

Reproductive Responsibilities: Neoliberal Motherhood
and the Normalization of Feminine Sacrifice

by

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Introduction:

A Feminist Critique of Liberalism

“Many women have told me, and surveys have shown, that they find it easier, more ‘professionally’ gratifying, and certainly more socially affirming, to work outside the home than to give up their careers to take care of their children. ... The radical feminists succeeded in undermining the traditional family and convincing women that professional accomplishments are the key to happiness.”

- Rick Santorum *It Takes a Family*

“Conservatives acknowledge this radical potential, which is also to say, this radical *threat*, of queerness more fully than liberals, for conservatism preemptively imagines the wholesale rupturing of the social fabric, whereas liberalism conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity.”

- Lee Edelman *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*

Rick Santorum, a former Senator from Pennsylvania and, at the time of this writing, a candidate for the 2012 Republican Party presidential nomination, declared in his 2005 book *It Takes a Family* that radical feminists were to blame for “undermining the traditional family” and “convincing women” that life outside the home instead of life inside it was “the key to happiness” (95). From a feminist perspective, it would be easy to simply dismiss Santorum as an outlandish right wing conservative who aims to reinstate the “traditional family” at the cost of women’s freedom. Yet I propose that we must not dismiss Santorum too quickly and instead take his claim seriously. *Have* radical feminists succeeded in undermining the traditional family?

This project looks at the ways the traditional family has *not* been undermined and how the values of domesticity and feminine sacrifice continue to function in liberal, not just conservative, discourse. As Santorum notes, the alternative for professional women is to “give up their careers to take care of their children” (95). This project takes seriously the question of what is given up to take care of the children and claims that motherhood and sacrifice remain dangerously tied to “normal” womanhood in popular imagination. Looking at representations of “good” and “bad” mothering in popular culture including the reality television show *16 and Pregnant*, the media blitz around the figure of “Octomom,” and the critically acclaimed film *The Kids Are All Right*, I map the different ways in which motherhood and gender are constructed in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Central to my argument is the claim that upholding the traditional family and the norm of self-sacrificing motherhood are integral to liberalism, a form of governance that operates through freedom by requiring responsibility. By illustrating how *liberal* notions of motherhood function to discipline subjects, this project calls into question the feminist politics of responsibility and inclusion in our present period of neoliberalism. If, as Lee Edelman asserts, “[c]onservatives acknowledge this radical potential, which is to say, this radical *threat*, of queerness more fully than liberals,” we should consider how Santorum’s fears extend this powerful potential to radical feminism. I advocate that we take seriously this conception of radical feminism as one that threatens to undermine the traditional family and to create space for

a form of feminist desire that refuses to give up anything to take care of the children.

The Feminine Mystique, Feminism, and the Return to Motherhood

Though my project centers on the constructions of womanhood and motherhood in the present period of advanced liberal or neoliberal society, holding women to normative standards of feminine self-sacrifice has a longer history. Before discussing how these constructions may be theorized, I would like to first situate the connection between womanhood, motherhood, and liberal society in the broader context of gender in the United States during the mid to late twentieth century. I look specifically at the “domestic containment” ideology of the 1950s, the response to the limitations of the “feminine mystique” that led to the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s, and the reevaluation of motherhood as an alternative politics of gender equality in the 1980s and 1990s, paying particular attention to the concerns arising from the increase of women in the workplace. In order to understand how narratives of motherhood and family manifest in the present neoliberal moment, I argue that we need to attend to the role of gender in the rise of liberal strategies of governance.

The “Domestic Containment” Ideology of the 1950s

The relationship between the rise of domesticity and the Cold War strategies of governance in the 1950s sets the stage for understanding the relationship between constructions of gender and the liberal state. In her book,

Homeward Bound, Elaine Tyler May explores the connection between the Cold War and the elevation of the nuclear family in cultural imagination. By linking the philosophy of containment with family values, May argues that adherence to gender norms became both a cultural phenomenon and a priority of the state.

Facing the ideological threat of communism, domesticity became necessary to bolster American values related to liberal democracy. Tying political aims abroad to the stability of the American family meant a reliance on specific meanings of gender and citizenship. In this framework, “motherhood provided the female version of civic virtue” (May 102). This employment of motherhood in politics relied on both the “mother as moral guardian” image and also the idea that fostering “good” citizens required the containment of sexuality within the nuclear family. Heterosexual marriage became the proper site of sexual expression and containment “would enhance family togetherness, which would keep both men and women happy at home and would, in turn, foster wholesome childrearing” (May 102-103). Not simply an expression of an individual maternal urge, motherhood was intimately tied to the state as producing “wholesome” children became a government strategy. Here, May shows the specific historical context that tied women to child bearing. In a nationalist tradition, the state, facing the threat of communism, sought to secure itself by relying on cultural institutions including the family to reproduce its values. May states:

If women fulfilled their domestic roles, as adapted to the atomic age, they would rear children who would avoid juvenile delinquency (and homosexuality), stay in school, and become future scientists and experts to defeat the Russians in the cold war. (109)

“Good” citizens required “good” mothers and if the fate of the nation rested on the “moral fiber” and wholesomeness of future generations, society as a whole used the specter of “bad” children to discipline “bad” mothers and “bad” women. Again, this project was tied to the political agenda of the state as the need for “good” children arose in the context of the Soviet threat to American security.

“Bad” women and “bad” mothers thus represented another threat to social cohesion and to the state. May writes:

The sexual containment ideology was rooted in widely accepted gender roles that defined men as breadwinners and women as mothers. Many believed that a violation of these roles would cause sexual and familial chaos and weaken the country’s moral fiber. The center of this fear was the preoccupation with female ‘promiscuity,’ despite the lack of evidence of any significant increase in premarital sexual intercourse at the time. (117)

Enforcing gender norms of proper femininity and masculinity became a priority of the state and those who strayed were perceived as threats to the social order. May states, “[s]exual ‘deviants’ were allegedly security risks because they could be easily seduced, blackmailed, or tempted to join subversive organizations, since they lacked the will and moral stamina to resist” (95). Deviance was defined in the terms of heterosexual reproduction and condemned for its perceived threat to national security. Echoing the identifying characteristics of proper citizenship, “‘normal’ heterosexual behavior culminating in marriage represented ‘maturity’ and ‘responsibility;’ therefore, those who were ‘deviant’ were, by definition, irresponsible, immature, and weak” (94). Using the rhetoric of liberal democracy, the “maturity” and “responsibility” of citizens were essential for the functioning of a stable state, able to resist foreign ideological

invasion. With these values wedded to heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction, those who fell outside could only be considered non-citizens and thus marked for punishment or correction.

Tyler, however, only relies tangentially on official discourse for her discussion of “domestic containment.” Primarily, she analyzes cultural productions such as films, periodicals, newspapers, and data from the Kelly Longitudinal Study, a survey conducted among members of white middle-class families. By showing the connection between state policy, culture, and individual households, May illustrates the breakdown of the public/private distinction. The normalization of domesticity and motherhood was not simply administered by the state, but became institutionalized within the family and popular culture, allowing for specific qualities to constitute “womanhood” as a lived identity. Instead of being recognized in relation to state ideology, “motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality and the primary source of a woman’s identity” (May 141-142). In “domestic containment,” therefore, we see the ties between the liberal state and the construction of motherhood as an institution linking feminine virtue to marriage, heterosexuality, and the production of future generations of citizens.

“The Problem That Has No Name” and the Birth of Second Wave Feminism

One of the most influential critiques of the 1950s ideology of domesticity appears in Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* as “the problem that has no name.” Friedan describes how “[n]o other road to fulfillment was

offered to American women in the middle of the twentieth century” except to “devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children” (70; 58). Friedan’s monumental work details the detrimental effects of “the feminine mystique” on women and “throws into question the standards of feminine normality, feminine adjustment, feminine fulfillment, and feminine maturity by which most women are still trying to live” (77). Friedan argues that marriage and motherhood require a “forfeited self” for women and that “[t]he mystique would have women renounce ambition for themselves” (485). When “[m]arriage and motherhood is the end ... women are supposed to be ambitious only for their husbands and their children” (485). The norms of domesticity in the 1950s, therefore, required women’s sacrifice of their own interests. In order to be “good” women thus “good” mothers and, following May, good citizens of the liberal state, women had to give up the right to selfishness.

In the obituary written in *The New York Times*, Betty Friedan is credited with having “ignited the contemporary women’s movement” by publishing *The Feminine Mystique* (Fox). *Times* writer Margalit Fox describes Friedan as “one of the chief architects of the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960’s and afterward, a sweeping social upheaval that harked back to the suffrage campaigns of the turn of the century and would be called feminism’s second wave.” As a forerunner of the second wave feminist movement, Friedan’s rejection of domesticity and the “forfeited self” of “the feminine mystique” opened up the critique of the construction of woman as sacrificing mother. Friedan and second wave feminism in general have been criticized for “focusing

almost exclusively on concerns of middle-class married white women and ignoring those of minorities, lesbians, and the poor,” and indeed, Friedan’s assertion that “no other road to fulfillment was offered to American women” risks homogenizing or universalizing the experiences of women (Fox; Friedan 70). Yet we should keep in mind the contribution of Friedan and other second wave feminists in articulating so clearly the *dominant* constructions of femininity that link womanhood with motherhood and sacrifice.

At the end of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan concludes with what she calls “a new life plan for women” that relies on the idea that “fulfillment” of identity for women can only occur if women reject “the feminine mystique.” Yet she does not dismiss motherhood from this “life plan” altogether. The “new life plan” would make the tradeoff between freedom and motherhood “unnecessary choices” and instead would involve “integrating a serious, lifelong commitment to society with marriage and motherhood” (509; 500). Friedan focuses specifically on improving higher education for women including altering “from a four-year college to a life plan under which a woman could continue her education, without conflict with her marriage, her husband and her children” (503). Friedan believes that a society geared towards women and women’s needs (e.g. maternity leave, increased numbers of nurseries, etc.) would make it so “they will not have to sacrifice the right to honorable competition and contribution anymore than they will have to sacrifice marriage and motherhood” (509).

Though Friedan provides a remarkable critique of the “forfeited self,” the result of the required sacrifices of the mother and the housewife, she does not advocate forfeiting another self namely, the married or maternal one. Whereas the argument for women to “have it all,” seems to promote feminine desires whatever they may be, there is the slight slippage that makes motherhood not one potential desire, but a natural or essential one. For Friedan, women who embodied this “new life plan” “knew that marriage and motherhood [were] an essential part of life, but not all of it” (510). Continuing to value marriage and motherhood as “essential” for women, Friedan argues that the stifling domesticity of the feminine mystique is harmful to women *as mothers*. She states:

If we continue to produce millions of young mothers who stop their growth and education short of identity, without a strong core of human values to pass on to their children, we are committing, quite simply, genocide, starting with the mass burial of American women and ending with the progressive dehumanization of their sons and daughters. (495)

Condemning the “mass burial of American women” by appealing to the “dehumanization of their sons and daughters” proves a surprising return to the discourse of motherhood. While the majority of Friedan’s argument rests on proving the feminine mystique harmful to women, her return to the detriment of the *children* of unhappy mothers suggests the difficulty of putting forth a solely selfish “life plan.” Unable to completely reject the discourse of motherhood, Friedan also fails to oppose the ties between gender and the state. She writes, “[e]ven in politics, women must make their contribution not as ‘housewives’ but as citizens” (508). Against the Cold War political climate that required women to

uphold “civic virtue” by acting as “good” mothers and producing “good” children, Friedan argues for women to be included as full citizens instead of questioning the category of citizenship itself.

Revaluing Women by Revaluing Mothers

While Friedan may “be forever known as the suburban housewife who started a revolution” by publishing a book that has “been responsible for such sweeping, tumultuous and continuing social transformation,” one response to her critique of oppressive domesticity was to posit the reclaiming of specifically *feminine* characteristics as simply undervalued, not inherently oppressive (Fox). Yet I suggest that the feminist effort to revalue the maternal, exemplified by the work of Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick in the 1980s, not only failed to challenge the liberal ideology of domesticity but in fact functioned to strengthen it.

In her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan brings together psychology and gender studies to provide an intervention into development theory, one that calls for the inclusion of women’s experiences. Using studies that surveyed women on abortion and other issues, Gilligan determines that an alternative feminine mode of thinking and experiencing has been left out of dominant discourse. Specifically, Gilligan finds, “[y]et in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection” (173). Femininity is thus linked to “an ethic of care,” relationships, and responsibility, what one might think of as “motherly” qualities.

Ruddick's 1980 article "Maternal Thinking" and her later book by the same name published in 1989 articulate the revaluation of feminine traits in a way that is tied more directly to motherhood. Against the dominant image of maternal powerlessness, Ruddick argues, "a mother has residual power accruing from her capacity to bear and nurse infants" (343). By associating motherhood with power, Ruddick conceptualizes a form of "maternal thinking" that arises from maternal practices, those that "begin in love, a love which for most mothers is as intense, confusing, ambivalent, and poignantly sweet as any they will experience" (344). Ruddick states her aim: "I consider my attempt to express and respect maternal thought one contribution to an ongoing shared, feminist project: the construction of an image of maternal power which is benign, accurate, sturdy, and sane" (345). By valuing "maternal thinking," Ruddick claims motherhood for feminism and associates it with "benign, accurate, sturdy, and sane" power and "poignantly sweet" nurturing love.

Though both Gilligan and Ruddick maintain gender distinctions by valuing traits as specifically feminine, they do not quite return to biological essentialism. While certain traits are "associated" with femininity, Gilligan cautions,

But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex. (2)

Though associated with women and arising from women's experiences, these "modes of thought" are not irrevocably tied to the biological body of woman.

Similarly, Ruddick states, "[f]or me, 'maternal' is a social category: Although

maternal thinking arises out of actual child-caring practices, biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient” thus “[m]any women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring with others” (346). Though “maternal thinking” or feminine “modes of thought” are not necessarily tied to biologically distinguished “men” and “women,” they remain gendered. While this revaluation appears empowering, throughout the rest of this project I will discuss how returning to the discourse of motherhood solidifies a normative construction of womanhood that also works to regulate and constrain.

Working Mothers

The rise of women in the workforce in the latter half of the twentieth century brought up serious questions of the role of the mother and the perpetuation of the nuclear family. Following the second wave feminist movement, the gendered roles of breadwinner and homemaker were called into question, yet the fear for the well being of children in families with working mothers became a major concern for feminists. In her 1997 book, *The Time Bind*, Arlie Hochschild uses fieldwork in a Fortune 500 company to explore what she sees as a connection between the entry of women into the workforce and a simultaneous deterioration of family life. What Hochschild theorizes as a “time-bind” frames her critique of the corporate “speed-up”: longer hours come at the expense of family time.

Hochschild recognizes one of the reasons for increased hours as a change in the conceptualization of work and leisure. She states, “[i]f in the American

imagination the family has a touch of the sacred, the realm of work seems profane” (35). The maintenance of the “sacred” space of the family relied on a different type of “profane” labor, however, and this labor historically has been relegated to women. The opportunities for women in the professional labor market troubled that distinction between work and home. As stated by one of Hochschild’s interviewees, “her home was not a place to relax. It was another workplace” (37). If the “sacred” home was tainted with domestic labor, there became a new value of “profane” work at the factory as “life there was more fun” (40).

Hochschild offers a critique of capitalist exploitation in the longer hours of the “time-bind,” yet ignores the *desirable* qualities of the workplace identified by female workers. She states:

The difficulty is not that women have entered the workplace but that they have done so ‘on male terms.’ It would be fine for women to adopt the male model of work, to enjoy privileges formerly reserved for men, if this model were one of balance. But it is not. (247)

This balance, it is apparent, is one of work and home or labor and leisure. But if for women the workplace is where one has “fun” and the home is where one “works,” her call for balance falls in favor of the home and thus work. Instead of advocating for a way in which both men and women could share in the “privilege” of leisure, she casts women (and men) back into the sphere of work represented by domestic labor.

Furthermore, Hochschild’s conclusion reveals nostalgia for the domestic, which is tied to a conception of an “authentic” family and a “real” mother. She states:

For to most Americans the mother still represents the heart and soul, the warmth and human kindness of family life, a brake on the forces of capitalism, and a protector of the family haven in what is still generally imagined as a heartless world. It is a woman's symbolic role to preserve time for personal bonds, not to spend money substituting for them. (233)

It is clear that Hochschild identifies as one of "most Americans" as her analysis of increased work hours clearly condemns those mothers who "escape" to the "fun" of their job and shirk their duties as "real" parents. Instead, she revalues the "symbolic role" of motherhood in terms of warmth, kindness, and "personal bonds." Motherhood and the home in fact become the solution for capitalist exploitation instead of forms of exploitation in their own right. Instead, the crisis for Hochschild is represented by "the time-starved mother" who "is being forced more and more to choose between being a parent and buying a commodified version of parenthood from someone else" (232). In this framework, one can either "be" a real mother or "buy" a fake one. If motherhood is an identity (one *is* a mother) not a job (one *does* mother) its tasks cannot be outsourced without disrupting what we understand as "family."

Hochschild denounces anything that would destroy the image of a "real" family, from MTV to take-out meals. Evoking a past of "homespun cloth, homemade soap and candles, home-cured meats and home-baked foods," she concludes that "household chores have over the years become fewer and easier to do" yet does not seem to recognize this as a desirable occurrence or a liberating one for women on whom these chores normally fall (209). Excusing the possibility that the home may be an oppressive, exploitive place for women, for Hochschild, the dedication to the preservation of family makes it worth it.

Hochschild's research culminates in the assertion that the "real" victims of the "time-bind" are the children thus claiming the child victim as the rallying point for taking women back from the workplace. Children, in Hochschild's view, are deprived of time. She reports the phenomenon of parents, low on time, buying their children presents "out of guilt" (217). "True" family relationships are untainted by commodities thus children who use their parents' guilt to barter for desired goods like fudge bars or toys are tragic victims, not desiring agents. Hochschild recognizes potential empowerment facilitated by this exchange but dismisses it stating, "children rarely enter into these 'trades' voluntarily" (217). Instead of addressing the historical disempowerment of children within family structures, Hochschild centers the issue in parental responsibility. She suggests labor activists and working mothers find a "common cause in their children" (258). Working mothers who find pleasure in their jobs and freedom from domestic labor must sacrifice their own desires to preserve the family and the futures of their children. While Hochschild believes "the most ardent constituency for a solution to the time bind are those too young as yet to speak up," her goal is not to consider how children are silenced but to articulate their desires herself and thus position them as the innocent Other in whose name we sacrifice ourselves (258).

Though Hochschild's return to motherhood and domesticity does not appear directly connected to state ideology in the way the 1950's "feminine mystique" was tied to Cold War policies of containment, I argue that her promotion of "work," even though it appears in the family and not in the

capitalist marketplace, is integral to a system of liberal governance. Holding women to standards of responsibility that require their return to the home and the sacrifice of their careers for their children is a form of governance in itself. Before turning to the connection between liberalism and work and responsibility, I would like to first sum up the common themes of this brief history of constructions of motherhood in twentieth-century America.

From the heightened period of domesticity in the 1950s and on, we see the ties between womanhood and motherhood that require women's sacrifice for the good of the nation and the good of the children. While critics have taken issue with the oppressive "cult of domesticity," the turn in feminism to a reevaluation of motherhood that glorifies specifically feminine characteristics of care, responsibility, nurturance, and sacrifice neglects to question how holding women to certain standards of womanhood limits ways of being. Overall, we see how motherhood becomes not simply an individual choice, but an institution caught up in a web of socially constructed meanings that dictate what a mother is and what a woman should be. As we have seen, even the feminist critiques of domesticity fail to take into account the underlying issues that tie motherhood to responsibility, sacrifice, and governance. In this project, I will show how motherhood emerges as a strategy of governance that relies on "good" female subjects that sacrifice their self-interest to become responsible mothers.

