proportion to the mother) and reversing the imperious gaze of the child upon the deviant mother. The sign of maternal concern—the hug—is here used to wrest the gaze from the judgmental and norm-enforcing child and reinstate the mother as the one in control. Importantly, in that same episode Jackie stops a drunk mother from nursing her infant, thus further insisting on Jackie’s authority and maternal power even (and in spite of) her (non-maternal) drug use and non-traditional sexual morality.

In an earlier episode, Jackie and off-beat older daughter Grace are at their mother/daughter tap dancing class when the self-same Kaitlyn keeps gratuitously bumping into the less coordinated Grace. Jackie tries, unsuccessfully, to steer Kaitlyn away from Grace but ends up in a contretemps with Kaitlyn’s mother, a high school acquaintance. With an air of beauty queen haughtiness, she confronts Jackie: “Please don’t scold my daughter!” But Jackie is ready for a rumble when her child’s pride (or safety) is at stake: “I’m just trying to take care of my kid, that’s all . . . we paid our ten bucks just like you did.” When Kaitlyn raises the stakes by insulting Grace (“I think she didn’t practice”), Jackie quickly turns to her “Have you always been such a snot Kaitlyn?” Grace interjects a tepid “Mom, don’t!” and when the beauty queen mom claims she is embarrassing her daughter, Jackie fires back a quick “Fuck you” and takes her daughter out of the class. This scene is riveting on any number of levels. First, Jackie’s hardworking persona does not in any way undercut her

centrality as a parent, even as her husband does more “hands-on” parenting duties. Indeed, the scene is intercut with shots of her adoring husband Kevin out at a jewelry store picking out a new wedding ring for her.⁸ Second, she defends her daughter against censure, censure that should rightly be aimed at Jackie. And her response to attempts to censure *her* prompts not the typical regret or apology but rather the epithet aimed at the prissy beauty queen and, implicitly, aimed at all who would judge her mothering. Here, too—as in much of the series—she puts class on the table: Kaitlyn is a “daughter” while Grace is a “kid” and the entry fee is dished up as evidence of her right to be present in a space that her working/lower-middle-class status might seem to put off limits, much as her fancy lunches with rich Dr O’Hara are taken with an ease and righteousness that just hints at a bit of lower-class resistance. If Nancy is the aberrant mother we guiltily enjoy, then Jackie is the aberrant mother we root for and secretly identify with. Hyper-competent at her job but not afraid to break the rules. A committed parent but not suffused with guilt. A passionate wife but an equally passionate drug addict. Her hardworking, hanging on by the fingernails lower-middle-classness suffuses the narrative with a grit that Nancy’s latte-slurping dilettante can never have.

Will the Real Mother Please get Humiliated?

Varied representations of mothers also populate the realm of pseudo-celebrity reality television. This genre has the potential to create space for new and progressive representations of real mothers, yet it instead routinely presents a stage for the public flogging of “bad” moms. The mothers of reality TV provide an interesting counterpoint to the aberrant mothers in high-end television, particularly the treatment of two women whose recent fame is inseparable from their status as mothers—Kate Gosselin (of *Jon and Kate Plus 8* fame) and Michelle Duggar (the devoutly Christian mother of *19 Kids and Counting*). These women are not “just” mothers—they are mega-mothers, responsible for families that could populate the roster of a baseball team. By taking motherhood to hyperbolic extremes, and exposing their families to the public gaze, the spotlight burns even brighter on their perceived successes and failures.

The Duggars and Gosselins are “watched” both onscreen and off, yet the pleasure viewers experience when watching fictional TV mothers behave in aberrant ways is a far safer and more culturally condoned pleasure than that of viewing Kate Gosselin snap at a sextuplet. Fictional TV mothers can acceptably shock *and* please, while the guilty pleasure of watching reality TV mothers behave badly is yoked to the sense that they deserve punishment, or at least censure. And, of course, those “real” moms provide a way for other “real” moms to feel good about their own parenting practices; bad parenting on the public stage provides a kind of maternal schaudenfreude for female spectators.

