

The “Good Mother” vs. the “Other” Mother

The Girl-Mom

“The “Good Mother” vs. the “Other” Mother: The Girl-Mom” explores how discourses of the “Good Mother” have created a dialectically charged interdependency between this “Good Mother” and her “Other.” Every “Good Mother” lives striving to achieve “good” mothering and most every “Other” mother lives in a space where her parenting skills are other than “bad.” The binary logic that confines mothers to “good” or “bad” is socially constructed and propagated in western culture to serve patriarchy and the state, dividing mothers and women. In this paper I examine the discourses of the “Good Mother” related to the “Other” mother, specifically the young mother who is socially constructed as a “crisis” of epidemic proportions in modern Western culture. This paper examines the provisional and strategic use of the identity politic “Girl-Mom” to politicize and de-stabilize the “carceral continuum” of motherhood.

I am a 28-year-old mama to a wonderful, little six-year old girl. I attend the University of Alberta while my daughter attends kindergarten. I am an arts undergraduate studying as a double major in Film Studies and Women’s studies. I am white, Canadian, I was brought up in a middle-class family and I think it is important to be clear that I do not mean to speak for all young mothers, but of a cultural phenomenon of devaluation and de-legitimization that I have witnessed and experienced myself as a young mom. Being a young mom, I have been particularly interested in how the “ideal” mother is produced in mainstream Western culture. This idealization is repeated to all mothers inscribing ideas about what they should strive to be like. I will refer to the “ideal” mother in this paper as the “Good Mother.” My aim is to expose the culturally constructed ideals that devalue some mothers while valorizing others. These ideals of the “Good Mother” are repeated systemically to serve

patriarchy and the state. Such ideals in turn become “discourses of knowledge,” they are the discourses of the “Good Mother.”

Michel Foucault (1979) said “discourses of knowledge” were the ways of coming to know. From a place of fear, in what Foucault called the “carceral continuum,” people become docile bodies. The carceral continuum is self-policing, individuals are regulated by the discourses of knowledge, behave in ways deemed “appropriate,” live in fear of being watched, seen, or exposed as something other than “good.” Mothers behave in accordance to what has been prescribed as acceptable behaviour. Being this “Good Mother” is an impossible task, and the reinforcement of this mythic ideal puts all mothers into a lose-lose situation, whereby the ways a mother comes to know how she should behave is repeated and imitated, manipulated and exalted in the media, setting a standard so high the only outcome can be a series of failures. Judith Butler explains that, “Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” (Butler, 1996: 13). I wish to show how Motherhood is a “regulatory regime” by which I mean that the fear of *not* being a “Good Mother” oppresses, regulates, controls, and produces docile bodies that will not resist, or question the “experts.” I am particularly interested in the way the discourses of the “Good Mother” relate to the discursive productions of the “Other” mother. One mother, unsure and scared that she is not a “Good Mother” can find value in herself by devaluing “Other” mothers who do not share her values or beliefs regarding childrearing.

Adrienne Rich (1976) worked to deconstruct the discourses of the good or natural mother, in her book *Of Woman Born*. In this paper, I will examine the discourses of the “Good Mother” related to the discourses of the “Other” mother, specifically the young mother who is socially constructed as a “problem” of epidemic proportions in modern Western culture. I will refer to the young mom as the “Girl-Mom,” a term I have borrowed from a web-based feminist community run by and for teen and other marginalized young mothers (www.girl-mom.com).

No mother’s experience is the same. Mothering differs day-to-day, moment-to-moment. Many books and articles have expounded upon the topic of mothering: The styles of mothering, post-partum depression, the totalized identity of the mother, the deviant mom and the good mom. On occasion a book comes along that attempts to debunk the myth of the “Good Mother” and bring into public space the dark side of mothering. While there are a few books that regard young mothering as a “crisis” to be prevented, relatively few texts have touched on the experiences specific to the Girl-Mom. By “Girl-Mom” I mean a mother under, or close to the age of majority and generally unmarried, but not necessarily a teenager by exact definition.

If I can take what I see and hear to be true around me, the totalizing identity of the “Good Mother” is what Betty Freidan (1963) described in *The Feminine Mystique*, that a mother’s identity outside the world of motherhood ceases to matter or exist. A mother is seen *only* as a mother, with no other potential,

needs or goals. And in 2007, this “Good Mother” is alive and well. She may be labelled by some as “1950’s housewife” or “Super mom,” but whatever term is used to label her, her role is instrumental in upholding (right-wing) “traditional family values.” However, this paper is not just about “Good Mother” morals and values. The “Good Mother” is often produced as being predominantly white, heterosexual, married and middle or upper class. Doreen Fumia, in her paper about marginalized mothers, says, “For Whiteness, goodness, and chasteness to become the measure for the respectable bourgeois subject there had to be categories of women deviated from that standard in order to be contrasted with it. Without the contrast, there could be no deviant” (1999: 89).