Foucault, Subjects, and Normalization

This brings up the larger theoretical questions of what we mean by subjectivity in relation to motherhood and domesticity. If one of the primary goals of feminism, as per Catharine McKinnon, was to trouble the grammatical construct of “[m]an fucks woman; subject verb object,” the question of what subjectivity means is an essential one for feminist politics (541). For this project specifically, it becomes necessary to ask what type of subject is woman-as-mother?

My work follows theories of the subject found in the work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. Althusser, in his work on what he terms “Ideological State Apparatuses,” locates the production of the subject in the process of subjection. Ideological State Apparatuses, related to but distinct from Repressive State Apparatuses such as the police, the army, the courts, and the prisons, trouble the boundaries of the state and the public/private binary by functioning in cultural realms or, more specifically, through purportedly non-state institutions such as the press, radio, television, literature, the arts, etc. While Repressive State Apparatuses work through violence, Ideological State Apparatuses work through ideology where “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (162). To follow Althusser, “there is no practice except by and in an ideology,” thus social relations and material experience exist within an ideological framework that has an inherent relationship to the state. It is through subjection to ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses that subjects are formed. Developing a theory of

ideological interpellation, Althusser says, “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects,*” meaning that individuals come to recognize themselves as subjects through a kind of “hailing” by ideology (173 emphasis in original). The calling into being of subjects by ideology is both obscured by the seeming naturalness or “obviousness” of subjecthood and inescapable as “*individuals are always-already subjects*” (176 emphasis in original). By tying subject formation to ideological interpellation, Althusser shows the seemingly “natural” appearance of an acting subject to be always already implicated in the social and its obligations. In regard to this project, I examine the production of the subject through the ideology of womanhood and motherhood, taking note that this process is one of subjection.

Foucault similarly theorizes the subject in opposition to its perceived “naturalness” as being uninvolved or preexisting the social. In his theory of subjectivation, “the person is subjectivated – she/he is at once rendered a subject and subjected to relations of power through discourse” (Youdell 517). The subject is produced, not preexisting, and appears always within the framework of power and discourse. For example, the subject can be called into being through what Foucault calls “disciplinary power.” Foucault writes, “[t]he individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline’” (*Discipline and Punish* 194). This project, which takes motherhood as a form of disciplinary power, both employs and extends Foucault’s theories of discipline. Before turning to how these theories intersect

with feminist studies of gender and power, I will briefly discuss the more general meaning of “disciplinary power” as put forth by Foucault.

Foucault traces the move from “sovereign power” to what he terms “disciplinary power” by way of the transformation of punishment into systems of normalization. Foucault defines sovereign power as the power to “*take life or let live,*” in other words, the power to kill, whereas disciplinary power focused on correcting or regulating life itself (*History of Sexuality Volume 1* 136). The shift from sovereign power to disciplinary power meant a concurrent shift in focus from the pathology of the crime to the pathology of the criminal. Foucault writes, “[a] whole set of assessing, diagnostic, prognostic, normative judgments concerning the criminal have become lodged in the framework of penal judgment,” showing the insistence on individual characteristics as determinants of criminality (*Discipline and Punish* 19). The standards of “normative” behavior are what the form of power Foucault calls “discipline” both relies on and produces. Disciplinary forms of punishment individualize and thus mark deviations from a norm and identify “deviant” individuals. In Foucault’s words: “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (*Discipline and Punish* 183 emphasis in original). In the disciplinary model, the “power of the Norm” allows the punishment of the abnormal. This form of punishment, however, becomes a question of correction, discipline, and ultimately rehabilitation.

Furthermore, Foucault ties discipline to the opposition of order and chaos. He states, “[b]ehind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of ‘contagions’, of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder” (*Discipline and Punish* 198). The threat of social destruction allowed for the disciplining of those thought of as “contagious” in the name of the greater good of social cohesion. The specter of chaos as the antithesis of society, specifically a contagious chaos infecting “the masses,” required a form of disciplinary power rooted in individualism, order, and normalization. Though deviant individuals appeared a threat to society, the role of disciplinary technologies and practices was to redeem, not cast out, the “abnormal.” As contagions, their pathologies were invitations for intervention, correction, and rehabilitation into normal life. Foucault writes, “[t]hey accepted that one could be both guilty and mad; less guilty the madder one was; guilty certainly, but someone to be put away and treated rather than punished; not only a guilty man, but also dangerous, since quite obviously sick” (*Discipline and Punish* 20). To be “cured” took on the meaning of normalcy and the medical and psychiatric establishments took on the roles of disciplinary institutions.

The redemptive project required the process of individualization as well as an understanding of the individual body in its capacity to benefit society. Foucault here introduces the concept of the “docile body” in relation to economic productivity. If the body is no longer simply punished for committing a crime but normalized by correction, the aim is not to destroy it but to increase its utility

through discipline. According to Foucault, “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (*Discipline and Punish* 26). The “docile body” thus becomes integral to disciplinary power, as “[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (*Discipline and Punish* 136). In the study of deviancy, therefore, we must take into account which individuals are being targeted for correction and which bodies and behaviors are deemed “non-productive.” Foucault calls this focus of power on the productivity of the body “biopower,” a technology that undertakes the improvement of the biological body as its aim. This paper relies on the framework of biopower and the processes of making women’s bodies more *reproductive* as the basis for the exploration of the “deviant” mother.

Foucault and Feminism

The focus on improving the “productive body” translates to the topic of this paper: the reproductive body of the mother. Jana Sawicki, author of *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*, argues that although “Foucault never wrote a history of women’s bodies,” he originally intended to connect the control of women’s bodies to biopower (67). Beyond acting to render bodies more economically useful, biopower became “indispensable to patriarchal power insofar as it provided instruments for the insertion of women’s bodies into the machinery of reproduction” thus “the history of modern feminist struggles for reproductive freedom is a key dimension of the history of biopower” (Sawicki 68). Within a gendered history of labor in which women

traditionally perform the reproductive labor of childbearing, childcare, and other domestic tasks, the framework offered by biopower shows the need to attend to the processes by which women's bodies are rendered more "docile," "useful," and specifically *reproductive*.

Feminist scholars have taken issue with gaps in Foucault's theories of biopower, however. Lois McNay discusses how Foucault's lack of attention to the particular formulation of biopower in relation to the reproductive female body has led to feminist critique. She writes:

One predominant criticism has been that Foucault's analysis does not pay enough attention to the gendered nature of disciplinary techniques on the body and that this oversight perpetuates a 'gender blindness' that has always predominated in social theory. (131)

Furthermore, "[t]his 'gender blindness' is apparent in *Discipline and Punish* where an implicit assumption of an isomorphic structure is applied to the operations of power upon male and female bodies" (McNay 132). For McNay, however, it is important that the specification of disciplinary techniques on the female body not return to an essentialized basis of gender that would see "eternal, undifferentiated difference between the sexes" (133).

This merits a brief discussion of the importance of Foucault's work for feminists theorizing non-essentialist analyses of gender. One of the primary difficulties for feminism is attending to material gendered experiences of oppression without resorting to narratives of biological essentialism and "natural" sexual difference. According to McNay:

One of the most important contributions that Foucault's theory of the body has made to feminist thought is to provide a way of conceiving of

the body as a concrete phenomenon without eliding its materiality with a fixed biological or prediscursive essence. (128)

This occurs by adopting Foucault's argument that "sex is in fact a cultural construct produced with the aim of social regulation and the control of sexuality" (McNay 130). The sex/gender divide, which posits gender as the socially constructed "product" of the biological base of sex (i.e. anatomical, chromosomal, and hormonal difference) is troubled by Foucault's assertion that "it is impossible to know the materiality of the body outside of its cultural significations" (McNay 131). Though the sexed body may provide a "base" for inequality and oppression, it is important to remember that argument for biological difference is not a naturally occurring fact, but rather "the 'natural' body must be understood as a central tool in the legitimation of specific strategies of oppression" (McNay 128). Neither sex nor gender is a "natural" phenomenon. Instead, discursive practices give certain meanings to anatomy, chromosomes, hormones, and social presentation that lead to different lived experiences of bodies. My analysis of motherhood follows this line of thought, looking at how gender is constructed through discourse to produce guidelines for living.

While Foucault's theories have proved helpful for the task of destabilizing gender, feminist critics oppose the apparent lack of room for agency in his analysis of discourse and power for its potential to depoliticize feminist struggles. In *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity*, Margaret McLaren writes, "[i]n general, feminist critics of Foucault fear that his rejection of norms undermines the possibility for feminism as an emancipatory political

movement... They also worry that Foucault's account of subjectivity does not allow for agency and resistance" (2). By viewing the subject as discursively produced through power relations such as those of disciplinary power, the subject as a socially constructed, not free acting being, appears to lose its ability to act. McLaren's feminists object to "a concept of the subject wholly determined by social forces" and "claim that [Foucault's] conception of 'power as everywhere' leaves no way to distinguish the difference in power between the dominators and the dominated" (2).

Following a somewhat similar line of thought, McNay disagrees with Foucault's tendency toward "[t]he reduction of individuals to docile bodies" which "oversimplifies the process through which gender identity is installed and maintained," precluding disruptions of hegemonic discourse. In contrast to the feminist critics discussed by McLaren, however, McNay thinks Foucault relies too little on the "power as everywhere" argument that he himself makes and instead gives an overly influential role to disciplinary power. She questions an approach that credits "an all encompassing 'biopower'" and supports the work of feminist historians who "have attempted to show how, within the oppressive constraints which operate around ideas of femininity, there are contradictions and instabilities" that allowed the possibility for women to "undermine the very system which constricts them" (135-136). Returning to the opening of this introduction, I follow McNay in questioning how radical feminists can fulfill the potential that Rick Santorum bestows them, the power to undermine the traditional family. This task, however, cannot ignore the systems of biopower

that operate through discipline to make women's bodies more reproductive. In thinking about agency, we must be careful to take into account how subjects are formed through these systems and what constraints are placed on their actions as subjects. I will therefore turn to a discussion of the subject of liberalism to show how actions are governed by requirements of responsibility and what this responsibility means for women.

The Liberal Subject and Neoliberalism

Situating this discussion of subjects, action, and discipline in the context of liberalism, my project shows motherhood as a strategy of governance, one that works through coinciding ideologies of freedom and responsibility. Althusser's focus on the subject interpellated by ideology ultimately turns to the idea of the "free" subject as a subject of subjection. He says, "the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject ... in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*" (182 emphasis in original). In this way, Althusser connects action to subjection, stating, "[t]here are no subjects except by and for their subjection. That is why they 'work all by themselves'" (182 emphasis in original). In other words, seeing itself as a "free subject" but always subjected by ideology, the subject will act in certain socially influenced ways precisely because it sees itself as free. For Althusser, this meant sustaining the relations of production. For Foucault, this autonomy of the individual subject becomes implicated in the projects of self-care and self-management. We can now see how Hochschild's return to domestic

work relates to the project of governance. The subjected subjects of liberalism are ones that *want* to work and “work all by themselves.”

This brings us to the question of the liberal subject. The liberal subject incorporates this coincidence of subjection and freedom, or as Laurie Ouellette puts it, “[l]iberalism, for Foucault and his followers, does not refer to a political ideology (as in conservative versus liberal), but instead to a ‘governmental rationality,’ or approach to governing through freedom” (9). As with Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses, the state does not disappear in the advent of the “free subject,” but instead uses the concept of freedom to impose certain conditions of subjectivity. This theory of liberalism has been detailed extensively by Nikolas Rose. In his essay in the edited volume *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*, Rose brings together Foucault’s theories of biopower regarding the disciplining of individuals and the governing of populations:

The two, apparently illiberal, poles of ‘power over life’ that Foucault identifies – the disciplines of the body and the bio-politics of the population – thus find their place within liberal mentalities of rule, as rule becomes dependent upon ways of rendering intelligible and practicable these vital conditions for the production and government of a polity of free citizens. (44)

Liberal government requires certain types of individuals as citizens, yet also maintains itself as a form of legitimate governance by championing liberty. Indeed, “[f]reedom, in a liberal sense, should thus not be equated with anarchy, but with a kind of well-regulated and ‘responsibilized’ liberty” (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 8). Thus, the connection between the individuals in *Discipline and Punish* subject to processes of normalization and “free” subjects appears in

relation to strategies of liberal governance that interpellate subjects as responsible, self-managing, autonomous individuals. Rose writes:

Those mechanisms and devices operating according to a disciplinary logic, from the school to the prison, seek to produce the subjective conditions, the forms of self-mastery, self-regulation and self-control, necessary to govern a nation now made up of free and 'civilized' citizens (44).

Discipline works not only to regulate individuals by normalization, but also to produce subjects that regulate *themselves* by "freely" adhering to normative practices and behaviors.

Like Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses, the state and the project of governing become covert. Governing becomes the discursive or ideological task of creating subjects that "work all by themselves," thus decreasing the need for a visibly repressive government as subjects learn to govern themselves. The "governing through freedom" approach requires a "free" subject whose freedom is contingent on certain norms and behaviors. Rose writes:

the national objective for the good subject of rule will fuse with the voluntarily assumed obligations of free individuals to make the most of their existence by conducting their life responsibly. At the same time, subjects themselves will have to make their decisions about their self-conduct surrounded by a web of vocabularies, injunctions, promises, dire warnings and threats of intervention, organized increasingly around a proliferation of norms and normativities. (46)

Thus the earlier discussion of Foucault's theories of normalization and discipline do not disappear in the formation of the liberal subject, but are required for its existence. In fact, the "division between the civilized member of society and those lacking the capacities to exercise their citizenship responsibly" is tied to the hierarchizing, differentiation, exclusion and normalization of disciplinary

power (Rose 45). These divisions between the responsible citizen and the irresponsible one “are applied selectively to certain individuals and always the same ones” (*Discipline and Punish* 224). Rose identifies “the infanticidal woman or the monomaniacal regicide in the court of law, the delinquent boys and girls to be reformed in industrial or reformatory establishments, the prostitute or fallen women, the men and women thought mad” as irresponsible or improper citizens of liberal governance and thus subjects of discipline (45).

This project takes up the question of the liberal subject as it applies to the constructions of womanhood and motherhood. Through a feminist reading of biopower, proper female subjects become more productive when they become more *reproductive*. If we take “reproductive” to signify not simply biological fertility, but the social processes of birthing, nurturing, and educating children as the new subjects of the social order, the disciplining of women becomes absolutely necessary for the functioning of the liberal State. “The infanticidal woman” and “the prostitute or fallen women” become irresponsible citizens because they have deviated from the norms of proper womanhood and failed to become properly reproductive. In short, for women, interpellation as a liberal subject requires responsible, self-management, thus the “choice” of responsible reproduction: motherhood.

Conclusion

The gendering of the liberal subject that occurs when projects of self-improvement are aimed at increasing reproductivity alongside productivity

turns the logic of discipline onto women's bodies, requiring a normative embodiment of femininity that sacrifices self-interest "in the name of the children." The concurrent rhetorics of liberalism and biopower thus accord a specific task for women: the *re*-production of society. Sacrificing "in the name of the children" ultimately upholds the very social order itself by arguing for its preservation for the good of future generations. The following chapters trace the stakes of subjectification qua motherhood by identifying the characteristics that are coded as deviant and thus incompatible with responsible liberal subjecthood.

In the first chapter, I look at the reality television show *16 and Pregnant*, an MTV show first broadcast in 2009 that follows the lives of teen girls during and following their unplanned pregnancies. I do a reading of the show's portrayal of the struggles teen moms face to explore how motherhood is constructed in relation to maturity and responsibility. Looking at how reality television aims to provide lessons for living and create distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, I claim *16 and Pregnant* as a site of neoliberal governmentality. Encouraging projects of self-care and self-improvement, *16 and Pregnant* educates girls on what constitute proper forms of womanhood and motherhood. Through the depictions of immature teenagers transformed into responsible mothers, I argue that the show functions as a cultural technology that normalizes feminine sacrifice.

Next, in Chapter 2, I take up the notions of liberalism and inclusion in relation to lesbian motherhood. Centering my analysis in a reading of the critically acclaimed 2010 film *The Kids Are All Right*, I discuss the formation of

lesbian deviancy and its normalization through the family. Using the framework of “homonormativity,” I argue that the inclusion of lesbians in the institutions of motherhood and family upholds and sustains dominant constructions of gender including feminine sacrifice. Claiming inclusion by reinscribing sacrifice as the norm, I argue, is a risky politics, one that stakes its claim to empowerment in an identity that precludes its own self-interest. Instead, I advocate a rejection of the whole system of the norm and question what a politics would look like that claimed not inclusion, but deviancy.

In Chapter 3, I expand on my discussion of liberalism and responsibility, looking specifically at the question of agency. Using popular media representations of Nadya Suleman, the woman who used in vitro fertilization to give birth to octuplets in 2009 consequently dubbing her “Octomom,” I explore the cultural requirements of responsible reproduction. Understanding liberal governance as grounded in “responsibilized freedom,” I look at the popular condemnation of Octomom as a response to her depiction as a selfish woman who acted irresponsibly. Shown as a failed sacrificing mother and irresponsible liberal subject, Octomom’s self-interested action appeared to defy liberal restrictions on agency. I argue that this irresponsible agency is a site of possibility for feminist politics.

I conclude by engaging the questions of reproduction and futurity in regard to feminist politics. Does rejecting reproduction including the reproduction of the social preemptively deny the possibility for change and a better feminist tomorrow, or does it liberate women from a reproductive

linearity that will always necessitate self-sacrificing motherhood? Drawing on recent scholarship that engages notions of queer temporality, I argue that disavowing the insidious power of liberalism that governs through normalizing feminine sacrifice requires rethinking not just motherhood and gender, but our whole notion of progress, future, and politics. Rejecting the “responsibilized” freedom of liberalism and the requirements of self-sacrifice for legible womanhood, I propose a feminist politics that is about acting irresponsibly and unbecoming women, claiming that this politics has no hope for the future but has radical potential for the present.

Chapter 1:

Immature Mothers, Selfish Women: The Gendering of the (Neo)liberal¹

Subject

“...to see reality television as merely trivial entertainment is to avoid recognizing the degree to which the genre is preoccupied with the government of the self, and how, in that capacity, it demarcates a zone for the production of everyday discourses of citizenship.”

–Anna McCarthy, “Reality Television: a Neoliberal Theater of Suffering”

“I enjoy this responsibility and to you it’s a hassle.”

–Maci to her fiancé, *16 and Pregnant* Season 1, Episode 1

In “Why I created MTV’s ‘16 and Pregnant,’” Lauren Dolgen states, “[w]e believe that our audience is smart enough to view ‘Teen Mom’ and ‘16 and Pregnant’ as the shows were intended – as cautionary tales about the consequences of unprotected sex, and the reality of becoming a parent too early.” The article also cites a study by the National Campaign that found that 82 percent of teens that watch *16 and Pregnant* “believe the show helps teens better understand challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood and how to avoid it” (Dolgen). Aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and teen parenthood, *16 and Pregnant* offers a case study in the cultural constructions of motherhood and the guidelines that govern everyday life. As a reality TV show, *16 and Pregnant*

¹ I use the term (neo)liberal to make clear the longer history of neoliberal governance rooted in liberalism. This chapter traces constructions of motherhood not only in the present neoliberal moment, but also during the latter half of the twentieth-century.

exploits “real life” stories of young women to provide models for living, thereby both illuminating and constructing the boundaries of normal and deviant behavior. Seemingly a depiction of “reality,” these “cautionary tales” focused on the consequences of teen sexual activity have a moralizing slant that dictate what is at stake in “becoming a parent too early.”