The Duggars have been featured in numerous television formats as their family has grown; parents Jim Bob and Michelle have been married for over twenty-five years and given birth to nineteen children. After a miscarriage early in their marriage, they “prayed and asked God to forgive them” and to “bless them with as many children as He saw fit in His timing” (www.duggarfamily.com). It was when the Duggar’s nineteenth child was born dangerously premature that the family began to receive a substantive amount of bad press. Despite headlines (from *People* magazine and other venues) suggesting that Michelle Duggar is too old to responsibly continue having children, Jim Bob and Michelle are given space to explain their religious faith and the authority to frame their “choice.”⁹ What’s more,

People reassures readers of the critical difference between the Duggars and those truly deserving of social censure—"critics who believe the Duggar children are a strain on government finances can rest easy: the Duggars live debt free in a 7,000-sq.-ft. home they built themselves, and Josie's medical costs are covered by insurance" (Dennis 2010, 82). As this comment suggests, the Duggars are somewhat immunized from the wrath of the public because they are no drain on the public coffers and exemplify the kind of Christianity that is quickly becoming a necessity for full civic inclusion.

A contrasting figure can be found in Kate Gosselin. Unlike the Duggars, Jon and Kate's large brood resulted from the use of reproductive technologies; like the Duggars, the Gosselins are pro-life Christians. Yet after tabloid reporters revealed that Jon was allegedly cheating on his wife, it was Kate who faced the brunt of tabloid wrath with headlines in various magazines including "Kate Gosselin: Mom to Monster," "Mommy You are Mean," "Inside Jon's Prison," and "Caught Hitting Her Daughter" (Bellafante 2009; Blakeley 2009). Gosselin would seem to fit into the same (normative) discursive framework as Michelle Duggar—a married, white, middle-class mother-extraordinaire, raising a super-sized family on frugality and maternal instinct, yet she slid quickly to tabloid infamy. How? Within the time period that *Jon and Kate Plus 8* aired, Kate went from a stay-at-home mom reliant upon her husband's financial support to a wealthy single mother of eight, juggling kids and career and refusing to apologize: essentially Kate enacted the conservative horror story of the dissolution of the American family. Where Michelle is lauded for devoting her life to raising a large, Christian family, Kate is cast in the well-worn "mommy dearest" stereotype, emasculating her henpecked husband and exploiting her children for her own financial gain.

The varied responses to Gosselin and Duggar are bound up in (Christian, neoliberal) ideologies of the traditional nuclear family and women's place within it. The varying levels of critique aimed at the reality TV moms when they challenge these hegemonic ideologies stands in stark contrast to the acceptable pleasure with which audiences view (and perhaps relate to) the fictionalized "bad" moms on cable. So while wacky Nancy Botwin may be the mother we all (guiltily) hate to love, Gosselin may simply be the mother we (aggressively) love to hate.

Mothers on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

While TV remains a place where motherhood ("reality" or fictional) is often central, the rise of blockbuster action films and the decline of woman-centered dramas mean that the depiction of mothers in contemporary popular film is thin indeed.¹⁰ Mothers are not, of course, wholly absent,¹¹ but the "maternal melodrama" or even narratives in which mothers figure centrally, has certainly receded in recent years. When mothers do crop up, they alternate between ineffectual or secondary (*Little Miss Sunshine*), loving but misguided and needing to be set right by dad (*My Sister's Keeper*), and downright evil (*Precious*). In a number of recent films, mothers are the ones who respond illogically to crisis situations, or who present the impediment to their children's growth and maturity (*My Sister's Keeper*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Whip It*, *An Education*). Smothering mothers became a favorite trope of recent film, and it appears that Diane Keaton and Jane Fonda have cornered that particular market with films such as *Smother*, *Because I Said So*, *The Family Stone*, *Monster-in-Law*, and *Something's Gotta Give*. The specter of two such powerful, independent, quirky performers trading in the most egregious of anti-feminist stereotypes points once again to

the continuing cultural ambivalence over both powerful women and canny moms. In almost all of these “chick flick” films that featured maternal figures, mothers are fairly benign albeit over-engaged with their (adult) children’s lives.

