

Marginalized Motherhood and the Mother-Lesbian Subject

Government agencies, the courts, and other entities have threatened, enforced, or terminated the motherhood status of certain women and girls, against their stated desires and without evidence of abuse, because, for example, the woman in question was disabled, a political activist, too young, unmarried, comatose (judge denied abortion), divorced and had sex, too old, the wrong race, an atheist, a Native American, deaf, mentally ill, retarded, seeking an abortion, lesbian, reported to speak Spanish to her child, enrolled in full-time college, a drug user, poor. (Solinger, 1998: 383)

Introduction

This paper seeks to claim a space for mother-lesbians. This subject position, mother-lesbian, to which I belong, refers to women who have had their children in the context of heterosexual relationships and then reconfigured their family lives in order to live as lesbians. Placing the word mother before lesbian indicates that such a woman identified, at least publicly, with motherhood before lesbianism, in contrast to lesbian originated motherhood. The desire to draw attention to mother-lesbian subjectivities grows out of my experience of exclusion from already constituted categories of mother and lesbian.

Creating ever-increasing categories of “mother” is useful if the intention is to expand the possible ways in which any individual mother can legitimate her identity. Additive methods of increasing categories are, however, limiting as they always exclude someone and do little to address the systems of oppression that restrict legitimising identities in the first place. As Judith Butler (1990) suggests, categories always leak.

For example, while gathering data for my Master's thesis I attempted to create a category of identity I termed "once married mother-lesbians." I used a snowball method in order to obtain interviews. Two women referred to me for this study did not easily fit the confining category of "once married mother-lesbian." They are same-sex lovers, with six children between them, from heterosexual marriages. One of the husbands had died, and the other husband lives with them. All three adults—the two women and the husband of one of the women—love each other and all maintain intimate, sexual relationships. Although the women are same-sex lovers they are also opposite-sex lovers. They are not "once-married" since one is still married. They are not simply mother-lesbians; in fact, they rejected the term "lesbian" altogether. What term could I use to define the motherhood in which these two women were engaged? The category I had drawn in order to rupture a normalized category of heteronormative motherhood and differentiate mother-lesbian from lesbian mother—was an already-ruptured category.

Interlocking

Additive methods used for inclusion are, ultimately, dangerous. Such methods result in exclusions and when applied to the discourses of motherhood, limit, rather than enhance, the capacity for women to mother. Fellows and Razack (1997) cite the work of Patricia Hill Collins to strengthen their claim that additive methods are limiting and will ultimately fail since they disrupt one system without simultaneously disrupting others.

Replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones creates possibilities for new paradigms. The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. (Hill Collins qtd. in Fellows and Razack, 1997: 3)

The compulsion to be included in any category that carries with it the potential of social and economic benefits is, however, strong. There are very real consequences attached to whether or not mother-lesbians are able to claim that their motherhood is legitimate. Is it any surprise, then, that if and when possible, mother-lesbians will disavow identities associated with "illegitimate" mother identities in order to claim benefits reserved for women attached to (white, middle-class, "respectable") legitimate ones? What is to be gained and what is lost when individual claims to legitimate motherhood depend on excluding women positioned outside those categories?

Unrespectably respectable

In 1991, Martha Fineman said that motherhood is an institution "with significant and powerful symbolic content in our culture "[that] has an impact

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on all women independent of the individual choice about whether to become a mother" (276). The identities of woman and mother, then, interplay and depend on specific histories of understanding which make particular and different subject positions available for different women.

Even as we must fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other. Neither past nor present—has a complete meaning alone. (Said, 1994: 4)

From the moment they set foot in this country as slaves, Black women have fallen outside the American ideal of womanhood. (Roberts, 1997: 10)

Dorothy Roberts states that attributes assigned to the True Woman "were precisely the opposite of those that characterized Black women" (1997: 10). Further, Black women's mother practices were blamed for Black peoples' problems (Roberts, 1997: 10). Interpal Grewal explains that notions of beauty that began just before the turn of the century focussed on the face as the representation of "good" or "bad" moral character of a woman (Grewal, 1996: 27). Thus, the fact that Trollop's Hatty Carbury, in *The Way We Live Now* (1875), was a good woman was affirmed by the perfection of her physical features (Grewal, 1996: 27). Circumscribing boundaries of moral perfection based on an "aesthetic" version of "white transparent beauty" carefully constructed categories of women/mother in ways that excluded those it could never contain—poor women who tarnished their transparent whiteness with the dirt of their work, or women marked by skin colour. Such discourses circulate in ways that set an impossible standard by which women are measured.