In this chapter, I focus on the construction of normative motherhood as it relates to discourses about maturity and responsibility. I first discuss reality TV as a site of neoliberal intervention to promote self-governance and *16 and Pregnant* in particular as a site of discipline for young women whose projects of self-care and self-improvement rely on certain beliefs of what it means to be a woman and a mother. Using work by feminist scholars Anna Tsing and Rickie Solinger, I undertake a reading of the first season of *16 and Pregnant* to explore the implicit sexual, racial, and class norms at the heart of these “technologies of the self.” Finally, I contrast the “too young” mothers of *16 and Pregnant* with representations of women who have children late in life. I argue that the condemnation for becoming a mother “too early” or “too late” revolves around a specifically gendered form of neoliberal “responsibilization,” one that requires the sacrifice of “selfishness” to attain the mature embodiment of womanhood: motherhood.

Television and Discipline

In *Better Living Through Television*, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay connect reality television programs to the neoliberal state’s reliance on self-

governing citizens. They write, “[a]t a time when privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice are promoted as the best way to govern liberal capitalist democracies, reality TV shows us how to conduct and ‘empower’ ourselves as enterprising citizens” (2). Oriented toward “self-help” and “self-actualization,” reality television provides models for good citizenship: good citizens are those dedicated to their own self-improvement. Furthermore, the presence of “ordinary people” as “subject matter, ‘case studies,’ points of identification, and sources of disobedience and conflict” brings the project of governing home (Ouellette and Hay 3). Consistent with Foucault’s theory that liberal government functions by governing “at a distance,” the public/private distinction disappears as the state’s requisites for good citizenship are imposed not by direct force, but by the indirect constitution of norms and normativities in mass media. It is “[r]eality TV’s capacity to insert guidelines for living into the nooks and crannies of everyday life” that make the process of governing both invisible and omnipresent (Ouellette and Hay 4). Not an overtly repressive institution, television offers the “free choice” to follow its lifestyle prescriptions while constantly marking the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Reality TV, as a cultural medium designed to educate and reform viewers, therefore becomes a “cultural technology” of liberal government or an example of “governing through freedom” (Ouellette and Hay 14).

In the case of *16 and Pregnant*, reality television takes a gendered approach toward the education and reformation of the public, providing “cautionary tales” for young women that encourage them to become sexually

responsible and “to choose order over chaos and good behavior over deviance” in order to become good liberal citizens (Ouellette and Hay 10). The episodes, titled with the name of the expecting teen mother and narrated by her voice, can be seen as studies in “motherhood” more than teen parenthood in general. While the teen fathers almost always feature as a source of resentment, anxiety, or disapproval, by voicing the narrative from the perspective of the mother the show reveals the true subjects of discipline: girls. Pregnancy and reproduction are ultimately a “woman thing” or a “girl issue,” and teen mothers become the targets of neoliberal strategies of self-improvement. A male classmate of the expecting mother in one episode says, “If girls have enough respect for themselves... I’m not saying you don’t have respect for yourself if you havin’ sex, but, you know, just keep your legs closed” (Episode 4 “Ebony”). By including this statement in the show, the audience is reminded that ultimately the burden of responsible reproduction is on the woman. Self-respecting (and respectable) girls “keep their legs shut.”

With the recent media focus on “slut-shaming,”² fingers have been pointed at the conservative rhetoric that demonizes women’s sexuality by deeming women who have sex (or use birth control) promiscuous or sexually irresponsible. Yet what mode should a defense of women’s sexuality take? If conservative attacks are countered by the reclamation of female sexuality as not irresponsible and thus not dangerous, we should consider what is at stake in

² See the Rush Limbaugh/Sandra Fluke incident, the motivations for the Slut Walk movement, or any of the current legislature on contraception/abortion.

claiming “responsible” sexuality. My work thus examines the links between responsibility and motherhood and also asks what the dangerous assertion of irresponsibility would look like. By questioning the framework of “responsibility,” I am not providing an argument for (or against) unprotected sex or unplanned pregnancy per se. Queer scholars have looked at socially irresponsible or antisocial sex as a site of contestation of hegemonic forms of sexuality and desire, including, for example, Leo Bersani’s meditation on AIDS and homosexuality, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and Tim Dean’s study of barebacking communities, *Unlimited Intimacy*. Following in this tradition, this chapter examines how discourses of neoliberal self-care impact constructions of womanhood and women’s sexuality and calls for a rethinking of what the embrace of “irresponsible” sex would mean for feminist politics.

While motherhood has traditionally played the role of the respectable outlet for women’s sexuality, limitations have always existed in regard to what constitutes proper motherhood. In “Monster Stories: Women Charged with Perinatal Endangerment,” Anna Tsing explores the construction of the “anti-mother” as the paradigm of bad womanhood by studying depictions of women who give birth alone, refusing medical supervision and thus “endangering” the lives of their children. These “monster stories” function similarly to the educational elements of reality television for “[l]ike other cautionary tales, these tales advise and inform about acceptable ways to live” (282). According to Tsing,

Stories of inappropriate mothering are built from diverse symbolic resources. What brings them together is their cultural opposition as ‘unnatural’ alternatives to more appropriate forms of womanhood and maternity. By setting a ‘bad example,’ these women, in all their diversity,

direct those who hear their stories toward the singular path of propriety.
(Tsing 296)

16 and Pregnant offers another case study in the construction of the “anti-mother.” With the stated purpose of de-glamorizing teen parenthood, the teen mothers featured on *16 and Pregnant* are depicted as those who fall outside the bounds of conventional, socially sanctioned motherhood. They are those that set a “bad example” and thereby illuminate “the singular path of propriety.” Their deviance is not only due to their age but also, I would argue, dependant on the relationship between maturity and sexual, racial, and class norms. Mediated through the governmental mechanism of reality television, the production of this deviance serves to discipline the rest of the population.

Race and Redemption: The Neurotic White ‘girl’ and the Sexualized Black Other

The racialization of the anti-mother has come under scrutiny by feminist scholars looking at various configurations of “bad” motherhood. In *Wake Up Little Susie*, Rickie Solinger examines the treatment of unwed mothers in the post-war, pre-Roe v. Wade period. Her work shows the way race configures narratives of othering and sexuality. For unwed mothers before Roe v. Wade, whiteness diagnosed illegitimate pregnancy “as a psychological rather than a sexual issue,” rewriting the “shame” of unwed pregnancy as “a condition that admitted rehabilitation and redemption” (Solinger 24; 25). White unwed mothers were sent to maternity homes that focused on domestic training and psychological care and were strongly encouraged to relinquish their children for

adoption. Learning the techniques of proper feminine domesticity such as hostess skills and sewing, being “cured” by the maternity homes’ psychiatrists, and providing a desirable white baby for the newly booming adoption market, unwed white mothers “who envisioned the future ... in normative, family terms” found a modicum of social support and the potential for reintegration (Solinger 164). The unwed white mother “had not engaged in sex exactly,” instead, her transgression stemmed from mental illness and was often explained as a retaliation against her own mother; “in spreading her legs, she was engaging in a family form of psychological warfare” (Solinger 100). Solinger shows how this simultaneous psychologization and desexualization allowed the white unwed mother to become a “non-mother” and restored her ability to lead a normal, married life after the temporary setback of her unwed pregnancy.

This redemption narrative can take place due to the change in methods of governance. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how governing becomes a project of finding criminals, not punishing crimes, thereby focusing on the characteristics of individuals that are read as “normal” or “deviant.” Similarly, Tsing’s “monster stories” “persuade because they give an identity and a history to the woman charged with a crime” (Tsing 285). Following narratives that construct the normal and the deviant, judgments about the “particular type of individual” mean these women “can fit into our expectations for guilt or innocence” (Tsing 285). Her study of women accused of murdering their babies therefore finds two disparate formulations based on the “identity and history” of the accused women. In one, “young white ‘innocent-looking’ schoolgirls are

revealed as perverse products of a distorted maturation process” (Tsing 286). Again, whiteness gives deviance a psychological basis. In both Solinger’s and Tsing’s studies, the mother’s whiteness classifies her as a neurotic, treatable subject but, more importantly, as at least a *potential* candidate for white middle-class normative femininity. Though deviant, her whiteness casts her as a legible subject: she is the every-day girl but gone wrong. Furthermore, as per Solinger, “[p]sychiatric theory helped unwed mothers see their plight as an individual, not a collective, concern” (102). Thus the turn to psychological perversity also allows the neoliberal individualization of social “problems” and their treatments. With the proper disciplinary techniques and as individuals, unwed white mothers could be redeemed as proper women and good liberal subjects.

In contrast, non-white mothers in both Solinger and Tsing’s work represent an Other on whom the projection of deviance falls. For Solinger, black unwed mothers in the post-war period faced an entirely different set of social mores than their white counterparts. Solinger discusses several different attitudes toward the black unwed mother. The “benign neglect” model saw blacks as “irresponsible and amoral, but baby loving” thus outside state responsibility (Solinger 187). The “punishers,” in contrast, believed “simply that the mothers were bad and should be punished” and the babies of black unwed mothers “were expensive and undesirable as citizens” (Solinger 187). Finally, the moral reformer view sought to include black unwed mothers in the same discourse as white unwed mothers, calling for black maternity homes and the adoption of the babies of black unwed mothers. As Solinger notes, all these

viewpoints “shared the belief that the black illegitimate baby was the product of pathology” (188). Specifically, this pathologization was tied to “the construction of black female sexuality and the black woman” (Solinger 188). Following “the white tradition of projecting free sex norms onto black women,” the black unwed mother became the “bad” mother and sexualized Other against which the white unwed mother could be desexualized (Solinger 44).

In contrast to the “innocent looking” young white women whose misdeeds stemmed from psychological trauma, Tsing distinguishes a second category of “older, poor white women, as well as women of color of all ages” that “are described as obstinate and cunning refusers of medical knowledge and routine health care” (286). Instead of appearing as victims of psychological troubles, these women act on their own in ways that reject the social doctrine of femininity, becoming “the enemies of nurturance and affection” (Tsing 283). The two different portrayals, however, show that “the cultural construction of the ‘female’ is never a unitary process” and “even an essential ‘anti-woman’ is created from symbolic scraps of race, class, age, and ethnic difference” (Tsing 286). These symbolic scraps converge in the creation of the normal. Tsing notes, “[i]n U.S. American understandings of class, respectability and aspirations are as important as income in one’s ability to be classified as ‘middle-class’ and therefore ‘normal’” (294). “Middle-classness” thus becomes associated both with whiteness and with certain normative behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. Therefore, while aspiring white middle-class subjects could err but be redeemed

through treatment, those represented as “outside of middle-class, ‘normal’ values” continued to be seen as “abnormal” (Tsing 295).

Like Solinger’s white unwed mothers and Tsing’s “innocent looking” white schoolgirls, the young women on *16 and Pregnant* mark the boundaries of deviance while maintaining the potential to be redeemed. In the first season of *16 and Pregnant*, all but one of the teen mothers featured are white and all are low or low-middle income and from small towns in middle or southern America. All episodes start with a brief introduction narrated by the featured teen mother explaining her hobbies, her family, her social life, her boyfriend, and her normalcy. As Amber says, “I’m just your typical teen from Anderson, Indiana” (Episode 3 “Amber”). Introduced as the archetypal ordinary girl, the show centers on the transformative quality of teen pregnancy. Farrah, a proud cheerleader says, “Even though right now I’m still a size two, I won’t be for long, because I’m pregnant” (Episode 2 “Farrah”) and Ebony opens Episode 4 with a description of her dreams of joining the air force with her fiancé but concluding, “But now all our plans are up in the air, because I’m pregnant.” Framed in “normal” teenage life, the young women are presented as some variant on the recognizable All-American teen with one caveat: their inappropriate expectant motherhood.

The girls on *16 and Pregnant* are not, on the whole, “outside of middle-class, normal values” and are represented as errant subjects of discipline. Despite the focus on their pregnancies, the actual subject of unprotected sex is rarely breached on the show. Other than a few “didn’t your mother tell you”

conversations and the aforementioned “keep your legs closed” statement by a classmate, the sexual activity of the young women is remarkably absent. Though sexual transgression underwrites the premise of the show, the young women are not depicted as sexual agents. Therefore, as nonsexual, modest “girls” they become relatable and redeemable. Like Tsing’s psychologically distraught schoolgirls, the young women on *16 and Pregnant* “are depicted as looking and acting like ‘the girl next door’” and are guilty of naiveté but ultimately retain the potential for normal, white femininity (Tsing 290-291). While the “it could happen to you” quality makes the girls on *16 and Pregnant* “a negative example for *all* women to avoid,” they ultimately are not unredeemable as long as they undergo the proper transformation from irresponsible teenager to responsible mother (Tsing 286). On screen the teen mothers attempt to overcome their indiscretion by becoming “good” mothers, almost as a form of repentance. The show’s disciplinary character, therefore, appears in its portrayal of the difficulties teen girls face in becoming responsible mothers, while holding that this is the only type of mother one can be.

Maturity and Motherhood: The Neoliberal Subject of Sacrifice

Featuring Maci from Chattanooga, Tennessee, a white self-described “overachiever” who is engaged to the father of her coming child, the first episode sets the precedent for the type of teen mother the television series seeks to portray. The girls, on the whole, are presented as good-hearted if naïve, their flaws producing innocent if devastating mistakes. Tsing describes how

sympathizers of the young, white anti-mother in her work “turned to imagery of vulnerable pregnant teenagers,” an “imagery of a perverse naivete – perhaps a distortion of maturation” (291). Like Tsing’s young white mothers, the anti-mother of *16 and Pregnant* becomes sympathetic as a product of the “distortion of maturation.” But while for Tsing the naïve immaturity “explains both the young women’s familiarity and their difference” because “[a]lthough they start out like ordinary girls, they fail to develop an appropriate womanhood,” the young women on *16 and Pregnant* face a distorted growth process precisely because they must immediately jump into “appropriate womanhood” by becoming mothers (291). Unlike the “anti-mother” in Tsing’s studies whose deviance came from the supposed murder of her baby and the white “non mother” of the pre-Roe v. Wade period who gave up her baby for adoption, all but one of the young women on the first season of *16 and Pregnant* keep their babies and struggle to attain the maturity necessary for motherhood. The episodes focus on showing the difficulty of assuming “adult” responsibilities as a teenager. As Catelynn says in Episode 6, “How are we supposed to raise a kid when we’re kids ourselves?” (Catelynn, cognizant of her own immaturity, is in fact the only mother in the first season to give up her baby for adoption.) Teen mothers occupy a borderland of maturity; though physically capable of reproducing, they remain in the social category of not-yet-adult.

The teen moms who have chosen to raise their babies must therefore speed up the linear maturation process in order to fulfill their adult responsibilities. Their self-described transformation is often compared on the

show to the immaturity of the babies' fathers, who are still caught in childhood. In the first episode, Maci says, "I wasn't ready either, but I grew up because I had to." Similarly, in Episode 4, Ebony complains, "I'm just the one that grew up too fast, like I needed to" whereas her boyfriend did not. Motherhood is more immediately tied to responsibility in a way that fatherhood is not. The assumption of this responsibility does not come easily, however. When asked if she liked being a mom, Whitney, in Episode 5, responded, "It doesn't feel like I'm a mom. It feels like I'm Whitney. And I just had a baby." The show makes it clear that motherhood does not simply follow from the process of biological reproduction but instead encapsulates a specific set of social meanings as an identity. To "be" a mother one must perform motherhood correctly.

Showing the profound difficulty of assuming maturity as an immature teenager fulfills the professed aim of *16 and Pregnant* to discourage teen pregnancy. No matter how hard they find the responsibility of motherhood, however, the young women featured on the show do not shirk from their responsibility. Here we see the crux of the show's construction of motherhood. By aiming to cast the sacrifices teen mothers make in a negative light to denounce age-inappropriate motherhood, the show nonetheless implicitly normalizes sacrifice as a component of "good" motherhood. Mothers sacrifice; the tragedy for teen mothers is the incompatibility of their immature lifestyles with the necessary selflessness of motherhood.

Every episode features the tradeoff of self-absorbed teen life for responsible motherhood. In the first episode, Maci says, "I can't believe how

much I miss my old life. Hanging out with friends, riding dirt bikes, and cheerleading. But those days are gone.” When she is unable to attend a social engagement, her friend tells her, “You’re going to miss out” to which Maci responds, “Story of my life.” Motherhood is about missing out. For Ebony this includes missing out on her career in the air force as well as missing out on the quintessential beauty of youth. She cries in the dressing room while shopping for prom dresses, reminded that the pregnant body does not fit social norms of attractiveness. Lamenting the loss of a prom-queen title or trips to the mall may seem like typical self-absorbed teen behavior, whereas the foregone education and career represent the serious sacrifice of a more socially accepted form of self-interest. But the “selfish” desires of teenagers generally seem innocent as long as they remain not-yet-women and not-yet-mothers. Ebony says, “I knew having a baby meant making sacrifices, but I never expected my career would end before I even finished high school” (Episode 4 “Ebony”). The teenagers on *16 and Pregnant* simply enter a world of adult responsibility too early.

As soon as one achieves maturity through motherhood, however, these become necessary sacrifices. When Maci’s friend questions why she quit the dance team, Maci responds, “I have more important priorities” (Episode 1 “Maci”). Catelynn, the only teen mother to give up the baby for adoption, looks for a family that embodies this form of responsible motherhood. Discussing adoption prospects, she says, “I think it would be good for her to have a stay-at-home mom, so she’s not always in day care or whatever” (Episode 6 “Catelynn”). While the show positions the sacrifice of teenagers as pre-mature, sacrifice

remains an essential component of motherhood, legitimizing the normalization of the stay-at-home mom. As Whitney says, “My teenage years are just gone,” showing the end of the period of socially acceptable selfishness for women.

While the teen mother becomes a deviant “anti-mother” due to the incompatibility of her young age with the maturity required for the proper embodiment of responsible, sacrificing motherhood, women deemed “too old” to have children also face condemnation for behaving irresponsibly with regard to reproduction. In an article that appeared in *New York Magazine* in October 2011 titled “Parents of a Certain Age,” Lisa Miller discusses the common perception of those who choose to have children during middle age. Miller explains the outlook that “[w]hat really bugs the acquaintances of these oldest parents is their denial about their decrepitude,” because, according to one psychologist of fertility patients, “children are entitled to at least one healthy, vibrant parent” (47). By depriving their children of a “real” parent, one who follows the social prescriptions for age, health, and “vibrancy,” those that delay childbirth are considered as acting out of self-interest, not for the good of their offspring.

Miller also discusses the argument that older parents are “unnatural,” referring to a viewpoint taken by Nancy London, co-author of the famous feminist text *Our Bodies, Ourselves*:

In the seventies, the Second Wave feminists wanted to “have a career, travel, have sexual adventures, whatever we thought freedom meant,” London recalls. “But then we had to find out that biology is not some patriarchal concept created to keep us barefoot and pregnant. To mother is part of our nature. To toss that out the window and say, ‘Hey, that’s not for me,’ and then at 50 to say, ‘Oops, forgot to have a baby’ – something is not processed in our thinking.” (cited in Miller 48)

London argues against the second wave feminist goal to “have it all.” If pursuing a career, getting to travel, having “sexual adventures,” or acquiring “freedom” requires, as per London, a sacrifice of motherhood, then motherhood conversely requires the sacrifices of these “freedoms.” Furthermore, following this line of thinking, these “freedoms” are unnatural if “to mother is part our nature.” Miller summarizes this outlook saying, “[c]hoosing to have children at 50 disrupts life’s natural trajectory, causing needless suffering and disharmony for both parent and child” (48). As London says, having children late in life is “irresponsible” (Miller 48).