In contrast to the representations of motherhood in contemporary television, Hollywood filmmaking seems more doggedly drawn to the long tradition of binary oppositions and less likely to present the highly ambiguous maternal figures that TV so obviously revels in. No two films illustrate this more than *Precious* and *The Blind Side*. Without getting into the heated debates on both these films, suffice it to say that both traded on familiar maternal tropes that were also—familiarily—deeply racialized. In one, a prototypical evil (and impoverished) African-American mother brutalizes her daughter in ways sexual, physical, and emotional. In the other, a prototypical good (and rich) white mother “rescues” a homeless black youth, himself the “victim” of a drug-using mother. And the Academy rewarded both, with Best Actress and Supporting Actress awards going, respectively, to Sandra Bullock and Mo’Nique. Clearly, then, while black women are often (and still) portrayed as all-knowing and all-loving “mammies,” they are also simultaneously demonized. It remains the case that

when we see black mothers who are not “moral compasses,” they fail to balance motherhood, work, and sexuality—as the white mothers do—and are more likely to appear as failed mothers than as supermothers . . . With few exceptions, portrayals of black mothers in the 1990s and early twenty-first-century film tend to demonize them. (McCormick 2010, 149)

Interestingly, however, neither film supports its binary oppositions with the typical underlying frames of sacrifice and the perils of work for women—neither woman works outside the home and while the Bullock character is certainly beneficent she is not classically sacrificial in her actions toward any of her children, including the boy she adopts. While it seems clear at this point that mainstream Hollywood filmmaking trades in more traditional maternal tropes than television, the dangers of laboring outside the home are no longer believable paradigms. In other words, the success she garners for her children is not dependent on her own sacrifice and self-denial, some small consolation in an otherwise overly predictable maternal narrative.

Even worse, however, are the recent spate of (hit) films that make even Betty Draper look like Carole Brady. In 2010’s *The Fighter* (nominated for any number of major awards) veteran character actress Melissa Leo plays the maniacal, hard-drinking, controlling, exploitative, brassy mother-from-hell of boxing brothers Micky and Dicky, one a fighter on the brink of success and the other a boxing has-been, laid low by drugs and, later, jail. Besides the “only in Hollywood” trick of having Leo (fifty) play the mother of not only Mark Wahlberg (thirty-nine) but a posse of similarly aged (and perhaps older) screaming harridan sisters, this film offers up a misogyny not seen since the glory days of 1940s noir malevolent moms or any number of 1960s-era scheming moms—from *The Manchurian Candidate* to *Psycho* to *Gypsy*. Leo’s performance would be laughable if it was not treated with such seriousness by the film and the critics. Instead of being jeered at for its tired depiction of conniving, low-life mothers controlling sons and husbands alike (bringing back to life the old trope of “henpecked” husbands who finally find a way to do the right thing for their kids by busting the chops of the domineering bitch in the house), this over-the-top stereotype was universally hailed as a “bravura” portrayal. Similarly, the other big critical hit of 2010, *Black Swan*, features yet another out of control and out to control mother, whose

infantilization of her ballerina daughter may very well contribute to her dramatic descent into madness and eventual suicide. Reminiscent of the unnerving laughter that accompanied Glenn Close's final comeuppance in *Fatal Attraction*, the current Hollywood audience is invited to both laugh at the horrific mother and cheer encouragingly as she gets slapped down (by the state in *Precious*, by the benighted daughter in *Black Swan*, by the timid husband and feisty girlfriend in *The Fighter*). While the aberrant mothers of TV resist becoming the object of spectator abuse, the tired old stereotypical matriarchs of mainstream movies get demeaned and dethroned diegetically and extra-diegetically, within the storyline and by an audience primed by the film and the critics to cheer on the overthrow of the wicked mother.

It is left to quirkier, independent films (e.g. *Juno*, *Junebug*, *Frozen River*, *City Island*, *Mother and Child*, *Please Give*, *Thirteen*) to offer the aberrant mother in a wholly different register, the register of serious drama or even wry serio-comedy. In the critically acclaimed *Frozen River*,¹² for example, we get the serious cinematic equivalent of Nancy Botwin's descent into illegal activity as two single mothers engage in cross-border human smuggling in a last-ditch effort to support their kids and keep their heads above water. In *Thirteen*, we gain entrée not only into the life of a troubled adolescent, but engage deeply with her struggling single mother as well.

All too often, however, "good" mothering is predicated on two prohibitions: sexuality and work outside the home. Hollywood has long depicted maternal sexuality "as destructive to the mother and child relationship" if not to society at large, and "working mother" became a central route to ruin long before *Mommie Dearest* took a hanger to her terrified daughter (Roth 2009, 112). As feminist critic Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2003) notes, "our culture likes its mothers 'immaculate' and maternal sexuality unacknowledged and unrepresented."