I think about this idealized, romanticized notion of who this “Good Mother” is, and she is not me. I do not fit the discourses of what the “Good Mother” acts like, or looks like. So, if I am not this “Good Mother,” what kind of mother am I? Am I a “Bad Mother?” I would say I am not. I know plenty of *good* mothers who are not this “Good Mother.” I identify myself at times as a Girl-Mom, particularly when I was in my early 20s and my daughter was younger. I became a mother at 21. Certainly, I am privileged and can only write from my own location as such. Nonetheless, I am the “Other” mother. It is often awkward to “out” myself as a young mom. This admission is often met with shock, and awe, often followed with the glib phrase “how do you cope?” Well, as any mother might answer, I just do. My age has little to do with my coping abilities. Rather, it is the carceral continuum that affects the choices I make, the thoughts I choose to share about my experience as a mother, and the way I raise my child. Discourses of knowledge work on my body to produce the appearance and imitation of a “Good Mother.” I strive to pass as the “Good Mother” though it is unlikely I am seen as anything but “Other” once I have been out-ed as a mom. Each mother has good days and bad, triumphs and failures. However, it seems that struggles with depression and other dark topics regarding mothering are strictly taboo to the Girl-Mom and “Other” mothers as the Girl-Mom and her “illegitimate” children should be punished for her immoralities.

“We hold mothers and pregnant women to a higher moral standard than we require of other members of society” (Turnbull, 2001: 132). Mothers who pass as the normalized “Good Mother” are assumed to be “fit” to have and raise children. Mothers who do not pass are vilified, called “unfit.” I am fully capable of raising my child, though in most situations I do not pass. While I do not doubt my own abilities as a mother, I constantly question if I am being a “Good Mother.” If I look for the “Good Mother,” and strive to be like her, I fail. Butler talks of identities as performative, where behaviour is essentialized through systemic repetition until the behaviours are invisible. The “Good Mother” role is “...always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing” (1996: 21). I am a derivation, an imitation, and in many spaces I do not pass. My identity as a mother is essentialized through “endless repetitions of itself” until its performativity

becomes invisible (Butler, 1996). When I wake up I do not ask myself if I am still a mother. I do however ask myself daily, “Am I being a ‘Good Mother?’”

I battle the regulatory regimes of normalized mothering and the guilt my resistance serves up daily. I work two part-time jobs, attend school full-time, and there are days upon days where I see my daughter only long enough to get her off to school in the morning. Some weeks I barely see her at all. Yes, I felt guilty. But I am doing what I need to finish my degree, while being a mother. Experts in the science and institution of motherhood repeat discourses of this “Good Mother.” In 1963, Betty Freidan wrote that so-called “experts” were telling women “...how to breastfeed children and handle toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion...” (1). This information and advice is still being repeated in parenting magazines, and elsewhere in mainstream western culture. “A woman who defies the truth of medical knowledge becomes a bad mother.” (Turnbull, 2001: 129) Parents, especially new mothers, turn to “expert” books and magazines to reinforce their own ideas of what the “Good Mother” looks like, how she behaves, and how her children behave (Francis-Connolly, 2003). Discourses of the “Good Mother” are repeated and reinforced by doctors, lawyers, educators, and other childrearing “experts,” as well as in laws and through the media. “The implicit reliance by the courts on the norm of the ‘good mother’ means that they are in essence applying a universal standard that ignores circumstance” (Ikemoto qtd. Turnbull, 2001: 132).

“New” categories are being created for the mother, but as Butler suggests, categories always leak (Butler, 1996). “Such methods result in exclusion and when applied to the discourses of motherhood, limit, rather than enhance, the capacity for women to mother” (Fumia, 1999: 87) Attempts to include “Other” mothers in the category of “Good Mother” only works to “out” the “Other” mothers. Coming out of one closet—the mother closet—I step directly into another closet—the Girl-Mom closet. Of course, I do not mean to speak for all Girl-Moms. A Girl-Mom who is further marginalized by race, religion, or class, faces even more adversities and is subjected to more public scrutiny than me—a white, non-teenaged Girl-Mom from a middle-class background. Mothers who are striving to achieve “Good Mother” status are pitted against “Other” mothers over every issue: i.e., breastfeeding vs. bottle-feeding, stay-at-home moms vs. working moms. Every “expert” who writes a book offers another set of “rules” that perpetuate the discourses of the “Good Mother.” These “rules” are weapons meant to divide and conquer women and mothers. These tenants are polarizing tactics used by a system bound to patriarchy that oppresses not only mothers, but all women. Any resistance to these disciplinary mechanisms works as a binary showing all the ways the “Other” is deviant. “The masculine imagination has had to divide women, to see us, and to force us to see ourselves, as polarized into good or evil...” (Rich, 1976: 16).