Miller herself, however, disagrees with the “natural” motherhood argument. She argues against “the assertion that people above a certain externally imposed cutoff should not have children because it is not natural,” insofar as “nature is a historically terrible arbiter of personal choice” (48). Miller does not call into question the whole framework of the “natural” exactly, but argues that exclusionary politics based on “nature” arguments (like anti-miscegenation laws) are debunked by “broad-minded people” as “bias and personal distaste hiding behind an idea of natural law” (48). Instead, she offers a defense of career bound women against their unfavorable depictions by those like London. She states, “[c]ruelly, ambition in women is still conflated with selfishness, and the woman who devotes her first decades of adulthood to her career is expected to then waive her maternal impulses” (103). Instead of arguing for the acceptance of the “selfish” woman, however, Miller simply desires to rebut the “cruel” portrayal of career bound women as selfish or non-

maternal. If ambitious women are not selfish, they deserve to have access to the ultimate fulfillment of feminine selflessness by becoming mothers.

Motherhood, Money, and the Middle-Class

The issue of the career woman introduces the question of material resources to the discussion of normative motherhood. As we saw earlier, Anna Tsing identifies “middle-class” not simply as an income bracket, but rather as a collection of normative values that employ racial, sexual, and age-related signifiers. Yet the question remains: what does motherhood have to do with money? On the first season of *16 and Pregnant*, though the teen mothers face the high price of diapers, the loss of future careers, and, very rarely, the difficulty of maintaining current employment, the main economic concern presented on the show is the financial contributions of the fathers of their babies. The teen fathers are consistently berated for their immaturity and refusal to become responsible parents. From using money designated for baby-related needs to buy video games to spending time with friends instead of at home with the family, the young men face disapproval for not assuming the role of “family man.” Upset at her boyfriend’s lack of commitment, Ebony’s friend sympathizes, “You just can’t be the perfect little housewife that takes care of the baby all the time” (Episode 4 “Ebony”). But, for the most part, the teen mothers on the show *do* stay home and take care of the baby all the time. Though the teen fathers exhibit a range of behavior regarding the dedication to physical childcare, the “provider” role of the father appears in every episode where the mother kept the baby except one;

in that case, the father of the baby died before the birth and the mother turned to her family for financial support. Though the teen moms on *16 and Pregnant* were often shown as falling back on their parents for economic assistance, this only occurred when the primary heterosexual nuclear family structure failed to provide due to the immaturity of the teen fathers.

As *16 and Pregnant* illustrates, motherhood is bound up in a much larger economy of dependency and heteronormative family structures. Anna Tsing notes the coinciding requirements of responsibility and dependency for women. She states, “[r]esponsibility becomes appropriate female nurturance only when it is tied to an acceptance of female vulnerability” (296). The young women of *16 and Pregnant* claim maturity and assume the responsibility of motherhood, but within the boundaries of normative “vulnerable” femininity. Dependent on the fathers of their babies and their own parents, the young women do not appear as autonomous women or “single” mothers. While Ebony says of her boyfriend, “I’m more self-reliant than Josh is. I’m ok with being the adult in the relationship,” the show repeatedly demonstrates how *not* self-reliant teen mothers are, necessitating the disciplining of the irresponsible father (Episode 4 “Ebony”). The father as “provider” remains an essential component of the hegemonic mode of kinship, the nuclear family. Whitney, reliant on her mother and grandmother for support, despairs, “How are we going to be a real family and stop depending on others?” (Episode 5 “Whitney”). The focus on her boyfriend’s reduction of work hours as the cause of the inability of the new trio to start life on their own reveals a commitment to the traditional roles of independent man as

“breadwinner” and dependent woman as mother. The deviance of teen mothers, therefore, becomes a question of the failure of a young family to uphold the division of labor between genders. Because responsible motherhood requires dependence on male support, the lack of financial stability of the family (and the father) means a departure from the dominant construction of the nuclear family as self-sufficient and ultimately middle-class.

When asked what she liked about the adoptive parents, Catelynn, the only teen to give her baby up for adoption in the first season, says, “Everything about them. Pretty much everything I wanted, they have.” For Catelynn, who describes her own family life as “unstable,” and mentions her mother’s “problems” that left her at times living outside her nuclear family as well as constantly on the move, adoption allows for the fulfillment of the domestic ideal she was denied, including middle-class status. When flipping through the photo books provided by the adoptive parents, Catelynn and her boyfriend Tyler remark on the couple’s affluence. Catelynn says, “She’s skiing or whatever that’s called” and Tyler responds, “Water skiing.” Besides exhibiting the marks of the leisure class through the photos of water sports and trips to Europe, the couple has a “nice house” and fits Tyler’s qualification, “[a]s long as they’ve graduated from college.” In a confrontation with his own father, who is against the adoption, Tyler responds to the argument “All a baby needs is love” with an adamant, “No! *Not* all a baby needs is love, dad!” Catelynn and Tyler believe their child “deserves way better” than their own lower-class upbringing, cognizant that responsible parenthood is not about love, but about material resources and

middleclassness. As discussed above, the economic success of the nuclear family is tied to distinct gender roles and Catelynn agrees that “it would be good for her to have a stay-at-home mom.” Being a “good” mother requires both responsibility and dependency that are conditional on being part of the middle-class, both as an economic category and as a set of behavioral norms, thus excluding lower-class women from “good” motherhood.

The rich, however, also fall outside the category of “good” mother. In “Parents of a Certain Age,” Miller discusses the class element of older parenting. Assisted fertility procedures and adoption are costly, restricting the choice to start families in later life to the wealthy. While she cites studies linking more money to healthier lifestyles and longevity to counter the perceived detriment of having older, “decrepit” parents, she is careful to reject the assumption that wealthier, older women make for selfish, bad mothers. She recognizes the stereotype:

On the parenting blogs, the cartoon persists as hateful as the campaign against Murphy Brown: The self-centered female, drinking wine and buying Jimmy Choos for decades, who one day awakens – alone, wrapped in high-thread-count sheets – and remembers the baby she never had. She goes to her doctor and sobs. If she succeeds in achieving her heart’s desire, she’ll just hire a nanny and go right back to work. (103)

Yet she responds, “[s]ure, *some women are materialistic bitches*. But most delay children because they want the independence that comes with work as well as the nontrivial benefits of professional success: a good salary, health insurance, and a stable place in the world” (103 emphasis mine). Miller attempts to draw a fine line between the “nontrivial benefits” sought by career women and the “self-centered,” decadence of “materialistic bitches.” But other than the manipulation

of language, what is the difference between the two depictions? Miller's defense of the ambitious woman rests on the denial of her selfishness, including the desire for material goods. "Independence" remains an acceptable goal, and as long as the material gains from professional success do not cater to "trivial" (read: material) desires, the career woman is not excluded from the category of "good" mother. What exactly designates the arbitrary boundaries of "trivial" materiality? Catelynn's desire for her daughter to have a "nice house" and maybe learn to water ski is acceptable, but women who wear Jimmy Choos and buy high-thread-count sheets must be condemned. While the question of what constitutes a "proper" level of wealth invokes personal beliefs about materialism and even a general discussion of the Protestant work ethic in American culture, let us suffice to say that "acceptable" affluence must remain within the category of "middle-class." The danger of rich women, as Miller illuminates, is the specter of the "materialistic bitch" who treats her baby as just another commodity, contaminating the image of the responsible woman and denigrating the noble sacrifices of motherhood. The selfish woman therefore threatens to destabilize the model of "good" femininity, the mature, sacrificing mother and the good liberal subject.

Conclusion

Returning to the opening of this chapter, we should remind ourselves of what exactly "the good liberal subject" means. As per Ouellette and Hay, "[l]iberalism is based on a paradox ... in that while it advocates governing

through (as opposed to against) freedom, it also expects individuals to govern themselves properly” (10). To govern oneself properly, I argue, is a gendered task. Freedom is heavily constrained by social norms that dictate what constitutes “good” and “bad” behavior. Taking reality television as a “cultural technology” of neoliberal governmentality, my reading of *16 and Pregnant* shows how appropriate “self-governance” for women requires the adherence to a normative femininity that implies whiteness, middleclassness, nonsexual respectability, responsible maturity, dependence, and the sacrifice of selfishness. While the neoliberal approach of “governing through freedom” requires the existence of “autonomous” citizens, it is important to remember that “[f]reedom, in a liberal sense, should ... not be equated with anarchy, but with a kind of well-regulated and ‘responsibilized’ liberty” (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 8). For women, becoming “autonomous” subjects of liberalism in fact negates their very autonomy if we define autonomy as independence and “self-directing freedom” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Instead, following the better-recognized definition as “the quality or state of being self-governing,” “autonomy” subjects women to a discourse of restrictive femininity, one that requires the abandonment of self-interest in favor of maturity, responsibility, sacrifice, and motherhood (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Liberal subjecthood for women means freedom to act, but not to act selfishly.

My goal in this chapter has been to establish the link between the mature woman-as-mother and the responsible neoliberal citizen. As cultural media continue to act as “outsourced” governing agents in the establishment of norms,

questioning the categorization of “good” and “bad” women becomes an urgent feminist task. As Tsing instructs:

Feminists cannot afford this romanticization of motherhood. They must attend instead to the social and historical circumstances that both create these expectations for what it means to be a ‘woman,’ and constrain women’s choices about whether and how to bear or raise children. (297)

When “being a woman” requires adhering to the norm of white, middle-class, nonsexual, responsible yet vulnerable femininity as exemplified by the “good” mother while simultaneously evacuating the possibility for independent, self-interested action in the name of neoliberal citizenship, perhaps we should begin thinking how to *not* be women.

Chapter 2:

No Trouble with Normal: Lesbian Motherhood and Homonormativity

“I got a kid, he’s being raised by two women at the moment.”

“Oh, you know, I mean I think that works. They made some studies, I read in one of the psychoanalytic quarterlies. You don’t need a male, I mean. Two mothers are absolutely fine.”

“Really? Because I always feel very few people survive one mother.”

-*Manhattan* (Dir. Woody Allen, 1979)

In Chapter 1, I showed how the gendering of the neoliberal subject occurs when the “responsibilization” of women takes the form of normalizing mature motherhood at the expense of feminine selfishness. Taking reality television as a site of governmentality, I looked at how the image of the “anti-mother” on *16 and Pregnant* serves to discipline young women by defining the qualities of “good” and “bad” motherhood and encouraging projects of self-care and self-improvement that uphold normative standards of femininity. The deviance of both the immature and overly mature mother comes from the opposition of irresponsible selfishness and responsible sacrifice. The good female neoliberal subject, therefore, is a mother. How then does heterosexuality affect the link between womanhood and motherhood? Is the good female neoliberal subject always straight?

In this chapter, I look at the figure of the lesbian mother through feminist and queer scholarship and the 2010 film *The Kids Are All Right* using a

framework of queering and homonormativity to show how liberal inclusion for the “deviant” lesbian relies on the gender conformity of feminine sacrifice. I first examine the role of heterosexuality in the construction of motherhood and womanhood, noting how lesbian “deviance” is formed in relation to the procreative basis of the gender binary and the specific characteristics associated with non-procreative sexuality and gender nonconformity. I then consider how the lesbian mother functions as an “oxymoron”: Has the lesbian been normalized or has motherhood been queered? I argue that opening the category of womanhood by extending “motherhood” to lesbians does not call into question the category itself. Furthermore, I argue that while it is no longer dependent on the heterosexual framework of “sexual difference,” lesbian motherhood operates within a normative system of family that maintains gendered norms of behavior. Through a reading of *The Kids Are All Right*, I illuminate the underlying requirements for accessing the normal, including the implications for gender conformity, sexual desire, selfishness, and the valuing of work. Ultimately I argue that lesbian motherhood, as a relationship of dependence between mother and child, upholds and sustains the dominant heteronormative institution of the family by working within, not against, normative feminine sacrifice.

Womanhood as Motherhood and the Making of Lesbian Deviancy

In *Queering Reproduction*, Laura Mamo shows that while “[a]ssociating womanhood with fertility and pregnancy is a longstanding script,” reproduction has traditionally remained in the domain of the heterosexual woman (186).

Lesbians have historically had a contested inclusion in, if not complete exclusion from, the categories of womanhood and motherhood. Using the work of Monique Wittig, Mamo follows the line of reasoning:

Since sex serves the economic needs of heterosexuality, Wittig argues, a lesbian is not a woman, because, in refusing heterosexuality, she is no longer defined within that opposition, which necessarily produces male and female, man and woman. (Mamo 49)

Heterosexuality thus becomes essential to the co-construction of womanhood and motherhood. As per Wittig, heterosexual reproduction as the basis of the binary gender system excludes lesbians – as non-reproductive, non-mothers, they are not women.

Kath Weston, in her notable work on queer forms of kinship, *Families We Choose*, discusses how the categorization of lesbian relationships as “same-same” renders them non-procreative, thereby disqualifying lesbians from motherhood and the appropriate fulfillment of femininity. Facing a culture that “ground[s] erotic relations in the symbolism of genital and gendered difference,” in hegemonic representations “lesbian or gay lovers appear ‘the same’ and therefore incomplete” (137). Thus lesbians and gay men are seen in “opposition to the differences of anatomy and gender understood to configure heterosexual marriage, sexuality, and procreation” (137). The cultural coding of “sexual difference,” like Wittig’s heterosexuality of “opposition,” requires male and female components for recognition by the social institutions that sanction reproduction. The social “deviancy” of the lesbian, therefore, comes from her inappropriate embodiment of womanhood as it is constructed through

heterosexuality. With her sexuality deemed non-procreative, the lesbian fails to achieve normative womanhood through motherhood.

This deviancy, however, takes on other characteristics that are important for the purposes of this paper. Weston points to representations of the “same-same” relationship that depict the gay or lesbian relationship as a “mere replication of the self, a narcissistic relation that creates no greater totality and brings little new into the world” (Weston 137). In addition to being seen as narcissistic, the non-procreative sexuality of gays and lesbians becomes evidence of selfishness and social decay. As conservative rhetoric would have it, “because gays selfishly pursue nonprocreative relationships, they threaten civilization by promoting a society that declines to reproduce itself” (Weston 156). Not only conservatives, but factions of “gay liberation militants” like the early homophile organizations set themselves apart and “stereotyped bar gays as decadent, frivolous, and cynical” (Weston 156). Non-procreative sexuality and therefore non-family oriented sexuality also leads to “accusing gay people of being irresponsibly ‘promiscuous’” and having unstable relationships (Weston 157). In addition, the stereotype of selfishness is also associated with wealth: “People in the United States often view selfishness as an outgrowth of narcissistic self-absorption, but in the case of homosexuality allegations of selfishness also relate to beliefs about how lesbians and gay men are situated within class relations” (Weston 157). That gays and lesbians are seen to be at the wealthy end of “class relations” means they lack the primary characteristics of the middle-class. Stereotypically, they are seen as selfish instead of sacrificing

and idle instead of productive. Weston states, “[b]ecause gay and lesbian identity is organized primarily in terms of gender and sexuality rather than production or work, the most visible gay institutions have occupied the ‘personal’ (read: ego-centered) sphere of leisure and consumption” (Weston 156). With the deviance of non-procreative sexuality, therefore, comes the projection of narcissism, selfishness, decadence, frivolousness, cynicism, irresponsibility, promiscuity, egocentrism, non-productive leisure, and consumerism – what we may read as “deviant” qualities.

Along with denouncement for behavior associated with non-procreative sexuality, lesbians face condemnation for being “not women.” The “deviance” of lesbians also has to do with their perceived gender nonconformity. In particular, Weston notes, “[t]he butch stereotype of lesbians seems diametrically opposed to the nurturance and caretaking so closely associated with motherhood in the United States” (Weston 172). With the strong ties between motherhood and womanhood, women that lack the appropriate characteristics of “nurturance and caretaking” must appear deviant. Weston phrases this incompatibility of the stereotype of the butch lesbian with “proper” femininity: “If childbearing stands a sign of gender fulfilled, the mark of maturity and becoming a ‘real woman,’ how can it coexist with a category like ‘butch,’ popularly understood as a woman who desires to be a man?” (Weston 174). Though she continues, “[t]his perceived contradiction rests upon a contested ideology of womanhood, along with a very one-dimensional and inaccurate portrait of what it means to be butch,” I argue that this ideology of womanhood may be contested, but still remains

frighteningly predominant and the projection of deviance in the form of non-nurturing, non-caretaking, non-mothering onto the figure of the butch lesbian functions to discipline lesbians into becoming properly gendered, mothering subjects (172). In our reading of deviance and normative femininity, therefore, inappropriate womanhood becomes associated in hegemonic discourse with the “anti-mother” figure of the butch lesbian.

Inclusion and Normalization: Expanding but Maintaining the Category of Motherhood

If the figure of the lesbian is rendered “deviant” by her disqualification from procreative normative femininity, what happens to her deviance when she becomes a mother? Weston remarks on this incompatibility: “the term ‘lesbian mother’ presents an oxymoron insofar as it joins a procreative identity (mother) to a sexual identity (lesbian) that is frequently represented as the antithesis of procreative sexuality” (169). The dominant view of lesbians as non-procreative “renders the image of the lesbian mother shocking and disconcerting, a veritable *non sequitur*” (168). As a shocking and disconcerting oxymoron, lesbian motherhood appears to challenge the dominance of a heterosexually biased system that requires a “male” and a “female” for reproductive viability.

If “male/female” sexual difference is no longer a requirement for reproduction, how are we to rethink Wittig’s proposal that the heterosexual, procreative basis of gender excludes lesbians from womanhood? Or, as Mamo puts it, “if the ‘lesbian’ procreates, does she then become a woman?” (Mamo 49)

If motherhood is the prerequisite for womanhood, it would seem that lesbianism is only associated with “bad” or non-womanhood when it is synonymous with “non-reproductive.” In her book *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture*, Ellen Lewin asserts, “motherhood, even more clearly than sexual orientation, defines womanhood” (Lewin 3). If, indeed, motherhood offers the invitation to sexually “deviant” women to enter normative femininity, what is at stake in this inclusion? No longer non-procreative or non-gender conforming, is the lesbian-as-mother still deviant?

On one hand, the increasing availability of “motherhood” due to improvement in fertility treatments, in vitro fertilization, surrogacy options, and other reproductive technologies redefines who is marked as “deviant” or “abnormal.” These technologies are fairly recent. The first sperm bank opened in 1972 and the first “test tube baby” was born in 1978, leading to a massive growth in the reproductive technologies industry throughout the 1980s and making motherhood more widely available (Mamo 29; 31). Lewin shows the importance of this opening of categories to the formerly “deviant.” She states:

Motherhood also appears to offer lesbians some resolution of the dilemmas inherent in membership in a stigmatized category... achieving motherhood implies movement into a more natural or normal status than a lesbian can ordinarily hope to experience otherwise. (Lewin 74)

In this view, motherhood is still the “natural” and “normal” expression of womanhood; it has simply been extended to include the previously excluded.