Yet some of the new "good" mothers of TV, like their more aberrant counterparts, are generally unabashedly sexual and refreshingly professional. In *The Good Wife*, Julianna Margulies plays a lawyer turned stay-at-home mom who returns to work after her DA husband goes to jail. What is unusual—and one could argue *truly* modern—about this series is that it is able to show a work world and a home world with some degree of mutual depth and mutual interaction. While such a set-up could provide grist for yet more tedious "juggling" metaphors and high-powered child neglect, we are instead treated to a mature, confident, complex woman and mother whose relationship to both work and family is rich and deep. Even *The Big C*, a Showtime series that debuted in the fall of 2010 starring Laura Linney as Cathy, a woman diagnosed with cancer, gives its character a daring new sex life in the midst of a life-change surrounding her illness. In one episode, Cathy has dropped Ecstasy and has treated herself to a sexual feast with her new lover. In a plot move typical of Hollywood (and reminiscent of the scene in *Mildred Pierce* when Mildred's young daughter contracts an illness and dies in the course of a few hours while Mildred is "indulging" in a night of romance), Cathy's difficult son finds himself in a troubling situation and is unable to reach his mother. He winds up in the hospital with a concussion and we fear the resurgence of tired old tropes of maternal sexuality wreaking havoc on the well-being of children. But it gets a bit more complicated. First, the son is injured when his inebriated *father* allows him to drive a car, even though he is underage and clearly lacking the requisite skills. When Cathy belatedly sees the voice messages from her son, she jumps up from her makeshift outdoor bed where she has been enjoying a post-coital nap with her lover. Then the expected: "I'm a mother!" she exclaims, bemoaning her inability to carry on the affair and

blaming herself for her son's accident. Watching this, we cringe at the old-school mother-blame and punishment for aggressive sexuality. Yet when she gets to the hospital, her noxious husband seems much more to blame and, crucially, it is her son who apologizes to *her*, the first moment where he begins to treat his mother with some modicum of respect and dignity. Unlike poor little Kay of *Mildred Pierce*, Cathy's son doesn't die. On the contrary, he seems to have learned a bit of a lesson from this episode. A complicated moment (in an otherwise failed series) that alters those recycled dictums just enough so that the ideologies of mother-blame are themselves revealed and even challenged.

While the new good mothers of TV can be imagined in a believable dramatic world, replete with plots that are "torn from the headlines," the gnarlier aberrant moms are largely locked in worlds not beholden to claims of verisimilitude. Surely it is striking that these new mothers we see on high-end cable by and large occupy a humorous or even camp location, even if sometimes cross-cut with dramatic elements. This is not insignificant; true non-normativity, it seems, can only be offered up if taken with a grain of comedic salt.

Mommy Wars Redux (or, No Mother Really goes Unpunished . . .)

Deviant or non-normative mothers have long been a staple of Hollywood storylines, particularly in their earlier filmic forms, but those mothers have precisely been deviant in order to be punished, to serve as reminders of the power of normative familialism and rigid gender ideologies. Earlier aberrant moms—their aberrance often signaled less by outré drug dealing and more by banal participation in the labor force or even merely active sexual desire—were almost always taken to task and put in their (domestic) place. In *Motherhood and Representation*, Kaplan identified two primary types of "bad" or "evil" mothers in popular culture. The so-called "fusional" mother is the "possessive and destructive all-devouring one," while the second bad mother is, on the contrary, over-indulgent and vicariously satisfies her own needs through the child. These mothers "project on to the child [their] resentments, disappointments and failures for which the child is also to suffer" (Kaplan 1992, 47), but the new bad moms of contemporary television don't fit easily into either framework. These moms certainly aren't overprotective or smothering or devouring, but neither are they overindulgent exactly, although they are certainly neglectful and often disengaged from their children. Motherhood is, rather, narratively secondary. In other words, her identity as a *woman*—and as a character—is not wholly determined by her behavior as a mother.¹³ In fact, one could even hazard that a reversal of sorts is occurring here, in that the more general aberrant practices (drug dealing, drug taking, neurotic unhappiness, multiple personalities) both precedes and trumps maternal identity.