Mother nation

Anna Davin frames motherhood as an imperial nation building project that supports the ideology of the "survival of the fittest." She asserts that the exaltation of motherhood confirmed the family in its bourgeois form based on unpaid female labour supported by the male "family wage" (1997: 138). The pivotal centering of the white middle-class/elite male depends on his female counterpart to complete the arrangement. The arrangement is not a linear one although the ideology of "the nation as family" can make it appear so. Phrases like, "the strength of the nation depends on the strength of our families" rest on the myth that the traditional nuclear heteronormative family form is attainable to all, and that our national survival depends on maintaining its dominance (Chunn, 1992; Davin, 1997; McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 1995).

Sheryl Nestel, commenting on the work by Stoler and McClintock on the construction of the bourgeois subject, says, "The production of whiteness as a social identity ... has direct historical links to an imperial past in which

racialized subjects provided the counterpoint against which bourgeois identities could be recognized" (Nestel, 1997: 3).

For whiteness, goodness, and chasteness to become the measure for the respectable bourgeois subject there had to be categories of women that deviated from that standard in order to be contrasted with it. Without the contrast, there could be no "deviant." With the contrast, the claim to respectability facilitated coding women who were "on the other side of the degenerate divide," deviant (Fellows and Razack, 1997: 4).

Degeneration

There is a potent rhetoric that circulates a belief that "degenerate" families destabilize the nation. The rhetoric has a strong "home" in American Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 publication *The Negro Family, The Case for National Action*. Slavery's legacy to the contemporary construction of Black mothers as degenerate is supported by terms used to categorize Black mothers: "welfare queen," "deviant," "matriarch," "unwed," "mammy," "negligent," "Jezebel," and "immoral" (Roberts, 1997: 10-18). Racialized concepts such as these apply to all women who fail to meet the standard of "respectable" mothering practices. Hence phrases such as "welfare queen" carry a multitude of assumptions about class and race while notions such as the "unfit mother" carry assumptions about class, race, and sexuality. Both these and similar terms are imbued with social meanings apart from any individual woman's mothering practices. The constructed "welfare queen" or "unfit mother" identities have little space outside the imagination of degeneracy and the anxieties of a nation produced through the rhetoric of the "demise of the bourgeois family."

Mother-lesbians and other marginalized mothers are racialized by the terms "deviant," "immoral," "unwed," and "negligent." Anne McClintock makes a convincing case for the idea that racial degeneration was evoked by the state at the turn of the century to "police the 'degenerate' classes—the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics and the insane—who were collectively figured as racial deviants" (McClintock, 1995: 43). How do mother-lesbians become a category that is coded "deviant" and what do we do in our attempts to avoid those markers?

Elisions

Kate Davy says that "[w]hite women signify hegemonic, institutionalised whiteness through their association with a pure, chaste, asexual before-the-fall womanhood ... attained and maintained via middle-class respectability with its implicit heterosexuality" (Davy, 1997: 212). The fallen or "bad" woman, she says, is "embodied by some white women (prostitutes, white trash, lesbians) and all women of colour" (Davy, 1997: 212).

Whiteness constructs motherhood discourses amidst assumptions that "best practices" in mothering reflect the "American ideal of womanhood" (Chunn, 1992; Coontz, 1992; Davin, 1997). Black feminist literature on

mothering posit claims that Black mothers face challenges in mothering practices that are invisible in white motherhood discourses (see Glenn *et al.*, 1994; Collins, 1994; Williams, 1995). Both white and Black motherhood discourses are steeped in heteronormativity and erase mother-lesbian mothering practices. How do positions of motherhood set up competing marginalities in ways that continue to support dominant positions of whiteness and heteronormativity?