Does this inclusion in normative gender thus “normalize” the lesbian? Feminist and queer scholars seem ambivalent on this topic. Lewin asserts:

On the one hand, insofar as lesbianism and motherhood seem to be culturally (if not biologically) incompatible, they transcend or challenge the ordinary organization of gender in American culture, which conflates 'woman' and 'mother' and defines lesbians as neither. In this sense, claiming the identity of lesbian mother may be construed as an instance of resistance to prevailing sexual politics. But in becoming mothers, lesbians join heterosexual women in a particular organization of identity which partakes of mainstream gender ideology. (Lewin 15)

Lewin identifies the tension between viewing the inclusion of lesbians in motherhood as a transgressive challenge to the heteronormative institution of the family and as a substantiation of existing gender norms. The transgressive quality of lesbian motherhood, however, is associated with the inability for lesbians to be seen as women and mothers, challenging the "prevailing sexual politics." Mamo picks up this last point and advocates that lesbian motherhood "queers" reproduction and qualifies as transgressive because it challenges "the normal":

I argue that while lesbians and other nonheterosexual actors and groups variously push and pull their way into normativity, doing so does not solidify the normal, but instead makes its borders far more porous and opaque, thereby recasting the meaning of reproduction itself. The stability and assumed naturalness of reproduction, and by extension the family form, has undergone substantial cultural reworking and is today finally queered. Lesbian reproductive practices have contributed significantly to this destabilization. (Mamo 5)

For Mamo, lesbian inclusion in the categories of womanhood and motherhood ultimately changes the nature of the categories themselves. She makes this argument by appealing to changes in "the normal" and changes in the "naturalness" of reproduction and thus the family.

Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* takes issue with the idea of "changing" the normal to include gays and lesbians. In opposition to

what he terms “heteronormativity,” or rather the hegemonic stipulation “that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous,” Warner advocates a queer politics that positions itself against not only the predominance of heterosexuality as the norm, but the whole idea of the normal itself (xxiii). He says, “queers, incessantly told to alter their ‘behavior,’ can be understood as protesting not just the normal behavior of the social but the *idea* of normal behavior” (xxvii). By rejecting the whole framework of “normal” and “deviant,” Warner advocates not an inclusion in normativity, but a radical assertion of queer desires as those that escape normativity itself.

Yet Warner concedes, “[i]t would be a daredevil act of understatement to say that not all gays and lesbians share this view of the new queer politics” (xxiii). While “queer” seeks to destabilize heteronormativity, it is not synonymous with a universalized “gay and lesbian” politics. In fact, in reaction to the increasing neoliberal conservatism of some forms of these politics, Lisa Duggan coined the term “homonormativity” in 2003 to describe “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (*The Twilight of Equality* 50). If “queering” describes the rejection of the “idea of normal behavior,” “homonormativity” appears as its opposite: the widening of the “normal” to include gays and lesbians.

The focus on the development of homonormativity intersects with the wider aim of this project to put forth a critique of liberalism. As I discuss at

length in the introduction and Chapter 1, liberalism extends an invitation into legible subjecthood on the basis of normalization. Following Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, governance in a liberal form requires that individuals submit to a form of subjugation that "compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes" individuals and populations based on their distance from "the norm" (*Discipline and Punish* 183). Pitting the "normal" against the "deviant," disciplinary systems allow entry into normativity through correction, redemption, and personal projects of self-care and self-management. If homonormativity describes the process of inclusion of gays and lesbians into the social body on the basis of their demobilization, depoliticization, and repudiation of their deviancy, we can identify homonormativity as a liberal project. Homonormative politics have a stake in securing "the normal" and encouraging the normalization of gays and lesbians through individualized self-improvement that brings them closer to "the norm." Regarding homonormativity, Jasbir Puar states in *Terrorist Assemblages*:

The politics of recognition and incorporation entail that certain – but certainly not most – homosexual, gay, and queer bodies may be the temporary recipients of the 'measures of benevolence' that are afforded by liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and diversity. (xii)

Liberal society allows the inclusion of *deviants* but not *deviance* as "multicultural tolerance and diversity" create acceptance of gay and lesbian subjects but only those who have been normalized. Furthermore, "[t]his benevolence toward sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity" (Puar xii). Thus a homonormative form of liberalism incorporates

certain gays and lesbians by requiring the adherence to certain normative behaviors and by projecting deviance elsewhere.

In regard to the figure of the lesbian mother, if lesbians become intelligible as women only through the act of mothering, the exclusivity of “womanhood” remains. Lewin says,

While the category of ‘woman’ thus expands, the definitions associated with it do not. ‘Women’ are still mothers, (or potential mothers). Non-mothers are still not quite women, though heterosexual women without children are more easily perceived as on the way to becoming mothers. (Lewin 191)

Does the expansion of the category of womanhood to include lesbian mothers contest the normative grounding of gender in reproduction, or, as Duggan warns, does it “uphold and sustain” it, constituting an instance of homonormativity?

While feminist scholars like Laura Mamo recognize the dangers of falling back on dominant tropes of family and femininity, she and others see agency in the identity as “woman,” and the possibility of lesbian motherhood to queer reproduction. Mamo says, “the lesbian body is transformed: no longer ‘not a woman,’ instead a woman with agency – ready, willing, and able to use cultural constructions of womanhood for her own purposes” (Mamo 232). But what form does this agency take? Circumscribed already by its exclusivity as only available to “women” and thus women who mother, what *are* the “cultural constructions of womanhood” that may be used “for her own purposes” and in what ways are they limiting as well as enabling? I will return more directly to discussing agency and empowerment of those claiming identity as “women” by becoming mothers at the end of this chapter.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to illuminating the components of the family that have *not*, in Mamo's words, "undergone substantial cultural reworking" and the implication that motherhood is still naturalized, not queered (5). Mamo's argument that reproduction "is today finally queered" rests on shaky ground (5). If "recasting the meaning of reproduction" occurs because the borders of the normal are made "far more porous and opaque," ultimately the border itself has not been *shifted*, never mind destroyed (Mamo 5). The "porous" border of normative reproduction allows in those it formerly excluded, but that does not in and of itself warrant a complete redefinition of reproduction. As I argue, if those included in motherhood simply perform a form of normative gender grounded not in sexuality, but in family and sacrifice, no radical transformation has occurred. We must remember, that "good" subjects are disciplined ones, meaning ones that perform certain behaviors and reject others. As we saw earlier in this chapter, there are other characteristics of deviance including selfishness, narcissism, decadence, etc. that are also associated with non-procreative behavior. While Mamo argues that lesbian motherhood does not "solidify the normal," any inclusion in "the normal" necessarily displaces deviancy elsewhere. I will now turn to a reading of *The Kids Are All Right* to discuss what forms constructions of womanhood take and which behaviors must be performed and rejected for the lesbian to become intelligible as "woman" and "mother."

The Kids Are All Right: "A picture of normalcy"

Looking first at how the 2010 film *The Kids Are All Right* was received in mainstream media, I discuss how portraying a “normal” lesbian family shows the inclusion of lesbian motherhood in traditional models of reproduction. After confirming the normalcy of the lesbian family depicted onscreen, I then offer a reading of the film that illuminates the boundaries of deviance that allow certain lesbians – but as Puar cautions, “certainly not most” – to access “the normal.” contingent on their performance of gender and motherhood, one that revolves around sacrificing in the name of the children.

Directed by Lisa Cholodenko, the film stars Annette Bening and Julianne Moore as Nic and Jules, a married lesbian couple raising two children in a white middle-class household in Southern California. The comfortable if stagnant domesticity enjoyed by the family is disrupted when the two kids, Joni and Laser, get into contact with Paul, the sperm donor Nic and Jules used to start their family eighteen years previously. Putting aside their marital problems, Nic and Jules unite against the unwanted intrusion in their family bliss until Jules, unhappy and “unappreciated” at home, begins an affair with Paul that puts the bonds of the nuclear family to the test. The film resolves with a testament to the difficulties of marriage, the virtues of family love, and the successful childrearing that makes it all worth it.

Winner of a number of awards and nominated for four Oscars, including one for Best Picture, *The Kids Are All Right* was overwhelmingly lauded by mainstream media. Rottentomatoes.com recorded that out of 205 critics’ reviews, 93 percent were positive. *The Los Angeles Times* called it “[w]itty,

urbane and thoroughly entertaining” and “the sort of pleasingly grown-up fare all too rare in the mainstream daze of this very dry summer” (Sharkey). The film offered a diversion from the “mainstream daze,” but perhaps only a slight diversion. *The New York Times* applauded “its originality – the thrilling, vertiginous sense of never having seen anything quite like it before” which “arises from the particular circumstances of the family at its heart” (Scott). But while “[t]here is undeniable novelty to a movie about a lesbian couple whose two teenage children were conceived with the help of an anonymous sperm donor” they are, in fact, “a picture of normalcy” (Scott). The film succeeds in taking the traditionally “deviant” and revealing it as, in fact, entirely normal. At most, the former “deviancy” now reads as “novelty,” an innocuous badge of “difference” in a culture that distinguishes itself by its multiculturalism. *The Los Angeles Times* called it “an ode to the virtues of family, in this case a surprisingly conventional one even with its two moms, two kids and one sperm donor” (Sharkey). We are to find it surprising that such a seemingly “abnormal” family functions as a conventional one. With the history of the classification of lesbian deviancy, the inclusion in the category of “conventional” does seem remarkable. I would therefore now like to look at the markers of conventionality that label the formerly “deviant” lesbian relationship normal, namely, the embrace of gender conformity, the desexualization of woman-as-mother, the sacrifice of selfishness, and the dedication to overcoming the difficulties of familial relationships by working hard and reinvesting in the family structure.

Motherhood and Gender Conformity

When A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* described the couple as “a picture of normalcy,” he qualified it saying, “[w]hich is to say that they are loving, devoted, responsible and a bit of a mess.” As we saw in Chapter 1, the signs of proper womanhood include maturity, sacrifice and responsibility. Lewin states, “[w]hat some women achieved by becoming a mother seems to be not just adulthood and responsibility but an identity as a ‘good’ woman” (56). As an institution of virtue, motherhood becomes a question of morality. Lewin also describes motherhood “not only as a practical condition but as a moral domain, one that enables mothers of all kinds to demand public recognition and to make claims to cultural, if not material, benefits” (Lewin 10). Claiming the cultural benefit of normality, therefore, requires the proper gender performance of moral motherhood with its implied characteristics of love, devotion, responsibility, and maturity.

Nic and Jules, or “the moms,” as their children refer to them, are seemingly homogenized into an embodiment of the loving nurturing maternal woman. They enact everyday domesticity in thank-you note reminders and remarks on dinner table manners. They show motherly criticism of their son’s choice of friends (“We just feel like he’s a little untended”). And they exhibit overly affectionate feminine babying, demanding hugs and cooing, “Do you believe our baby’s 18?” complete with a chorus of “You big girl.” In short, their parenting appears perfectly normal, if sometimes comical, and resolutely maternal.

The threat to moral motherhood enters, in the film, through the figure of Paul. *The New York Times* review stated, “nothing is more disruptive to domestic order than an unattached heterosexual man” (Scott). As we first encounter him, “[e]verything about him is seductive” but soon we fear his capacity to “destabiliz[e] family life” (Sharkey; LaSalle). Where “[a]t first Paul represents endless possibility: the cool parent whom kids fantasize about, the unexpected lover who believes in you and your dreams, the latecomer who turns out to be the life of the party even as his very presence is redefining the family,” he eventually becomes the despised other to the morally superior nuclear family (Sharkey). What about the “unattached heterosexual man” is dangerous? I argue that while the film clearly makes him an embodiment of specific non-family friendly character traits, he ultimately becomes “more scapegoat than demon” (Scott). In other words, Paul is primarily constituted as a threat due to the impact of his presence on both Jules and Nic’s ability to embody the proper traits of motherhood and womanhood.

While the film opens with a depiction of both Nic and Jules as variants of maternal womanhood, what Halberstam calls the “vaguely butch” and “vaguely femme” characteristics of each, respectively, become accentuated by Paul’s arrival (“The Kids Aren’t All Right!”). Nic, who is first seen in the film as almost overly motherly – she nags her daughter Joni incessantly about writing her thank you notes until Jules convinces her to “let it go” – soon enters a “male rivalry” scenario with Paul over Jules. Nic’s behavior begins to resemble that of a stereotypically “bad” father – excessive drinking, working late and neglecting her

spouse. In turn, her “mothering” becomes overbearing, authoritarian, and the opposite of the nurturing moral mother. Complaining about her lack of independence and Nic’s strict regulations, her daughter Joni questions why Nic must “mother [her] to death.” With Nic’s apparent masculinity read as negative or at least no comparison to the “actual” male (Paul) and her position as a “good” mother compromised, she shows how even the characterization as a vague butch means condemnation for gender nonconformity. Nic is redeemed as a “good” homonormative subject, however, after she performs proper feminine emotion in her heartfelt rendition of a Joni Mitchell song and her subsequent heartbreaking discovery of Jules’s infidelity, and most concretely after she returns to her proper role as mother – the culminating moment of Jules’s apology is staged in the living room where Nic, no longer the overbearing “bad” mother, is seated watching television with her now adoring children.

Halberstam, in a reading of another portrayal of the normalization of the lesbian on screen, *The L Word*, shows the incompatibility of the figure of the butch with a proper, legible – and necessarily feminized – lesbian subject. Halberstam writes, “[w]hat *The L Word* must repudiate in order to represent *lesbian as successful* is the butch” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 95 emphasis in original). The gender non-conformity of the butch makes her a deviant “other” to a now normative feminine lesbianism: “The butch therefore gets cast as anachronistic, as the failure of femininity, as an earlier, melancholic model of queerness that has now been updated and transformed into desirable womanhood, desirable, that is, in a hetero-visual model” (95). While Halberstam

here ties the hetero-visual image of desirable womanhood to its commodification for television, she also locates the anxiety around the potential manifestation of an *un*-desirable womanhood. The butch lesbian “threatens the male viewer with the horrifying spectacle of the ‘uncastrated’ woman and challenges the straight female viewer because she refuses to participate in the conventional masquerade of hetero-femininity as weak, unskilled, and unthreatening” (95-96). Where Weston connected the image of the butch to the lack of nurturance and maternal impulse, Halberstam similarly shows the butch to figure as the antithesis of normative femininity – one that is castrated, weak, unskilled, and unthreatening. Nic, as a butch, thus fails to become properly feminine and maternal and a proper homonormative subject.

Jules, as the vaguely femme partner, becomes the “bad” mother for different reasons. Biddy Martin, who has theorized the erasure of the femme as a transgressive subject, has noted the fear that “femmeness threatened to move lesbianism in the direction of heterosexual betrayal” (110). While Jules’s femininity would appear to grant her an easier inclusion in homonormative subjecthood, her “heterosexual betrayal” precipitated by Paul marks the deviance of a form of sexual inauthenticity that is incompatible with motherhood, a subject I will take up in the next section.

For Paul, in the end, “the filmmakers forgive him even if the other characters cannot,” because he is “poignantly, even tragically unprepared for the burdens of fatherhood thrust upon him” (Scott; Bradshaw). While the film therefore does offer a critique of irresponsible masculinity that disobeys the

imperative of responsible fatherhood similar to the condemnation of the immature teen fathers on *16 and Pregnant*, it remains committed to showing the normalization of lesbian *mothers*. This is accomplished by making Paul an unnecessary addition to the normalized nuclear family. Paul is left standing outside the window gazing at the forgone domesticity he now desires with Nic's words – "You're a fucking interloper. You want a family so bad? Go out and make your own." – in his ears. While Paul may propose the toast "To an unconventional family," the film ultimately desires all the markers of conventionality including the limit of two parents per family. As Nic says, he is welcome to make his own. Though Paul cannot become a part of *this* family, the discourse of liberal inclusion invites him to embark on his own familial project. Instead, I argue, the threat of inappropriate motherhood and womanhood in Nic's butch gender non-conformity and Jules's sexual escapades form the basis for the film's moralizing slant.

Motherhood and the Desexualized Lesbian

The moralizing slant has a specific focus for mothers. Building on work by Anna Tsing, Lewin discusses how debates about proper motherhood "depend on underlying images of 'good' (that is, altruistic, not sexual) and 'bad' (that is, selfish, sexual) women and mothers" (Lewin 185). Throughout the film we see first the allure of sex and then its condemnation. The sex scene between Jules and Nic that Duggan nominated "Worst Lesbian Sex Scene in Cinema History" and Halberstam called "cringe-worthy" on the blog of the "queer word art

group,” Bully Bloggers, is contrasted with Paul’s hot, commitment-free sex scene with Tanya, the beautiful, African American hostess at his restaurant (“ONLY The Kids Are All Right”; “The Kids Aren’t Alright!”).

While adult desire soon becomes problematic when Jules begins to enjoy the same sexual freedom in a heterosexual and adulterous relationship with Paul, the comic figure of Joni’s friend Sasha reminds us, more gently, that good girls don’t get down and dirty. From the opening sequence of the film, when Sasha tells Joni that she “deserves some hot jock sausage” to which Joni responds, “Gross. That’s disgusting,” we see a certain moral coding regarding sex. Though Sasha asserts, “I’m just a normal sexual person,” her friends don’t approve her tendency to “sexualize every experience.” Joni chastises Sasha for her one sided flirtation with Paul, saying, “He’s a really good person so I’d prefer it if you didn’t taint him with your whore juice” and Joni’s friend crush Jai angrily asks, “Must you take everything beautiful and make it dirty?” While we find this a mostly endearing cover-up for the unresolved tension between Joni and Jai, there is an underlying viciousness echoed in the adult plotline where sexual desire does taint beautiful, monogamous love with its dirty, disgusting “whore juice.”

Jules’s transgression is complicated. When Jules tries to explain her motivations, saying “I needed.... I needed...” Nic interrupts with “What, to be fucked?” to which Jules responds, “No, appreciated.” After half a film, we are certainly sympathetic to Jules’s plight. Nic, the primary breadwinner, nagger, and uptight borderline alcoholic, does not come across as the perfect spouse. From

mildly condescending remarks about Jules's new "gardening" business to her inability to even execute a make-up all-about-Jules evening, Jules's unhappiness seems warranted. Yet we cannot support her attempt at escaping the confines of an unhappy domesticity due, in part, to the heterosexual nature of her affair. When Laser asks Nic and Jules why they watch gay male porn and not lesbian porn after finding a tape of theirs, Jules replies, "You would think that but usually in these movies they hire two straight women to pretend and the inauthenticity..." With the question of authentic sexuality on the line, all we can do is applaud when Jules refuses Paul's pleas to leave Nic for him, with the parting words, "I'm gay!" even if this means sending her back to a miserable family life. The choice between "authentic" love and "inauthentic" lust is clear. If Jules's affair had taken place with another lesbian, we may have been far less eager for her to return to her unhappy life at home. But having already shown the asexuality of lesbian motherhood and the seductive yet ultimately "dirty" amorality of (hetero)sex, there is no space in the film for the articulation of lesbian sexual desire. Jules cannot need "to be fucked," because sexual desire has no place in authentic womanhood. Indeed, the reclamation of Jules at the end of the film can only occur due to her desexualization – "good" mothers and "good" women do not need sex, only "appreciation."