But what is even more curious about today's deviant moms is that, if not exactly heroines, they seem to revel in their slatternly parenting. If punishment for deviating from maternal norms was, well, the norm in Hollywood for eons, then this more ambiguous response to motherly aberrance surely signals something exciting. The new moms do still feel the sting of contrition and external judgment, but that judgment is assuredly more nuanced and ambivalent than in the past. Even in *Weeds*, which carried on with a gung-ho anti-maternalism for many seasons, a new criticism of Nancy's increasingly neglectful behavior grew as the years progressed. As one pop culture blogger writes:

Mary-Louise Parker's Nancy is now the show's worst offense. She started off selling drugs to support her family, then continued just for the, well, high she got from being in

dangerous situations . . . Listen, everyone parents their kids differently, but it's universally understood that if your teenage son murders someone, the punishment should be harsher than smacking him in the head and taking away his candy . . . In recent seasons, Nancy is just someone who had a wild tequila night where she drunkenly stole the Worst Mother Award away from Betty Draper, turned it into a bong and beat her sons half to death with it. (Viruet 2010)

In season 6, Nancy begins to exhibit a modicum of self-understanding. The family is on the run, and her infant son gets ill and needs to be taken to a doctor. As the doctor questions her about the boy she realizes—sharply and quite poignantly—what we as spectators have been witnessing for months: she doesn't have a clue. She has ceded the care of this infant to her (murderous and possibly sociopathic) teenage son, Shane. It is a strange TV moment as the camera closes in on her face, for it is a face full of self-understanding but strikingly absent of guilt. She realizes her neglect and registers it visibly but the typical self-recriminations and tears don't follow. Even more dramatically, the season concluded with a bravado move where Nancy—finally apprehended by her ex, Esteban—turns herself in to the police in an effort to both prevent the loss of the infant to Esteban but, more crucially, to prevent the arrest of her son, Shane. In a final act of maternal sacrifice, albeit like none we have ever seen, Nancy declares that *she* killed rival Pilar, thus exonerating Shane, the actual perp. But, of course, in the process she also saves herself: Esteban was poised to kill her. Finally, then, the “needs” of mother and child coalesce.

In both *Weeds* and *Mad Men*, maternal neglect does finally seem to get noted if not actively punished. As *New York Times* TV critic Ginia Bellafante (2008) argues:

Weeds no longer seems propelled by the will to subvert all of our cultural images of maternal perfection; it seems insistent on celebrating Nancy's parental fecklessness and narcissism, asking us to refrain from judgments when all we want to do now is throw stones. *Weeds* feels less digressive but it has also stripped away any vestiges of Nancy's appeal . . .

The blogosphere has been particularly unkind to Betty Draper of *Mad Men*, claiming that “her character (in both senses) gets ever icier, vainer, more alien—nearly camp at times, like some hissable Barbie with the most cake.” Once apparently nominally likable or at least pitiable, she is now “morphing from a mere neurotic into a full-on textbook narcissist, and not incidentally, the worst mother on television since Livia Soprano kicked off in 2001” (Nussbaum 2010). In the 2010 season finale, Betty does get her cosmic insult by being ceremonially replaced by Don's easygoing and easily maternal secretary. In one crucial scene in that final episode, Don has taken secretary Megan along with him on vacation, apparently to babysit his kids. As they eat in the hotel restaurant, Don watches in amazement at Megan's non-reaction to Sally's milkshake spill: Betty would have surely seen this as another opportunity to beat down her hapless daughter. As Bellafante (2010) notes, “what Don . . . wanted in the end was a woman he believed would serve as a warm maternal presence not only for his alienated children but also for himself.”

Surely, some of the pleasure of a Nancy or even a Betty is their absolute indifference to the normative regimes of mothering, even when they get censured by arrogant men. These moms are not reading the endless stream of motherhood how-tos, desperately anxious to find the perfect admixture of care and concern that will turn little Susie into an upright and successful citizen. We may be horrified at Nancy's disregard for the safety of her

children, but we do catch glimpses of a powerful love at work. Betty's treatment of her daughter makes us uncomfortable, but her whole life makes us uncomfortable, trapped as she is in that well-documented suburban hell. If, as Douglas and Michaels (2004, 209) claim, "the new momism is not about subservience to men . . . it is about subservience to children" then these bad mothers may indeed have circumnavigated this normative ideology. And if one of the most inane and ill-thought out discourses of contemporary motherhood has been this "balancing work and family" framework, then these aberrant mothers do us a service in upending or at the very least mocking this framework.