The many discursive productions of the New Woman can be superimposed over the discourses the Girl-Mom. Both the New Woman in the late nineteenth

century and the Girl-Mom are/were produced as being many of the same things: she is stereotyped as being single, sexually deviant, and promiscuous (Ledger, 1995). Single mothers, after all, have been constructed as the ultimate proof of promiscuity and sexual deviance. The New Woman was seen as women who would produce unhealthy children (Ledger, 1995), the same way the Girl-Mom is viewed in modern western culture. The Girl-Mom is also produced as being: on welfare, unemployed, uneducated, too young—or else *looks too young* (it has been my experience that looking too young is a reason for shame and guilt when the young-looking mother is assumed to be not married or is not in the presence of a man assumed to be both her husband *and* the father of her child). She is often represented as a high school drop-out that has no control of her children, and in the worst case she might be a prostitute, a drug abuser, or an alcoholic (even all three). It is ironic that the New Woman was in fact a white, heterosexual woman from the upper and middle classes, who wanted more access to libraries, to become more educated, and put off marriage and children (Ledger, 1995).

“Motherhood ... has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism” (Rich, 1976: 15). In Canada, after the First World War there was a resurgence of this pre-occupation with motherhood and those deemed unfit. Nationalist ideals were propagated by the state, patriarchy, and medicine (Commachio, 1997). The institutions of childbearing and childrearing created the science of motherhood (Commachio, 1997). Discourses were produced to let women know what it would take to be a “Good Mother.” This discourse of the “Good Mother” is reinforced in modern Western culture, upholding gender roles, class relations, and racial distinctions (Commachio, 1997). Discourses of the “Good Mother” “leaves little room for consideration of class, age, race, family and other such relations comprising social identity...” (Commachio, 1997: 308). “Behaviour which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism is considered deviant or criminal” (Rich, 1976: 24). Currently, in 2007, these ideas propagate nationalism and patriotism, re-emerging in the name of right wing “traditional family values.”

Girl-Moms and “Other” mothers are subjected to public scrutiny based on value-laden assumptions regarding: relationships with male partners, socio-economic circumstances, education, employment, housing, substance abuse, maturity, personal responsibility, coping skills, health and well-being, the cognitive development and behavioural problems of their children; also whether or not these mothers need to use government programs, social assistance, child tax benefits, subsidized health care, and childcare (Phoenix, 1991). Age is not relative to how well one will parent, however, age is assumed criteria for the makings of the “Good Mother.” “Early motherhood does not constitute cause for general concerns. What seems to be of public concern is the repeated ideology that young mothers are ‘unfit’ if they are unmarried” (Phoenix, 1991: 247). Certainly 50 years ago, it was perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, for 18- and 19-year-old women to marry and begin families.

“Motherhood is ‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’” (Rich, 1976: 24). Mothers who fit the mould of proper “Good” mother have their experiences of motherhood legitimized. Mothers who are deemed misfit are excluded from speaking of motherhood, and not welcome into the “sacred”—culturally constructed—space of motherhood.

In October 2003, a U.S. federal program, “PRIDE” (Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone) a section of TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) was set up to award bonuses totalling \$100 million over four years. States must “establish goals to reduce the rate of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, with special emphasis on teenage pregnancies, and establish numerical goals for reducing the illegitimacy ratio” in order to qualify for bonus money (TANF Section-101, 2003). The state oppresses Girl-Moms by imposing patriarchal norms and making value-laden judgments on any Girl-Mom that does not pass as the “Good Mother.”

Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976), and Jane Lazzare in *The Mother Knot* (1976) deconstruct the discourses of the “Good Mother”; however, none of these feminist authors speak from a place of having the Girl-Mom experience. These authors scrutinize the way mothers are encouraged to attempt to pass as a “Good Mother” but do not expound on those “Others” who cannot pass in normalized culture.