It may seem ironic that a seemingly pro-gay film would erase the very lesbian sexuality on which it was based. Does the film, in fact, support what we might think of as "gay and lesbian" politics? While some reviewers claim that the

underlying message of *The Kids Are All Right* is “in the gentlest way possible, fiercely political” (LaSalle), *The Los Angeles Times* takes another view:

let’s start by getting past any hesitations or reservations about the lesbian household premise on which [the movie] is based. The issue of gay marriage is not what’s on the table here. At its heart, this is a movie about how families, whatever their composition, stay together, love each other through difficult times, and weather the particularly storm-tossed seas that come when the kids hit their teenage years. (Sharkey)

It is the normalcy of the family, not the deviant sexuality of the parents that the film banks on portraying. While the desired take-away point may be that lesbian families have the same problems as the rest of us, the bolstering of the nuclear family has particular meaning, precisely because of its relationship to sexuality. In discussing the use of reproductive technology by lesbian mothers, Mamo writes, “[w]hat happens to their lesbianism, their actual sexuality, and thus their subversion? Is it still the lesbian – unsexed, unwoman – who refuses the heterosexual matrix of epistemological domination, who can subvert the hierarchy of knowledge and subjectivity?” (Mamo 233) By erasing lesbian sexual desire and stressing the normalcy of lesbian motherhood, the film does not subvert the “heterosexual matrix” that bolsters the nuclear family and registers as homonormative. While the category of womanhood has been expanded, it has not been queered. Though inclusion itself is seductive, we must remind ourselves, “[w]hat is the cost of cultural intelligibility?” (Mamo 127)

Motherhood and the Sacrifice of Selfishness

One of the costs, we have seen, is sex; another is selfishness. Lewin discusses narratives of lesbian mothering that remain within a heteronormative

framework, those that are “heavily influenced by relatively conventional gender expectations centered on women’s special vocation for nurturing and altruism and men’s disinterest in parental responsibilities” (Lewin 11). Lewin here identifies the gendering of altruism – men are “naturally” selfish or become disciplined into responsible fatherhood and women are “naturally” selfless and on their way to motherhood. One of the main concerns with Paul, especially for the children, is his incentive for donating sperm. When Laser questions him, he responds, “I don’t know, I liked the idea of helping people who were in need who wanted to have kids who couldn’t” to which Laser immediately asks, “So you did it to help people?” and then presses “How much did you get paid?” Paul appears reluctant to answer and, responding to Laser’s disgruntled reaction to the fact that he was only paid sixty dollars, he says, “Well, like, it was a lot of money to me at the time and plus inflation that’s like ninety dollars today. Hey – I’m glad I did it.” Laser’s silent admonishment reveals the fear that monetization cheapens reproduction and, if one *is* going to get paid, it must be properly valued, not just done cavalierly for a pittance. The cultural narrative of parental altruism is troubled by the commodification of reproduction. While the accepted answer is the altruistic desire to “help people,” the selfish motive of making money must be countered with Paul’s newfound desire to give up his selfish bachelorhood and become family centered and therefore selfless.

The seductiveness of Paul becomes the seduction of Paul as he begins playing the role of parent and proclaims the desire to become part of the family. Wooed by the apparent stability of domesticity, Paul decides to alter his lifestyle

including giving up his relationship with Tanya. Refusing her sexual advancement, he says:

Tanya, you're so sexy and beautiful but I don't think we should do that anymore. You know, what we have is really fun and easy but I don't want to be that 50-year-old guy that's just, like, hanging out, you know. I really do want to have a family and I need to be doing that with somebody who's, like, ready to go there with me.

Assuming the type of responsibility that comes with having a family means giving up a "fun and easy" lifestyle of "just hanging out." Irresponsibility does not fit within the bounds of family. That the inclusion of Paul in the realm of responsible domesticity requires his renunciation of the "sexy and beautiful" Tanya should come as no surprise. Here the burden of sexual deviance shifts from the irresponsible bachelor to the hypersexualized black woman as "other" to the discourse of white, middle-class domesticity.

As we saw in the first chapter in the case of the foregone careers of the teen mothers, female ambition in the workplace also becomes a site of sacrifice in the turn toward motherhood. In the film, this comes to light in regard to the marital difficulties between Jules and Nic on the subject of Jules's failed career. Jules, unhappy with Nic, calls her out for being unsupportive of not only her current foray into landscaping, but her past career aspirations. She accuses, "You wanted a wife. You wanted me home taking care of the kids." The sting of this remark rests in its reference to the heterosexual matrix of male dominance/feminine submission presumably overcome in a lesbian relationship that is stereotypically seen as "same-same" or free of gendered difference. It is important to note that this moment comes during the phase where Nic is

presented as butch. Nic, as aspiring father *must* have a “wife” at home taking care of the kids. Since ultimately we are meant to esteem Nic as a mother but not as a “false” fathering butch, the film comes down on the side against the heterosexual gender model of unequal sacrifice. I will stipulate, however, that this is not an argument against sacrifice itself or even of its specific relationship to mothering. Instead, as I discuss in the next section, the film reinscribes the dominant narrative that families require sacrifice and hard work. While the normalization of lesbian motherhood need not follow the passé 1950s-esque “ideal” of a sexual division of labor – perhaps it is even prohibited from doing so as lesbians lack the constructed sexual difference upon which this division is predicated – becoming a homonormative family requires the sacrifice of selfishness. This includes disavowing non-altruistic reasons for entering parenthood, an irresponsible “fun and easy” lifestyle, and sexual pleasure. If the pursuit of a career is not immediately associated with “selfishness,” the responsible shared-parenting model requires a dedication to work and sacrifice that instead of attaching to “fatherhood” becomes a form of “mothering for all,” solidifying the construction of womanhood as inherently nurturing and selfless.

Motherhood and Working (on the Self) in the Name of Family

The Kids Are All Right ultimately becomes a film that promotes family as the social norm. The primary conflicts occur when various members of the family are seduced by non-family-oriented lifestyles including sexual pleasure and irresponsibility. The story is structured as first the seduction, then the fall,

and finally the redemption of the three adults or parent-figures. Jules, the clearest example, is seduced by the allure of sexual pleasure outside of marriage, succumbs, and then repents, returning to the family in disgrace. Paul, the figure of seduction, represents the fallen from the very beginning but becomes redeemed by his renunciation of irresponsibility and casual sex in an attempt to create a family. Nic portrays a more covert seduction/redemption in the form of gender nonconformity; she is seduced into performing non-normative female masculinity but eventually returns to proper femininity in the form of motherhood. The film thus reminds us that “the norm” is not achieved easily. To be “good” mothers or create a “good” family requires the constant work of self-improvement and self-care.

This is most clearly articulated in Jules’s soliloquy near the end of the film. Approaching her happy family seated on the couch watching television together, Jules delivers her apology:

Bottom line is, marriage is hard. It’s really fucking hard. Just two people, slogging through the shit, year after year, getting older, changing. It’s a fucking marathon, okay? Just sometimes, you’re together so long, you stop seeing the other person, just see weird projections of your own junk. Instead of, instead of talking to each other you go off the rails and act grubby and make stupid choices, which is what I did and I feel sick about it because I love you guys and I love your mom and that’s the truth. Sometimes you hurt the ones you love the most and I don’t know why.

Marriage, motherhood, and holding together a family are “really fucking hard.”

While sometimes the temptation to stop “slogging through the shit” causes one to “act grubby” or “make stupid choices,” ultimately there is no option other than to keep going in the “fucking marathon” because familial love makes it all worth it. The “normal” family is an imperfect one, but remains intelligible as long as it

keeps striving, constantly looking to improve and refusing to give up no matter how difficult the project may become. Because this normalization of work and sacrifice in the name of the family remains so entrenched, the possibility of articulating a refusal to “slog through the shit” any longer becomes unthinkable. Jules’s reasoning, “because I love you guys and I love your mom” brings in the unarguable dedication to preserving familial relationships, negating any alternative to the work-sacrifice model of family.

Jules’s narrative exemplifies how the depiction of motherhood as a loving bond between mother and child erases or justifies the “hard work” component of raising children. Lewin discusses how narratives of mothering may glorify motherhood when the importance of the self is replaced by the importance of the children: “Nothing else seems as important as one’s children, and women paradoxically resent the tyranny of motherhood at the same time that they derive value from their experience of it” (Lewin 116). Motherhood exceeds its oppressive quality when life becomes lived for the children. According to Lewin, “having children has the added benefit of connecting lesbians and other women to forces of ‘good’ in the world, of allowing them to participate in the creativity of childhood, and to be altruistic” thus “[t]he intensity of their feelings makes the experience of motherhood meaningful, rather than just burdensome” (Lewin 114). Instead of “just burdensome” or “tyrannical,” the labor of motherhood becomes not labor at all; it becomes labor one enjoys. This rewriting of labor and leisure and embrace of productivity begins to read as a project of neoliberal self-governance, one in which subjects “work all by themselves.” In addition, the

meaningfulness in motherhood once again returns to a form of romanticized domesticity and “true” womanhood. “True” women wish to be forces of “good” and are child-centered and altruistic. If “motherhood provides the occasion for a woman to declare her commitment to a kind of authenticity, a naturalness,” the labors of love are erased (Lewin 57).

The essentialist turn to the “naturalness” in the identity of the mother, that a mother “is” a certain type of being and therefore must act in certain ways that are “good,” altruistic, etc. has been a point of critique for feminist scholars. Instead of attributing these characteristics to a “natural” woman-ness, Mamo and Maureen Sullivan are quick to distance themselves from biological essentialism by valuing the qualities of motherhood as qualities in and of themselves. Sullivan writes in *The Family of Woman: Lesbian Mothers, Their Children, and the Undoing of Gender*:

it is not given in nature or in some primary, socially acquired gender identity that women *as* women will automatically or necessarily mother, nurture, or support loved ones who do. Rather, mothering and gender are reproduced (or not) in a particular interpersonal and sociohistorical context. (61)

Instead of being tied biologically to the reproductive body of woman, the virtues of the labor of motherhood come from learned behavior, making the need to emphasize their social value all the more urgent a project.

In addition, by turning the focus away from innate ability, for these writers the agency of women to mother becomes the locus of motherhood’s political potential. Mamo, seeing reproductive technologies as enabling those formerly excluded into the cult of womanhood, finds the abilities of lesbians to

rewrite (or perhaps only appropriate) narratives of reproduction a form of “self-empowerment”:

Self-empowerment offers an image of womanhood that is about possibility, limitless potential, and the promise of control over the future. Embedded in the concept of self-empowerment is the sense that a life of motherhood (and careerism) is within reach of women who learn the skills, navigate the system, and/or have the characteristics necessary for continual self-invention. (Mamo 230)

While again we see that motherhood is not necessarily incompatible with “careerism,” the establishment of family as a realm of work and sacrifice and motherhood as a mode of nurturing and altruism makes the “self-empowerment” of women contingent on following a specific rubric for “mothering.” Furthermore, we must remember that those women “self-empowered” in Mamo’s reading are only those capable of learning certain skills or able to self-invent. What women have access to reproductive technology? What forms of class or racial bias exist in the assumption that reproductive technologies are necessarily empowering? How does “self-empowerment” through reproductive technology intersect with neoliberal governmentality and “technologies of the self”? These questions become the focus of the next chapter. For now, I would like to call attention to Mamo’s reading of self-empowering motherhood “that is about possibility, limitless potential, and the promise of control over the future” (230). What is the source of this possibility, potential, and “control over the future”?

Making Mothers, Making Children: Structuring “Empowerment” Through Dependence

In the discourse of “self-empowerment” it is absolutely crucial to examine the conditions of becoming “empowered.” I have shown that the glorification of motherhood, instead of simply offering an empowering mode of womanhood, serves to erase the labor aspect of mothering by construing it as either an inherent feminine trait or a (still gendered) characteristic one should aspire to enact. In addition, holding “motherhood” as the standard of “good” parenting in general and “good” womanhood in particular ultimately disciplines those women who fall outside of the purviews of “good,” altruistic, and sacrificial constructions of femininity. The underlying component to the identity of motherhood, however, often becomes obscured, namely, its relationship to children. While lesbian motherhood may seek to queer reproduction by rejecting the gendered inequality of a heterosexual model of family, we must keep in mind that motherhood exists always in relation to a separate hierarchy of power, that of parent and child.

In her 1980 article “Maternal Thinking,” Sara Ruddick states, “[l]oving, competent, and appreciated, a mother need not experience her work as oppressive. When their children flourish, mothers have a sense of well-being” (Ruddick 344). The self-empowerment that women feel from the “control over the future” mentioned by Mamo has much to do with their children’s performance: *children* are the source of value in motherhood. Thus, if children “flourish,” motherhood is validated, if they do not, motherhood not only loses the

ability to empower, but, by Ruddick's own account, becomes "oppressive." The reliance of "proper" motherhood on the existence of "proper" children necessitates the creation of a narrative of the empowered mother and the dependent child. The figure of the child serves as the base for which the narrative of empowering motherhood unfolds.

Both the film and the narratives of motherhood discussed by feminist scholars in this chapter proclaim the necessity of motherhood in the name of the children. Mamo and Sullivan, focusing exclusively on the ways in which lesbian families trouble gendered power structures between men and women, leave out the way women's empowerment through motherhood requires the existence of a grateful, dependent child. Mamo lauds the lesbian family as a queer and "postmodern family form" because "[s]uch a reconfiguration of family destabilizes gendered power in its queering of masculine domination" (Mamo 123). Similarly, Sullivan asserts:

Theoretically, then, if two parents within a family are of the same gender, the power exercised relationally between them will not be attached to gender: that is, it will not be the expression of power immanent to the social construct of sexual distinction. (Sullivan 8)

If the entirety of gender norms in the family relied on the presence of both a man and woman, lesbian motherhood could potentially "queer" the family. As we have seen, however, the inclusion of lesbians in the category of motherhood requires certain embodiments of normative femininity. Becoming "woman" through motherhood, the normalized lesbian mother does not "undo" gender, rather she solidifies it as a category of identity. This identity remains associated with specifically gendered traits of nurturance, sacrifice, and responsibility and

rejects those considered non-family-friendly such as sexual desire, selfishness, and irresponsibility. While the “normal” family-form no longer needs to function by upholding the division of labor based on “sexual distinction,” in a family with two mothers both must remain *mothers* – still gendered and still exhibiting the proper characteristics of “mothering.” Halberstam theorizes gendered power by stating, “patriarchal power, in some sense, takes two: one to be the man and the other to reflect his being the man” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 66). While lesbian motherhood may appear to sidestep patriarchal power by ejecting the man and his reflection from the family, I argue that motherhood takes two: one to be the mother and the other (the child) to reflect her being the mother, thus reinserting patriarchal power by maintaining norms of family that hold women to specific gendered roles of motherhood.

In her conclusion, Sullivan reveals how the family depends on power inequality in its very definition. She writes, “it is the vertical intimacy between mother and child that most needs protection and preservation because it is this tie that most accurately embodies (and reveals) the fundamental basis of familial relations: dependency” (Sullivan 217). Even if lesbian families or other alternative kinship forms succeed in divorcing power from the perceived sexual distinction between men and women, power returns in the very construction of the “mother and child” relationship of dependency. This “vertical” (read: hierarchical) relationship in fact “needs protection and preservation,” advocating not the abolishment of the institution of the family but rather its

conservation. Sullivan, careful to avoid essentializing this *gendered* dependency of *mother* and child, broadens the scope of her argument:

Symbolically, the mother-child dyad represents a specific practice of social and emotional responsibility, where 'mothers' may in fact be men who wish to mother (nurture) while those women who are biological mothers but who do not or cannot mother may in fact be legally deprived of their children; the 'child' in the metaphor stands for all persons in positions of 'inevitable dependency,' including those who are ill, elderly, disabled, and of course children. (219)

Yet by making the "*mother-child dyad*" the archetypal form for dependency, Sullivan returns to a specific gendering of "mothering" or "nurturing." Furthermore, Sullivan lauds the extension of this form of "mothering" to men while deploring the prevention of mothering for those women who are "legally deprived of their children." Though Sullivan divorces "mothering" from specific biological bodies of women and men, she desires not a de-gendering of motherhood but an expansion of the availability of this feminine quality. While Sullivan also extends the category of "child" to all who are "inevitable dependents," we should consider how labeling the ill, elderly, disabled, and "of course" the child as "dependent" may preclude their own struggles for empowerment. Instead of questioning why and how these segments of society come to be thought of as dependent, Sullivan argues for the "protection and preservation" of the power structure. This discourse validates the nurturing work done by mothers, but only by relying on a categorization of others as "dependents." But what happens to motherhood when children reject the discourse that labels them as dependents?

The Kids Are All Right, though ending on a conservative note of family togetherness, shows brief recognition of the unequal power structure between mother and child that destabilizes the family. Joni, on the cusp of legal adulthood, is able to act on her brother's desire to meet their sperm donor. At first, the film seems to explain Laser's fascination with Paul through the traditional male role-model or father-son narrative as Paul allows Laser to show off his basketball skills and becomes the cooler voice of reason that shows Laser his "cool" friend is really an immature jerk. In contrast, Joni's attraction to Paul turns out to be precisely his lack of parenting ability. Paul, unlike "the moms" does not represent a repressive force for Joni and she enjoys her newfound freedom through motorcycle rides and organic gardening with Paul. Complaining to Paul about Nic, Joni says, "She treats me like I'm twelve. It's like she doesn't want to admit that I'm an adult." When Paul responds, "She's your mom, it's her job," Joni retorts, "What? Mother me to death? That's not her job." In this exchange we see the embodiment of Sullivan's dependence dyad. As Paul says, the whole purpose of motherhood requires the refusal of a child's maturity. Joni, however, rebels against this social script.

In a telling exchange between Joni and Nic after Joni drives home drunk from a party, Joni yells, "I did everything you wanted! I got all As! I got into every college I applied [to]! Now you can show everyone what a perfect lesbian family you have!" The success of the family requires good behavior on the part of the children. As Joni insinuates, performing "good" motherhood may be even more necessary for lesbians whose inclusion in familial normativity is already

tenuous. Joni's reckless behavior suggests a failure of childhood dependence and her harsh accusation exposes the selfishness of a supposedly selfless, sacrificing motherhood. If the social script of motherhood requires that mothers sacrifice for the good of the dependent children, the child's rejection of dependence devalues the selflessness of motherhood, revealing the unstable grounds of a discourse of "empowerment" that claims identity only by the sacrifice of its own self-interest.

Conclusion

As I have shown throughout this chapter, the homonormative politics of inclusion that predicates agency or empowerment on entry into categories of womanhood and motherhood is a dangerous one. While Laura Mamo sees the claiming of womanhood by lesbian mothers as a simultaneous claim of agency, this agency remains constricted by the gender norms that must be performed and upheld in order to become legible as "woman." If action is an indication of liberal subjecthood, we must remember that intelligibility as a subject requires the process of normalization which necessarily confines action to the realm of "the normal." As seen through the case of *The Kids Are All Right*, to become "a picture of normalcy" requires maintaining dominant norms of gender conformity, desexualization, the sacrifice of selfishness, and self-care in the form of working for the good of the family. Giving up the "deviant" behavior associated with those who are non-women and non-mothers becomes a legitimate sacrifice if it is done in the name of the children. Ultimately based on a

structure of dependence between mother and child where motherhood signifies the sacrifice of self-interest for the child's well being, the valuation of motherhood is nullified if the sacrifice of mothers becomes delegitimized as in the case of an unruly or ungrateful child.

Basing a feminist politics on inclusion in womanhood and motherhood that requires the renunciation of self-interest and the glorification of sacrifice is thus also dangerous. If intelligibility through motherhood requires upholding gender norms of feminine sacrifice, perhaps we should stop struggling for social intelligibility and instead consider what it would look like to claim the antisocial position of not-mother and not-woman. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the qualities of deviance projected onto gays and lesbians due to their categorization as non-procreative including narcissism, selfishness, decadence, frivolousness, cynicism, irresponsibility, promiscuity, egocentrism, non-productive leisure, and excessive consumerism. Instead of desiring inclusion into the category of normal by disavowing any desires categorized as deviant, what would a feminist politics look like that rejected the whole idea of the normal and *desired* deviance instead of displacing it? As Michael Warner argues, "heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (xvi). Homonormativity can only be countered by refusing a liberal discourse of normalization and actively imagining a necessarily and desirably deviant world.

Chapter 3:

Octomom, Cyborg Motherhood, and Irresponsible Action

“The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.”

– Donna Haraway “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”

“Octomom: A mother with 8 tentacles emerging from her vagina. Number one do-it-yourself artificial family builder ... Made pregnant via turkey baster status. Will kill you with her uterus.”