Are these anti-moms an elliptical response to the overwrought mommy wars and their essentialist antidotes, a riposte to the suffocating blogs that link upscale consumer motherhood (buy that organic baby food!) with obsessive child-focused parenting advice? Recent years have spawned a veritable cottage industry of obsessive mommy navel gazing and parenting porn: from the genre of mommy lit, with its self-indulgent memoirs and tongue-in-cheek how-to guides, to the endless proliferation of mommy blogs and paeans to beatific celebrity motherhood. A more critical version of this has also arisen, largely among upper- and middle-class mothers. Manifested in websites (e.g. Hipmama and MomsRising.org), numerous books and "mamafestos" (e.g. *The Bitch in the House* [Hanauer 2002], *The Motherhood Manifesto* [Blades & Rowe-Finkbeiner 2006]), and cultural events (e.g. Mamapalooza) these activities vary but are characterized by a resistance to the motherhood mystique in the name of motherhood. Raising all the old fears of a kind of (feminist) maternal essentialism in response to a (anti-feminist) maternal essentialism, these movements build from a long tradition of mother-as-activist politics and serve it a new twist with savvy websites (replete with their own products) and maternal empowerment bromides.

Watching these aberrant mothers thus induces some serious head spinning and, we would venture, some deep ambivalence. We are simultaneously thrilled at their absolute refusal to follow the rule book, their "me-first" narcissism that has long been assayed as the *bête noire* of good mothering. Perhaps they signify a more elliptical rebuttal to the censorious surveillance and judgment that rains on mothers of all types, although more aggressively on those already disenfranchised by race, class, sexuality. If one of the banes of feminism has been the myth of perfect motherhood, the oppressive fantasy of devotional love and home-baked domesticity, then what does feminism make of this much more confusing era in which perfect motherhood may indeed still be ideologically offered but is largely invisible from the public sphere and marketplace of public opinion? Or are the Octomoms and Gosselins and drug-dealing cougars meant to serve as warnings that if we don't adhere to the myth of perfect motherhood this is what will happen to us and our children?

Whether in the fulsome mommy blogs and mommy lit, the egregious neglect of hip TV moms, the heinous abuse of filmic moms, or the reproductive surfeit of reality TV, motherhood in the new millennium is marked by an excess of meaning. They are uncontrolled and uncontrollable, full of urges, desires, and identities that are antithetical to what we imagine of a good mother. Part of our pleasure in these women, even Nancy, is watching them resist male control—of their sexuality, their work, their parenting. Nancy may be a bitch but she is nobody's bitch. Importantly, one significant form that this "uncontrollability" takes is sexual; these TV moms are having none of that separation of maternity and sexuality that has so marked motherhood tropes. And, here, it is not simply the moms of high-end cable that pursue booty call with avidity, but the moms of Wisteria

Lane and other more typical television locales. This is not to say that the sexual vs. the maternal has disappeared as a narrative structure, but when this narrative emerges it does so *explicitly* and therefore becomes the site of examination and even contestation. In other words, what was once the default space of an unacknowledged paternalism becomes now the contested space of an explicit public debate.

What is particularly interesting is that these images of out of control mothers emerge at the same historical moment in which “intensive parenting” or “parenting out of control” as sociologist Margaret Nelson (2010) puts it, is defining the ideological terrain. As Douglas and Michaels (2004, 300) argue, the new paranoia about mothering instantiates yet another unworkable double-bind, where “hip, relaxed, spontaneous and . . . sexy” mothers are “supposed to be as vigilant as Michael Corleone’s bodyguards but appear as relaxed as Jimmy Buffett in Margaritaville.” But TVs aberrant moms are neither vigilant nor relaxed; indeed they seem to explicitly attempt to avoid the penetrating and governing gaze of the state as much as possible, whether it is the FBI, social services, or censorious husbands old and new.