Competing marginalities

Many feminists readily adhere to the belief that Canada's imperialist roots have produced governing structures and institutions that support oppressive racist and sexist constructions of women in relation to men—and that women are differently placed along lines of multiple and overlapping oppressions (see, for example: Davin, 1997; Grewal, 1996; Razack, 1998; Stoler, 1995; Williams, 1995). This not only constructs gender differences it also constructs “difference” in relation to the dominant subject.¹ The marking of difference as subordinate allows the dominant subject to know itself as dominant (Fellows and Razack, 1997: 15). Without the unmarked position of dominance, difference would not exist as subordinate. Different and subordinate positions of motherhood upheld by machineries of institutional powers—capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism—pit women against women. The result is a hierarchy of differences that positions subjects in various orders amidst the dominant center (hooks, 1984).

Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack wrote of their experiences, at a “failed conference,” that led them to examine hierarchies among women (Fellows and Razack, 1997). At a conference on law and feminism, discussion about prostitution, violence and race came to be framed as “competing marginalities.” Women were differently positioned in relation to prostitution, violence and race—some were academics who theorized the subject and some were sex trade workers; some were women of color and others white women. At the end of the first day of the conference a “survivor of prostitution” left the conference feeling, once again, that the process of (re)defining the social context of work and prostitution was erasing violence in prostitution. The next day discussions about racism began in earnest. Tensions rose when participants turned the in-progress discussion of race to the former day's discussion of violence in prostitution. Some viewed this as a familiar move to eclipse debates about race. The separation of prostitution from race constructed a contest *between* rather than amongst women, “as if [prostitution and racism] were independent systems—as if they were competing parallel narratives” (Fellows and Razack, 1997: 8).

Borrowing from this narrative and the theories Fellows and Razack (1997) apply to their analysis, I would like to think about the possibilities for claiming mother-lesbian subjectivities. What discourses are already competing in the spaces in which I make a claim for legitimate mother-lesbian subjectivities?

Race to innocence

Motherhood is a cornerstone support in upholding the very systems of domination that oppress women. It is not only an experience it is also an institution built on unequal relationships of power (Rich, 1986). Through the institution of motherhood and domesticity women come to be regulated by the state, the self, and each other to desire particular mothering practices (Davin, 1997; Stoler, 1995; Foucault, 1991). Through our participation in the regulation of others, and ourselves as mothers, we come to be positioned as both oppressed and oppressor.

Feminists “have gained an intellectual understanding of complicity” (Fellows and Razack, 1997:5) through an acknowledgment of the places we find ourselves within institutionalized structures of oppression. For example, we might be able to understand that another woman has less privilege than we do. However, when a political moment challenges our own stability within imperialist, capitalist, and patriarchal frameworks, we feel our own oppression as both separate from the oppression of others and more critical than their claims of oppression. This is described by Fellows and Razack as a “race to innocence” (1997: 2). A race to innocence is, they say, “the process through which a woman comes to believe her own claim of subordination is the most urgent and that she is unimplicated in the subordination of other women. Although we know we are complicitous in the oppression of other women, we seldom *feel* this to be true” (Fellows and Razack, 1997: 2, 6).²

Who can be a mother?

As I continue my own project—to make the mother-lesbian legitimately visible—I wonder about how to dismantle systems of oppressions that regulate women in ways that compel us to perform “good mother” subjectivities based on white middle-class standards of respectability. If women are constructed as mothers through the available position of the bourgeois subject, then there are limited spaces in which to articulate, live, and form subjectivities that reflect the reality of her lived experiences—which more often than not lies outside such an impossible ideal (Smith, 1987).

Placing the experience of women of color in the center of feminist theorizing about motherhood demonstrates how emphasizing the issue of father as patriarch in a decontextualized nuclear family, distorts the experience of women in alternate family structures with quite different political economies. (Collins, 1994: 46)

In order to begin to think about alternative family structures, or households headed by mother-lesbians, it is necessary to find an entry point into motherhood outside the North American ideal of womanhood. Centering women of color when theorizing about motherhood redirects attention away from the white hegemonic center and opens possibilities for thinking about

interrupting the bourgeois subject as the measure for the “good” mother. The question is: what does it take for individual mothers to interrupt the dominant discourse, and how are competing marginalities always already present and hailing us in ways that reproduce dominance?

Because women are all too aware of the risks for mothers who claim “respectability,” those of us who sit a distance from, or outside, the assumed right to mother compete with each other. We understand our own vulnerable positions as the most salient oppression of motherhood, exactly because we feel there is a threat to our own mothering practices. We erase the subjectivities of other women who are attempting to mother, as we launch our individual battles in order to find spaces within legitimate mother subjectivities.