– urbandictionary.com

In 2009, 33 year-old Nadya Suleman gave birth to octuplets by means of in vitro fertilization (IVF), sparking a moral panic over the meaning of reproductive technology embodied in the new species of “Octomom.”³ In 1985, Donna Haraway published “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,”⁴ declaring a world in which the fusion of organism and machine had disrupted the boundaries of the “natural” and putting forth “an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (150; emphasis in original). With its expansion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, reproductive technology has become a site of contestation over what

³ I use the term “Octomom” in this paper as opposed to Nadya Suleman’s legal name because my analysis follows the media representation of the constructed being of “Octomom,” which is related to but not limited to the real person Nadya Suleman.

⁴ Originally published as “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” I use the version “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” published in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* in 1990.

it means to be a “cyborg” in one of the most intimate narratives of nature and gender: motherhood. Indeed, feminist debates have taken up the notions of “pleasure” and “responsibility” in questioning whether reproductive technology is a source of empowerment or whether it serves as a disciplinary mechanism of medico-patriarchal structures. The discussion around reproductive technologies occurs, however, within a society already rich in class, race, and gender-informed modes of normative motherhood.

In Chapter 1 I looked at the figure of the immature mother depicted by the reality television show *16 and Pregnant* and in Chapter 2 I took up representations of lesbian motherhood focusing on the 2010 film *The Kids Are All Right*, using both cases to explore how different constructions of womanhood and motherhood become read as “normal” and “deviant.” Situating these constructions within a liberal system of governance that functions through discipline and inclusion, I examined the processes of normalization that require certain embodiments of femininity for legibility.

In this chapter I turn to the “cyborg mother” as another formation of the “anti mother.” Through a reading of the representations of Octomom in mass media publications like tabloids and the online collectively produced “Urban Dictionary,” I will demonstrate the difficulty of her incorporation into responsible neoliberal subjecthood. Unlike the quickly matured “girls” on *16 and Pregnant* or the properly homonormative lesbians in *The Kids Are All Right*, Octomom represented a refusal of the terms of responsible motherhood and acted as a selfish woman, inciting a furious cultural backlash. I begin by

discussing how the introduction of reproductive technology into the discourse of motherhood impacts normative narratives of gender and reproduction, looking specifically at reproductive technology as a site of biopower. Furthermore, I locate in feminist critiques of reproductive technology both the return to the essentialized “natural” woman-as-mother construct and the question of agency. By discussing the possibility of agency in reproductive technology, I set up the framework for my reading of the popular discourse around Octomom, one that constructs normative and deviant motherhood in relation to liberal requirements of responsabilized freedom. By illuminating the characteristics that constitute Octomom as the paradigm of the anti-mother, I not only show the costs of claiming normative motherhood, but also question the notion of liberalized agency. Ultimately I argue for a feminist politics that takes seriously what it would mean to act *irresponsibly*, refusing both the responsibility of motherhood and the responsibility of action itself.

Understanding Reproductive Technology: Biopower, Feminism, and Agency

The advent of reproductive technologies marks a collision of new and old, the attempt to reconcile technological advancement into an existing set of meanings of reproduction and family. As Marilyn Strathern states, “[d]evelopments in reproductive medicine do not just comprise new procedures; they also embody new knowledge” (347). Far from behaving simply as a new methodology in the medical profession, reproductive technologies constitute

new ways of knowing and new discursive formations. This “new knowledge,” however, can be used in ways remarkably similar to the old. Though seemingly providing the potential for a radical interruption in the “natural” reproduction narrative, the rhetoric in which “assisted” – specifically not “artificial” – reproductive technologies is articulated proves remarkably normative. Gillian Goslinga uses the concept she terms “biological embodiment” to show the ways rigid discursive representations, when confronted with new technologies for reproduction like surrogacy, “naturalize power in such a way as to foreclose other possibilities for action” by returning to singular, biological understandings of gender and the body (124). Instead of de-essentializing reproduction, the reproductive technology script “[e]nabled by reified, privatized, and biologized notions of the body and personhood” has the ability to “strangle the existential richness and complexity of being embodied at specific intersections of historical biographies and of social geographies” (Goslinga 124). While the insertion of technology into the reproductive process potentially opens up its meaning by inviting in new reproductive actors (surrogates, doctors, donors, extended kin, etc.) to the scene, this opportunity is foreclosed when preexisting scripts of “real” mothers, “real” fathers, and “real” families “strangle” attempts to redefine reproduction. As long as it limits the way personhood and gender can be enacted to a single “acceptable” model of behavior, the discourse of reproductive technologies builds on and solidifies normative narratives of reproduction.

This reaffirmation of “normal” reproduction and biological understandings of gender and the reproductive body exemplifies Foucault’s

notion of biopower. Biopower, which operates in and through “life” by the processes of improving, enhancing, prolonging, and making more productive, stakes its claims in the reproductive body. In *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*, Jana Sawicki identifies reproductive technology as a site of biopower, where “biopower emerges as an apparently benevolent, but peculiarly invasive and effective form of social control” (67). Relying on expert knowledge, the projects of improving life operate within a framework of “good” and “bad” where “good” conveys normality and “bad” conveys abnormality. Biopower functions by subjecting individualized bodies to classification based on what experts deem “normal” and correcting or disciplining those determined “abnormal.” In the reproductive realm, the medical establishment’s dedication to cure infertility or enhance fertility thus simultaneously pathologizes and normalizes these characteristics, respectively. Taking note of the specific focus of this technology of biopower in women’s (in)fertile bodies, we should consider how “disciplinary practices represent the body as a machine. They aim to render the individual both more powerful, productive, useful *and* docile” (Sawicki 67). By casting infertility as a problem to be fixed by medical intervention, the script of reproductive technology dangerously promotes an understanding of the female body centered in its potential to reproduce. Through technology, women’s bodies are enhanced for improved *reproductive* capacity.

The functioning of reproductive technologies as disciplinary mechanisms of biopower appears troublesome, yet the traditional feminist critique of these technologies fails to offer a radical intervention in this process of governance

and instead exposes a different form of biological essentialism in its return to a natural construction of “true motherhood.” Sawicki discusses the feminist attack on reproductive technology that “laments the fragmentation of the once unified biological process of motherhood into separate functions – that is, egg donor, womb donor, and social mother – as a dangerous degradation of motherhood” (72). Mourning the loss of “authentic” motherhood implies a nostalgic return to the “real” woman, a fiction of unified wholeness based in the biologically reproductive body.

The rise of the coupling of technology with the presumably “natural” body does not necessarily require this discourse of authenticity. One could here evoke Deleuze’s theory of assemblages or simply return to Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” referenced in the introduction, which claims, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” thus “we are cyborgs” (150). Haraway departs from authenticity-oriented discourses of womanhood and motherhood, claiming a “non-naturalist mode” of theory and debunking “the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother” (150; 151). Since “[t]he cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity,” it becomes impossible to conceive of the “wholeness” of “real” womanhood if “we are cyborgs” (151). Ironically, even Haraway returns to “new kinds of unity,” in the form of a unified politics “across race, gender, and class” that can occur in the claiming of the cyborg identity (173). Instead of seeing partiality as a unifying force, I look at its potential *as* partiality and thus the potential of the cyborg to undermine the coherent subject

of motherhood. Because motherhood is viewed as an organic, natural condition of “real” women, it becomes difficult to reconcile the idea of a “cyborg mother.” As we saw earlier, the reproductive technologies discourse attempts to recreate “authentic” family roles, thus both script and critique follow the same path of constructing “authentic” motherhood. Instead of looking for possibilities created by becoming cyborgs, feminist critique that relies on recentering the natural biological reproductive body of woman remains tied to normative constructions of gender that tie together womanhood and motherhood.

Understanding reproductive technology and its critiques also requires understanding the question of agency. Sawicki exhibits concern regarding the treatment of empowerment by different modes of criticism. She states, “[w]omen are portrayed either as innocent and ignorant victims of the medical establishment or as unwitting colluders in a horrifying extension of patriarchal control over women’s bodies” (73). As either the “objects” of disciplinary power or subjects of “false consciousness” that aid and abet the degradation of motherhood, women are prevented from finding reproductive technologies empowering. As Sawicki asserts, “[l]ike the discourses and practices they criticize, radical feminist discourses often position women as passive subjects not potential activists, as causally conditioned not self-determining, as morally or politically corrupted” (86). Sawicki instead desires to give attention to the potential empowering qualities of reproductive technologies, focusing on how they “create the possibility of new sites of resistance” and the fact that “many women perceive them as enabling” (84; 85).

We should be careful, however, in structuring our analysis in binary terms of subject/object, active/passive, or agent/victim. Saba Mahmood has provided a critical intervention into feminist work by identifying how the “liberal discourse of freedom and emancipation” has been “naturalized in the scholarship on gender” (208). Mahmood’s work on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt looks at other ways of understanding agency. Specifically, she writes, “I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (203). While Mahmood shows how passivity can be a form of action in itself and suggests rethinking feminism outside of a universalized liberal doctrine of resistance, I would like to focus on how even within liberalism, the notion of agency is a limited and limiting one. Mahmood notes, “[l]iberalism’s unique contribution is to integrally link the notion of self-fulfillment with individual autonomy insofar as the process of realizing oneself comes to signify the ability to realize the desires of one’s ‘true will’” (207). Understanding agency in liberal terms means recognizing how “autonomy” becomes the marker of “self-fulfillment” or a normalized mode of being. Liberal subjects are autonomous agents with “true will.” This discourse of liberty, however, operates within a system of normalization; it is, in fact, a normalization of liberty itself. If we are to take liberalism as a mode of “governing through freedom,” we can see how action and the expression of “true will” are influenced and restricted by the conditions of liberty. As we saw in Chapter 1, reality television as a cultural technology illuminates these conditions

of liberty, constructing guidelines for living that hinge on creating responsible subjects and mature mothers. To become a subject able to act requires a certain form of subjection namely, the subjection to normalization. Thus, “[f]reedom, in a liberal sense, should thus not be equated with anarchy, but with a kind of well-regulated and ‘responsibilized’ liberty” (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 8). Subjects with the freedom to act must act responsibly. Building off the work of Mahmood and Gayatri Spivak, Judith Halberstam proposes “radical passivity,” which includes Mahmood’s notion of passivity as well as forms of masochism, as an alternative to the constricted agency of the responsibilized liberal feminist subject, one that signals “the refusal quite simply to be” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 140). Halberstam notes, “feminist theorists in general have not turned to masochism and passivity as potential alternatives to liberal formulations of womanhood” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 140). Using this framework, I consider how the condemnation of Octomom for her selfish desires leading to irresponsible action can be read against the grain, illuminating a form of agency outside of liberal conceptions of responsible subjects and limited freedoms.

My reading of the crisis around Octomom has much to do with how reproductive technologies create intersections of normative narratives of motherhood, disciplinary techniques of enhancing the *reproductivity* of the docile female body, and notions of responsibilized agency. I argue that Octomom, as represented in popular media, becomes the ultimate “anti-mother” and a failed liberal subject. By acting selfishly to seek in vitro fertilization, Octomom is shown to refuse not only the narrative of “natural” motherhood, but also the

requirements of responsible citizenship. Instead of restricting her reproductive freedom by normative qualifications of responsibility, Octomom appears to reject self-discipline and even the disciplinary aspect of the technology itself. As represented in the media, she makes her body more reproductive, certainly, but by manipulating the medical establishment for her own self-gain. While the act of becoming a mother, even through “artificial” reproductive technology, generally confirms one’s status as a woman and conveys the achievement of proper femininity, the portrayal of Octomom’s agency that defies its own terms positions her as not only not-woman and not-mother but the anti-woman and anti-mother. While having eight children at once does not appear as an obviously feminist act (especially in accordance to this project’s attempt to critically engage the constraints of motherhood), the panic induced by Octomom reveals the fissures in normative gender that ought to be taken into consideration by feminist theory. In addition, the representation of Octomom’s agency that shows her to act both within normative femininity (a responsible woman having children) and radically outside it (an irresponsible, selfish non-woman) forces a rethinking of what a refusal of the liberal definition of agency would mean. I will therefore turn to the characteristics that constitute Octomom’s deviance and the boundaries of responsible action.

The Abnormality of Octomom

Urban Dictionary is a collectively produced online source for defining slang and colloquial expressions. The tagline on the home page is “Urban

Dictionary is the dictionary *you wrote*. Define your world. 6,535,301 definitions since 1999.” Definitions are user-submitted and then voted on, each submission appearing with the number of “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” votes. The definition of “Octomom” supplied by Urban Dictionary is:

A single, unemployed, welfare recipient mother of six children who goes on to have even more fertility treatments on the government's dime and gives birth to octuplets, without any real concrete or solid plans for how she is going to be able to support herself and 14 children. (Urban Dictionary)

This is followed by other descriptions including: “Number one do-it-yourself artificial family builder,” “An everlasting single woman,” “A mother with 8 tentacles emerging from her vagina,” and “The selfish California woman who decided that being unable to properly raise and care for 6 kids wasn't enough, so she had 8 more.” The examples for using “Octomom” in a sentence include: “Many animals on the lower end of the food chain reproduce in massive amounts, like Octomom, in hopes that a precious few will survive to into adulthood” and “The State of California must lay off an additional 50 workers to pay for the new Octomom Assistance Bill.” The definitions supplied for “Octomom” all have far more “thumbs up” votes than “thumbs down.” The first definition I mention received 396 “thumbs up” to 15 “thumbs down,” for example. Though any calibration of social opinion will necessarily be flawed, Urban Dictionary’s communal definitions subjected to peer review help provide a sense of the reaction to the media blitz and constitute another representation of Octomom in popular culture.

As we can see in these collective definitions, the public's simultaneous revulsion and fascination with Octomom mark particular characteristics of deviance that in turn can allow us to understand normative constructions of motherhood. The viciousness of this public shaming shows how abnormality is seen to invite punishment. Invoking Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, I argue that these forms of punishment of Octomom are directed not at the action of committing a crime, but rather at her deviance from the norm. Regarding the punishment of the abnormal, Foucault writes, "[t]hrough this micro-economy of a perpetual penalty operates a differentiation that is not one of acts, but of individuals themselves, of their nature, their potentialities, their level or their value" (*Discipline and Punish* 181). By positioning Octomom as hybrid of human and animal (a tentacled octopus woman "low on the food chain") and of human and machine (a "do-it-yourself artificial family builder"), she defies the basic quality of normality: the quality of being human. Classified by a tabloid as "what many will see as a repugnant freak show," Octomom appears on display as the cautionary tale, illuminating the normal by flaunting deviance (Pendlebury).

If we are to take her disqualification from the category of human as more reflective than constitutive of her deviancy, we should ask what specific norms Octomom deviates from. While her defining characteristics include being single, unemployed, poor, on welfare, artificial, selfish, and irresponsible, I argue that these markers of deviance are specifically gendered. In addition, I claim that the extreme public disapproval of Octomom is related to the investment of the social in children. With women as responsible for the reproduction of society, the

policing of “bad” mothers becomes a collective task. Why exactly the child and therefore the mother are such a point of concern is a question I will return to later on, after addressing how the deviance of Octomom is constructed. As one British tabloid put it, “America is coming to terms with having its maternal dream exposed as a tawdry nightmare” (Pendlebury). What codes as normative in the “maternal dream” and what characteristics threaten to turn it into a “tawdry nightmare?”

Irresponsibility and Welfare: The Racialized Poor Single Mother

As we saw earlier, even seemingly abnormal or “artificial” reproductive technologies rely on conventional narratives of motherhood that link mothering with “natural” femininity and also coincide with the responsible embodiment of liberal subjecthood, one that focuses on making bodies more productive and women’s bodies more *reproductive*. Thus how does motherhood become abnormal and irresponsible? In this section, I examine the links between the condemnation of welfare mothers and the characteristics of deviance that became associated with Octomom.

In “The Changing Faces of Population Control,” Betsy Hartmann draws attention to the threats of overpopulation and environmental degradation that are mobilized to prevent those considered socially undesirable from reproducing, all in the name of reproductive choice. Hartmann criticizes discourses of “empowerment” that in actuality function to discipline poor women and poor women of color. She states, “[t]he power neoliberalism is

willing to give to poor women is the power to make the 'right' choices: to have fewer children, to become mini-entrepreneurs or low-wage workers, to buy more consumer goods" (264). The "choice" offered by reproductive technology is not a universal one; while wealthy, white couples find IVF treatments available and socially acceptable, poor black women are expected (or forced) to use birth control and punished for refusing it. A "governing through freedom" approach thus requires its citizens to act responsibly, though what this entails may be contingent on an individual relationship to the norm. Because of "the popular myth that high fertility rates among poor (mainly Black) women are the cause of their poverty and that welfare encourages them to overbreed," "responsibility" for lower-class women and lower-class women of color means choosing not to reproduce (Hartmann 275).

The connection between welfare and reproduction means the "deviance" of poor (black) mothers is also tied to their representation as irresponsible neoliberal subjects, those that refuse to work. Judith Goode shows how "moral judgments about poor people's work ethics and sexuality" lead to "invidious moral distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor" (66). The "deserving" poor are not only those that embrace the neoliberal workfare programs as responsible, autonomous individuals, but also those that make responsible reproductive decisions. Because of the logic that positions the "welfare queen" as the irresponsible (re)producer of her own poverty, the only way for her become a normalized, autonomous worker is to not have children.

While liberalism proclaims the freedom to choose, including the choice to reproduce, this freedom always implies responsibility based on normative assumptions of “good” and “bad” motherhood that are implicitly racialized and classed. The irresponsible welfare mother appears as the “bad” citizen and also the “bad” mother. Tracing the history of welfare and workfare in the United States and the “neoliberal shift from supporting mothers to making workers,” Goode shows how the “racially marked poor population came to be seen as increasingly different from the rest of us, not quite *of the nation*” (65). The pathological deviance of poor (black) mothers comes from their representation as nonconforming rejecters of normative white middle-class characteristics of motherhood. Goode says:

As the poor were increasingly represented in public discourse by black single mothers, they became increasingly imaged as hypersexualized, lazy, and immoral welfare cheats and denied the very virtues of motherhood which had given white women symbolic value in the reproduction of national culture. (72)

Deviant or “bad” mothers are thus characterized as “hypersexualized, lazy, and immoral,” characteristics projected onto the “deviant” bodies of poor, black, single women. The “family morality” framework instead requires women who are good mothers: married, desexualized, possessing a good work ethic, and not dependent on state funds. Goode also connects this construction of “good” (white) motherhood to the “reproduction of national culture,” showing the intimate connection of women with the reproduction of the nation and society that requires the adherence to normative embodiments of femininity in order to perpetuate the norm itself.

As shown by Hartmann and Goode, single, poor, unemployed women on welfare, especially if they are women of color, are seen as unfit mothers and thus required to make the “responsible” choice to curtail reproduction. By actively seeking out in vitro fertilization and bringing to term not one but eight children at once, Octomom appears to defy this construction of responsibility. Represented as a poor, unemployed woman on welfare, Octomom rejects the neoliberal model of autonomous individualism. Unlike the potentially redeemable successful single mother, Octomom chose to have children with no male provider *and* with no means to provide for herself and her family. Independent in the non-culturally sanctioned manner of bearing children without a spouse or the “morally critical” male role model, Octomom is depicted as refusing the “responsible” component of autonomy by becoming a “welfare mom” (Goode 80). The tabloids are quick to point out the connections between dependency, poverty, and single womanhood: “Miss Suleman is unmarried, has no partner and no apparent means of financial support. She lives in a hopelessly small house with her divorced parents, one of whom recently filed for bankruptcy” (Pendlebury). Embodying multiple characteristics of deviance, Octomom, as represented in cultural media, defies the liberal requirements for responsible action and makes the irresponsible choice to procreate.