We see this moment as strangely hopeful. For so long, mothers have been framed by and framed in through the binary oppositions of sacrificial saints and demonic destroyers of hearth and home. Exceptions always persisted of course, but motherhood tropes seemed forever bound to one or the other of these hegemonic themes. When you see a *Nurse Jackie* taking down a too-perfect mother or a *Good Wife* in a complex and loving relationship with her teens or even a Nancy Botwin careening off the grid of recognizable parenting, you see—at the very least—multiplicity where uniformity so often ruled the day. Some of this shift can be understood through the structural and organizational changes in television specifically and popular culture more broadly. The balkanization of viewing produced by the proliferation of cable networks (both premium and basic), the increasing use of various technologies (TIVO, digital recorders, etc.) to “pick” selectively from the TV lineup, the ability to watch “for free” online and to engage in online fan communities and critical discourse are just a few of the social and cultural changes that have inevitably altered both the content and the context of viewing. The sheer proliferation of venues and types of programming is at least in part responsible for the more diverse types of mothers populating our cultural imagination and thus it is no accident that TV provides a richer array of roles for women—particularly middle-aged women—than mainstream Hollywood film.

Therefore we do take issue with critics who see only the overweening force of the market and renewed anti-feminism in contemporary images. The discordant images are a sign of our continued cultural confusion over motherhood and family but the fact that they can no longer be so narrowly typified, so reined in under a singular rubric, is also a sign of progress. Yes, the older ideologies haven’t wholly given way and they are often reconstituted with a veneer of post-feminist gloss that only makes them more pernicious. Like Raymond Williams’ notion of residual culture, leftover maternal tropes continue to be mixed in with today’s tastier menu. And aberrant mothering is always a double-edged sword; while it provides a respite from the virgin/whore dichotomies it also can be easily morphed into a new version of that tired classic “blame the mother.” But in an era of renewed anti-feminism and female power marketed as Palinesque “mama grizzly” political porn, we are in dire need of some tough, messy, non-normative renegades to blast a few more holes in the maternal shrouds we’ve been wearing for far too long. The bad mother as anti-hero might be just what we need.

NOTES

1. There have been any number of commentaries on the media maelstrom that became known as the “mommy wars.” Some of the most notable include Douglas and Michaels’ “The Mommy Wars” (2000), Belkin’s “The Opt-Out Revolution” (2003), Darnton’s “Mommy vs. Mommy” (1990), Peskowitz’s *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?* (2005), Flanagan’s “Domestic Life: To Hell With All That” (2004), and Steiner’s *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families* (2007).
2. Perhaps it is that these books just take us into the new millennium and they simply haven’t been able to reckon with the newest of images, the focus of this essay. Indeed, in Douglas and Michaels’ book, the media images discussed are largely from the 1990s and earlier.
3. Hilariously, both of Celia’s beleaguered daughters wreak revenge on their mother, while Nancy’s children remain strangely devoted.
4. The black maid here is the sign of maternal devotion, much like the more voluble black mother and angelic icon of the 1950s maternal melodrama *Imitation of Life*.
5. An assault on mom’s authority if not her (hyper)femininity, the daughter’s short hair signals resistance to the maternal neglect and a brazen assertion of her own (non-normative?) burgeoning sexuality.
6. Only in the 1960s context would Don’s casual and infrequent bouts of parenting be seen as gracious and loving.
7. While this is true of a number of teen-centered narratives of contemporary popular culture, what differs here is that the maternal disregard is unpunished if not celebrated.
8. Even the ring has doubled over meaning: in the previous episode Jackie had her ring sawn off and broke her own finger in order to remove evidence of her marital status when the ring became stuck. One can read this as an interesting riff on the “stuckness” of the nuclear family. The fact that Jackie takes matters—quite literally—into her own hand in unsticking the situation says volumes about the show’s deep ambivalence toward normative familialism.
9. It is telling to note that Michelle Duggar is praised for having a bucketload of babies, but as soon as one of them is deemed “imperfect” she is attacked: being a good mother is always conditional.
10. Not coincidentally, the explosion of feminist work on mothers in popular culture that characterized the 1980s and early 1990s (see especially the work of Suzanna Walters, E. Ann Kaplan, Marianne Hirsch, Sharon Hays, and Mary Ann Doane) has slowed to a mere trickle, replaced instead with mommy blogs, mommy lit, mommy memoirs but little in the way of substantive analysis of contemporary representations.
11. We should note that we focus here on mainstream Hollywood films of the past five–eight years. Independent and foreign films evince both a wider and deeper range of maternal representations.
12. Ironically, Melissa Leo starred in this film as well which garnered critical acclaim but none of the big-ticket awards or box office bonanza.
13. This could be a result, in part, of the demise of the maternal melodrama as a central genre.

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