In her book *Not Our Kind of Girl*, Elaine Bell Kaplan (1997) discusses the experience and the stereotypes associated with the Black teen mother. In one section she talks about attending a support group session for teenage mothers. At this meeting several “concerned” mothers from the surrounding community attended along with Kaplan. “Teen mothers presented their experiences in a positive light, especially when they were addressing adults and certainly if white adults were in the audience” (Kaplan, 1997: 165). In other public situations she noted the “concealment of discreditable facts concerning their experiences as teenage mothers may have been their attempt to ‘pass’ as a normal teenager” (Kaplan, 1997: 166). Books such as *The Mother Trip* by Ariel Gore (2000), *You Look Too Young to Be a Mom*, edited by Deborah Davis (2004) and *Riding in Cars with Boys* by Beverly D’Onofrio, bravely expose some true experiences of young mothering in modern Western culture—both good and bad.

Research-based books, such as *Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting*, often begin with the suggestion that teen pregnancy is a “problem” (East and Felice, 1996). Another example is *Young, Poor and Pregnant*, where the author despairs that amongst Girl-Moms “it is mostly poor teens who have babies but do not go on to finish school, get married, or get good jobs. Further, they often turn their back on opportunities, deliberately sabotaging their prospects for success” (Musick, 1993: 4). Ann Phoenix (1991) criticizes methodological problems in the research studies of young mothers as being responsible for the exaggerated differences between Girl-Moms and the normalized mother in *Young Mothers? These questionable methodologies perpetuate racism, by categorizing young moms further, in this case by way of “race.”* The “inappropriate choice

of comparison groups, failure to control for socio-economic status and parity, as well as lack of recognition of intra-group differences” (Phoenix, 1991: 2) creates the Girl-Mom as an “epidemic.”

Any Girl-Mom who is further marginalized by race, religion, or class faces even more adversities. Meanwhile, the white Girl-Mom of a privileged upbringing is commonly thought of as potentially salvageable through marriage. I resisted the idea of marriage when I was pregnant at 21. The pressure to marry before the baby was born was intense. Everyone seemed to have an opinion about the lack of wedding ring on my finger and my swelling belly. Ultimately, I did marry the father of my daughter when she was a little over a year old. In hindsight, I wish I had resisted a little harder.

Motherhood is assumed “proof” of heterosexuality. Not unlike how “discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (Wittig, 1996: 208), the discourses of the “Good Mother” (assumed heterosexuality) prevent the Girl-Mom from speaking unless she speaks in the terms of the married, white, middle-class “Good Mother.” Discourses of heterosexuality, and assumed heterosexual spaces, dismiss the experiences of the Girl-Mom. The Girl-Mom is ostracized, pathologized, and often supervised (Pietsch, 2002). When Gill Valentine said, “Heterosexual looks of disapproval, whispers and stares are used to discomfort and make lesbians feel ‘out of place’ in everyday spaces” (1996: 149), it could easily be re-worded as: “Looks of disapproval, whispers and stares are used to discomfort and make *Girl-Moms* feel ‘out of place’ in everyday spaces.” But Girl-Moms can use their identity politic. “In avowing the sign’s strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism) that identity can become a site of contest and revision” (Butler, 1996: 19). The Girl-Mom can destabilize the discourses of the “Good Mother” through politicizing assumed heterosexual spaces by being visible and vocal about their day-to-day struggles, as well as their accomplishments. Girl-Moms can thus shake up the notions of what “good” mothering looks like.

Teenage pregnancy is not a “crisis” or “epidemic,” like so many people would like us to believe. The only true epidemic associated with teen pregnancy is the overwhelming and universal lack of support available to young mothers. The only true crisis is the denial of the fact that teenage girls can be, are, and always have been, both sexual and maternal beings, with the capacity to love, procreate, and nurture. We love our children fiercely. We protect and care for them like any mother, of any age, would. Through Girl-Mom, I hope to slowly show that to the world. (Crews, 2003: from *The Girl-Mom Mission Statement*)

Though at times I identify as a “Girl-Mom,” other times I do not fix myself as *any* type of mother. I do not end with the identity “Mother,” or

“Girl-Mom.” I do not deny my mother role, or my “Girl-Mom” identity; but I allow myself to be many things. “Is it not a sign of despair over public politics when identity becomes its own policy?” (Butler, 1996: 19). By no means do I intend to normalize the experience of all Girl-Moms. But “the words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through” (Rich, 1976: 5) and the mask of the Girl-Mom can begin to break apart. Binary logic confines mothers to “good” or “bad” is socially constructed and propagated in Western culture to serve patriarchy and the state, dividing mothers and women. And the “Good Mother” and the “Other” mother, the Girl-Mom, are interdependent on each other to find value within the breadth of mothering experiences. Judith Butler might say that “Mother” itself is a slippery sign. “Good Mothers” strive to be better “good” mothers, while “Other” mothers also strive to be better “good” mothers. “...Now it was a chant which strengthened, which I believed in the bottom of my heart ... you are a good mother too—it went—a good mother too” (Lazarre, 1976: 91).

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