Through the performance of respectable identities, women participate in perpetuating dominant bourgeois subject positionings or what Ruthann Robson terms their “legal domestication”—“the regulation of women to the domestic sphere, a private place that can facilitate being dominated and inhibit collective action” (Robson, 1991: 172).

We attempt to argue ourselves into legal categories so that we can be protected, not noticing how such categories restrict [us]. (Robson, 1991: 173)

All women are regulated by state enforced, legal definitions of “mother.” Racialized notions of degenerate/deviant sexuality, unfit mothering practices, and the absence of a male provider regulate women who are lesbians. The “deviant,” “unwed,” and “negligent” lesbian is not close enough to the dominant center of “good mother” to be able to assume the right to mother unquestioningly. There are, however, discourses that are available for some mother-lesbians to mobilize based constructions of race, class and gender performance.

Respectability constructs whiteness, gender, and class in ways that surround women who are able to mobilize within these constructs. If mother-lesbians (particularly if they are white and middle-class) can perform ourselves as “respectable,” we can hide from the discourses that would construct us as “deviant.”

Women whose right to mother is questioned, are liable to state scrutiny, vulnerable to coercive reproductive control, risk having their children removed, and are made accountable for their sexual activities and their personal expenditures (Roberts, 1997). If possible, women avoid being categorized in ways that diminish their privacy. If possible, women are careful about avoiding social service institutions that compromise their autonomy. Not all women can always avoid surveillance.

Conclusion

When I moved away from the heterosexual privilege I had assumed in my twenty-three year marriage, I became conspicuously aware of the speed with

which racialized discourses surrounded me. I am reminded of Patricia William's description, in *The Rooster's Egg*, of her experience following the adoption of her son, looking in the mirror and saying to her reflection, "I am an (over-the-hill) black single mother" (1995: 171). She said that she realized she was "so many things that many people seemed to think were anti-family—"unwed," "black," "single," everything but "teenage" (1995: 171). Despite her privilege of class and profession she experienced tremendous social resistance.

I sometimes look at my own reflection in the mirror and say; "I am an (over-the-hill) white middle-class mother-lesbian with four children." Unable to "keep my family together" I feel the stigma of failure. I feel the economic vulnerability of dependency. My status as a mother of four demanding children, once lauded in my Italian-American community, is now viewed as "excessive" in a community where women have few or no children. I have become conscious of my changed status in institutional spaces such as my children's schools. My ears and eyes have been sharpened to the homophobic nuances "othering" me.

What is not so clear is an awareness of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which I have begun to see the connections with, and disavowal of, other mothers who are racialized and deemed "unfit" because of their sexuality, class status, visible ethnicity, or race. Despite my intentions, I self-regulate according to anxieties that call into relief motherhood as an imperial nation-building project. Rather than disputing these anxieties, I, consciously or not, limit the possibilities to mother unquestioningly through the disavowal of those categories of disempowered women condemned by society and the state.

I am coming to an understanding that it is "motherhood"—as an institution—that regulates me into competing with other women on the margins of "respectable" motherhood. Women are pitted against each other, and that limits our capacity to seek alternative and effective ways to mother. If I continue to seek to claim legitimate subjectivities for mother-lesbians without simultaneously challenging "respectable bourgeois subjectivities," then the systems of oppressions that create categories of exclusion will not be disrupted. Individuals may continue to make gains, but at the expense of excluding those always outside the categories of privilege.

¹For a more complete discussion of "difference" see, Goldberg, 1993; Lorde, 1984; McClintock, 1995; Said, 1993, along with the authors mentioned in the body of the text. These authors would be termed "critical race theorists" and they stretch the notion of dominance and subordination beyond gender inequality. There is a belief that the politics of difference has the capacity both to identify and make differences visible and to conflate difference into essentialized categories. By this I mean that the complex specificities of definable discriminatory markers such as class, gender, ability, sexual orientation are rolled into the one category—race. The aforementioned critical race theorists explore the specificities of how bodies are marked and the histories through which they are marked.

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²It is important to note that even as we attempt to build coalitions through our political strategies, it is difficult to put our theories into action—to *know* that we are both oppressors and oppressed.

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