Failures of (Self-)Discipline: The Irresponsible, Selfish Mother

Irresponsibility also becomes characterized as a personality trait stemming from psychological immaturity and manifesting in selfishness.

Following a trend of associating “madness” with deviance, specifically in the case of the “hysterical woman,” Octomom also becomes popularly diagnosed as psychologically unstable. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault’s discussion of normalization specifically uses the examples of the criminal, the madman, and the child, thus “when one wishes to individualize the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing” (193). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Octomom immediately became both neurotic and infantilized within popular discourse. The demand to know “What is her psychological profile?” points to these very questions of the presence of inner-childishness and inner-madness (Stateman). In addition, Foucault notes specific constellations of this psychologization as it relates to women and the ailment of “hysteria.” In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault discusses how “the hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” and thus gave rise to regulatory methods of “birth controls and the psychiatrization of perversions” (147). Specifically, “the Mother, with her negative image of ‘nervous woman,’ constituted the most visible form of this hysterization” (*The History of Sexuality Volume 1* 104). With motherhood tied to the reproduction of the family and society indicated by children’s health, women become targets for disciplinary

and regulatory practices that submit their psychological conditions for examination and evaluation.

In the case of Octomom, the media quickly looked to familial and psychological roots of her abnormality. “Her family says her desire for so many children may even be the result of mental illness,” reported a tabloid that also included a statement by her mother saying, “[s]he is not evil, but she is obsessed with children” (Pendlebury). Following the traditional psychological narrative, Octomom’s “mental illness” or abnormal “obsession” is shown as resulting from an abnormal family and immature growth. Octomom becomes an intelligible subject by appealing to these dominant narratives on television. Reportedly, “Suleman explained to Winfrey that she was ‘caught-up in a childish desire to have more children’ to compensate for being an only child. She was using the children to ‘fill a void’” (*Radar*). The “abnormal” desire for children comes from the fact that “she had grown up an only child in a dysfunctional family” (Stateman). Defying the normative trajectory of maturation, Octomom becomes the child and the madwoman, a deviant subject, and an unfit mother.

Octomom’s immaturity and irresponsibility were represented as the basis of her selfish desire for children. Without appealing to larger narratives of religion, nature, or the miracle of life to justify her decision to undergo an unrecommended fertility treatment, Octomom became the embodiment of selfishness. In a television interview on the *Today* show, *Time* reported her saying “that it was her decision to have all the embryos implanted despite being told what the recommendations were” (Stateman). Shown to be acting against

medical expertise, Octomom's desire becomes a purely selfish one. This selfishness quickly became a source of condemnation, with tabloids announcing, "How the heartwarming tale of the U.S. octuplets became a seedy story of self-indulgence" (Pendlebury). Though Octomom attempted repentance, reportedly stating, "I never ever could have conceptualized this... due to the selfish choice I made," the irresponsible choice confirmed her deviance as a selfish woman and unfit mother (Radar).

As shown through the media, Octomom's selfish action ignored the necessary component of self-discipline in the liberal form of responsible agency. As a single, poor, unemployed woman perceived as psychologically unstable and childish, the responsible choice would be to sacrifice the selfish desire for children. Selfishness is positioned alongside irresponsibility as a deviant quality, one that has particular repercussions when associated with women. The deviant selfish woman appears in contrast to the normative selfless mother, one who assumes the responsibility of being charged with the reproduction of society. Irresponsible self-interest in women and mothers becomes a threat to social stability, thus Octomom represents the fear of disorder brought on by unchecked feminine desire. As Foucault states, "[b]ehind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of 'contagions'" and "of rebellions," showing how incidences of social deviance translate into moral panics (198). Octomom's supposed ability to manipulate reproductive technology in her own self-interest and against the interests of normative society presents the danger of rebellion and the danger of contagion.

When, as we see in the case of Octomom, the ability to self-discipline and become a responsible subject fails, institutions fulfill the roles of disciplinary practitioners, ultimately reminding us that we are still operating within a system of governance, even if its preferred method is *self*-governance. Thus, the medical establishment was also put on trial for allowing the use of its services by a woman possessing clearly deviant characteristics. Speaking of her economic situation and familial status, a tabloid declared, “Any one of these factors would surely have denied Miss Suleman fertility treatment, on ethical grounds, if not those of common sense” (Pendlebury). Since the medico-patriarchal script positions women as “docile bodies” under the control of experts, the question became for many, “How could doctors let her bring so many babies to term?” (Stateman). The doctor that provided the fertility treatment for Octomom had his license revoked in July of 2011, showing the need not only for responsible citizens, but to uphold the integrity of the institutions that ultimately become the sites of control when self-control fails (Mohajer). Arthur Caplan of the University of Pennsylvania Department of Medical Ethics made this clear in a statement regarding Octomom: “The right to reproduce isn’t unlimited. You can’t put children at risk. The field of reproductive medicine and fertility treatment has an absolute responsibility to look out for the children it is creating in new ways. And in this case it seems to have failed” (Stateman). Returning once again to the responsibility of the expert, we see how ultimately the disciplining of women, including their selfish desires, is done in the name of the children.

Responsibility to the Children

The disciplining of the selfish woman – the “bad” mother – thus has as much to do with society’s obsession with the image of the Child as with its construction of gender. The two, in fact, cannot be disentangled. In the chapter “Down with Childhood” in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Shulamith Firestone warns that “[t]he heart of woman’s oppression is her child-bearing and child-rearing role” (73). Firestone goes on to offer a compelling argument regarding the creation of a “myth of childhood” that questions the depiction of the innocent, vulnerable child, and instead argues that due to physical and economic dependence, sexual, family, and educational repression, “Children ... are not freer than adults... Children are repressed at every waking minute. Childhood is hell” (101). While the aim of this project is not to provide an argument one way or another about the state of children in regard to their freedom or repression, Firestone also brings up the importance of the “myth of childhood” *for adults*. Firestone states:

It is clear that the myth of childhood happiness flourishes so wildly not because it satisfies the needs of children but because it satisfies the needs of adults. In a culture of alienated people, the belief that everyone has at least one good period in life free of care and drudgery dies hard. (93)

The “myth of childhood” is mobilized as a justification for the lives of “care and drudgery” that adults lead. In this way, we see childhood not as a knowable reality, but as a projection that functions to uphold structures of *adult* oppression and unhappiness and, I would argue, to legitimize the sacrifices of mothers.

In regard to the case of Octomom, the medical industry's "responsibility to look out for the children it is creating" brings us back to the fundamental issue of "responsible" reproduction. If children are the ultimate dependents, who should be responsible for them? Dominant discourse that constructs womanhood as motherhood and thus puts women in charge of childcare allows for the social condemnation of deviant women as irresponsible mothers – women who act in their own self-interest, not in the interest of the Child. The medical industry only takes responsibility when mothers fail at their social roles. Though one response would be to shift the burden of responsibility off women to another party, the question of how this discourse of responsibility is articulated in the first place rarely comes into play. Advocating against holding women solely responsible for raising children, Goode states, "[n]o state responsibility was acknowledged for the childcare needed to raise citizens" (81). While Good deplores the absence of the State, we can see its all too present governance in the form of the normalization of women's responsible sacrifices in the name of children. In its dedication to self-reproduction, society must produce the "right" type of citizens and social subjects and thus becomes complicit in the disciplining of women who are held responsible for this social reproduction.

In the case of Octomom, popular opinion easily jumped to the "true" victims of the selfish-woman: the innocent children. As an author of an online parenting advice column concludes, "I shudder to think what would become of her and her 14 beautiful and vulnerable children. They already seem too close to the edge" (Andreu). Yet the question of why these children are "vulnerable" in

the first place remains unasked. Instead of thinking of the child as naturally or essentially “vulnerable,” we might question the formation of narratives that construct children as dependent. By deconstructing the discourse of children’s vulnerability we might begin to register, as Firestone does, the modes of our own oppression that become justified by this discourse. Because of the normative constructions of motherhood that require women to act responsibly and sacrifice their own self-interest in the name of their children, we can see one consequence of this narrative of responsibility and dependence: the condemnation of feminine selfishness. What would a feminist politics look like that was freed from this social responsibility to the Child?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used the role of reproductive technologies within the discourses of normative and deviant motherhood and liberal responsibility to discuss what characterizes responsible reproduction. Using the condemnation of the figure of Octomom in popular media, I traced how deviance is mapped regarding race, class, marital status, employment, psychological condition, and selfishness and used to classify “good” and “bad” mothers. By connecting this categorization to the requirements for autonomous liberal subjecthood, I showed how action, including the act of reproducing, must be seen as responsible. Octomom, represented as an embodiment of the characteristics of deviance that exclude her from responsible reproduction, appeared to defy these

requirements in an irresponsible act of selfishness, provoking a panicked public backlash.

Other than aiding our understanding of what constitutes “good” and “bad” womanhood and motherhood, what does reading of the representation of Octomom’s action tell us? By circumventing both the liberal logic of self-discipline and the disciplinary technologies of the medical institution, the socially condemned figure of Octomom shows us a form of action not accounted for in liberal notions of agency and autonomous subjects. While Octomom becomes a mother, the embodiment of normative femininity, her portrayal as the “anti-mother” also constitutes a form of unbecoming. As we see in her condemnation in popular media, this site of unbecoming is not an easy one to inhabit. Using Halberstam’s term “radical passivity,” we can think Octomom’s “passive” embodiment of gender norms in terms of her active pursuit of self-interest that defies them. While Octomom, as depicted through the media, subjected her body to the painful process of rendering it more reproductive by undergoing fertility treatments and carrying eight babies to term, the docility of this body is troubled by her selfish desire to have children, that is not a responsible desire to become a “good” mother, but a childish one that is deemed psychologically abnormal. Perhaps we are witnessing a form of masochism that conceives of action against its liberal definition as autonomy, liberty, and self-fulfillment. What would a type of feminism look like that refused the language of liberal responsible agency? Instead of basing itself in the “natural” body of reproduction, or the agential female subject, this feminism could take refuge in

the fragmented, incoherent cyborg, one that acts against the definition of action,
one that acts out, and one that acts irresponsibly.

Conclusion:

(No) Future Feminism: Queer Temporalities and the Politics of Now

“Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death, the embrace of a late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility.”

– Judith Halberstam⁵

“We’re never at one with our queerness; neither its time nor its subject is ours. But to try to think that tension, to try to resist the refuge of the ‘good,’ to try to move ... into the space where ‘we’ are not: that is a project whose time never comes and therefore is always now.”

– Lee Edelman⁶

“...as scholars always do –both traffic in the wayward temporalities of the written word, which may reach a destination or not, but does not usually reach the one expected.”

– Elizabeth Freeman “Introduction” to *GLQ*
“Special Issue: Queer Temporalities”

To conclude, I would like to discuss what a critique of liberalism means for feminist politics. As I have shown, a liberal politics of inclusion offers a seductive form of governance. No longer operating in absolutist exclusionary terms, liberalism does not cast out but invites in. Yet inclusion is contingent on disciplinary processes of normalization; claiming “everyone” means subjecting everyone to the standard of the norm. Distinctions are still made between “good” and “bad” qualities and are attached to bodies that thus become “good” and

⁵ “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion” in *GLQ* “Special Issue: Queer Temporalities”

⁶ Ibid

“bad,” but “badness” or deviance becomes not a basis for total exclusion, but instead a rationale for surveillance, correction, and rehabilitation that aim to make bodies more “docile” and more productive. Furthermore, because liberalism presents itself as rational form of governance based in individual liberty, the primary site of disciplinary power shifts from the state to the self as individualized subjects take on projects of self-care, self-improvement, and the array of “technologies of the self” that constitute self-governance in accordance to the norm. This “governing through freedom” approach of liberalism and neoliberalism make it difficult for oppositional movements who can no longer identify a single locus of power to be resisted and instead must contend with the diverse practices and technologies of normalization.

Taking the *reproductive* body as a site of normalization, my work interrogates the construction of woman-as-mother in order to demonstrate the limitations of an inclusionary model of liberalism for feminist politics. Drawing on the ways cultural media like reality television, film, and tabloids rely on and expound discourses of normativity and deviance, I explore what normalization through motherhood means for women, tracing the ways “normal” is raced, classed, sexualized, and, most centrally for my work, organized around a vision of feminine sacrifice. If being or becoming women in liberal society means always striving for “good” womanhood, one that ever displaces its own self-interest in the name of responsibility to the children, I suggest, with Halberstam, that feminism must engage the “theoretical and imaginative space that is ‘not woman’ or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women” (*The Queer Art of*

Failure 125). Furthermore, the refusal to become proper reproductive subjects of normalization has a special meaning for women who are charged, in their connection to motherhood and childcare, with the reproduction of society as a whole. Refusing the sacrifices required in becoming women and becoming mothers leads to a specifically *antisocial* feminism – one that rejects the valuing of the future over present needs, interests, and desires. Instead of responsibly sacrificing “for the good of the children” and thus becoming legible as women and as subjects of liberalism, I am proposing that feminists savor the pleasures of illegibility, embrace the irresponsibility of *not* becoming women, and begin to think what selfish desires exist outside the realm of normative feminine sacrifice. This feminism posits no “good” for the future, no “life-plan,” no lofty aspirations; it is a feminism of negativity and negation that, in its rejection of the social that ever ties women to reproduction, says “no” to the future of feminism itself.

As I hope I have made clear, this is not a postfeminist text or a call for complacency. As Halberstam warns, “[n]egativity might well constitute an antipolitics, but it should not register as apolitical” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 108). What then do we do with an antipolitics that has no future? This question I believe can be addressed by looking at the proclamation of “no future” in Lee Edelman’s antisocial polemic of queer negativity *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and examining its intersection with the recent turn in queer studies to what has been termed “queer temporality” or “queering time.”

Edelman puts forth a new vision of “queer” that accepts its projection as the death drive of the social by arguing that the image of “the Child whose innocence solicits our defense,” becomes a mechanism for maintaining the social order through a logic that ties heterosexual reproduction and the family to responsibility to “the future,” a logic he terms “heterofuturity” or “reproductive futurism” (2). As “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value,” the Child is deployed to regulate behavior and require the good liberal citizen to properly self-manage, ensuring the continuation of the liberal social order (4). Because the figure of the queer is positioned outside of heterosexual reproduction and thus outside the future of the social that is tied to the image of the Child, Edelman, through a nuanced reading of Lacan, argues for the radical acceptance of the figural position of queerness as that which is antisocial, rejects social futurity, and threatens to become the destruction of the social itself.

Edelman carefully claims this position as not outside, but within the system it has the ability to unravel:

Not that we are, or ever could be, outside the Symbolic ourselves; but we can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures – *within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality – for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for death drive it harbors within. (22)

Locating the death drive within the concept of the social, Edelman advocates not only for its powerful destructive capacity, but also for the pleasure in this destruction. Queerness and the death drive have much to do with the notion of *jouissance*, what Edelman describes as “sometimes translated as ‘enjoyment’” and “a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of

pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law” (25). By locating this self-shattering coincidence of pleasure and pain in the rupture of the social, Edelman sidesteps the need in politics to look always for a better tomorrow, reducing opposition once again to the struggle for the future.

Furthermore, Edelman claims that the logic of reproductive futurism is inescapable: no one is on the side *not* fighting for the children. Therefore, “the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought,” or rather, the political cannot conceive of the rejection of the future as the fulcrum of social existence as it would negate the continuation of the political itself (2). If the political field always functions with the conservative aims of social preservation, how do we locate the possibility for change?

Edelman thus puts forth an argument of what “queer resistance” would look like, one that defies the terms of the political as they currently exist:

Impossibly, against all reason, my project stakes its claim to the very space that ‘politics’ makes unthinkable: the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive. (3)

The “space” Edelman puts forth as that of queer resistance is therefore both apolitical and antisocial. With both “the social” and “the political” wedded to a type of conservatism that privileges heterosexuality and the reproduction of the social order through the figure of the Child, Edelman claims “queerness” as that which does not seek inclusion in the social order by adhering to its requirements of heterofuturity. Instead, “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the

children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (3 emphasis in original).

By giving up the future, Edelman does not mean to give up the fight. Rather, turning away from future utopias toward the pleasurable destruction of the social becomes the most radical fight of all: the fight for *today*. The coupling of queerness with the *jouissance* of the death drive bespeaks a serious radicalism, one that rejects the desire for inclusion in the social promised by liberalism in favor of the pleasurable renunciation of normalization and destruction of the social itself. As Edelman reminds us, inclusion only grants us freedom as long as we play by its rules. Thus, "the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself" (18). Since subjecthood confines existence to that which is recognized and normalized by liberalism and politics makes unthinkable the side that is "*not* fighting for the children," we must think of new ways to live and struggle outside of becoming subjects and outside the political goal of progress. What, then, are we left with? Edleman says:

If, however, there is *no baby* in consequence, *no future*, then blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself. (13)

What would it mean if there were *no baby* and in consequence, *no motherhood*?

What would the rejection of reproductive responsibility and neoliberal subjecthood mean for women? What if instead of striving toward the normative

femininity that sacrifices “in the name of the children,” women chose to embrace “the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments,” halting the reproduction of society, the reproduction of gender, and the reproduction of reproduction?

Halberstam has taken note of Edelman’s neglect of the gender component of heterofuturity. In her most recent book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, she writes:

Edelman always runs the risk of linking heteronormativity in some essential way to women, and perhaps unwittingly, woman becomes the site of the unqueer: she offers life, while queerness links up with the death drive; she is aligned sentimentally with the child and with ‘goodness,’ while the gay man in particular leads the way to ‘something better’ while ‘promising absolutely nothing.’ (118)

Halberstam does not disagree with Edelman’s message, however, simply with its seeming exclusivity to gay men. Instead, she argues that “the real problem ... with the antisocial turn in queer theory as exemplified by the work of Bersani, Edelman, and others” is not about “the meaning of negativity” but rather “the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity (109). Halberstam instead wishes to open up the antisocial archive seeking new voices and unbinding women from an alignment with the child and with “goodness.” She declares this project an “anti-social feminism”:

I am proposing that feminists refuse the choices as offered – freedom in liberal terms or death – in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing. This could be called an *anti-social feminism*, a form of feminism preoccupied with negativity and negation. (129)

This project situates itself in the space created by an “anti-social feminism.” By exposing the underlying reliance of liberalism on the disciplining of women’s bodies to become more reproductive, thus necessitating an embodiment of

femininity associated with self-sacrificing motherhood, I argue that a truly radical feminist politics must be both anti-liberal and anti-social. As Edelman showed, the reproduction of society is tied to the figure of the child, thus to the reproductive body of woman.

This is not a politics against the objectification of women, but against our subjectification. If inclusion in liberal subjecthood requires the renunciation of our self-interest in the name of motherhood, we should consider, rather, Edelman's provocation to occupy that place *not* colonized by liberalism and social responsibility, the figural position of deviance, the realm of nightmares and radical potential. As Halberstam notes, an antisocial feminism refuses the theory of the subject:

Ultimately we find no feminist subject but only subjects who cannot speak, who refuse to speak; subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse 'being' where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject. If we refuse to become women, we might ask, what happens to feminism? (126)

This is the question I would like to address in this conclusion through the lens of "queer temporality."

Theorizing alternative frameworks for thinking about our implication in the social and our relationship to political action that use the idea of temporal rupture, like Edelman's insistence of "no future," have become popular among queer scholars who have turned to the subject of "queer temporality" in recent years. To name only a few that I will be focusing on, these include Judith Halberstam, Heather Love, Elizabeth Freeman, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Tom Boellstorff. Though this only represents a sample of the work on queer

temporality, I have chosen to focus on those that relate directly to my project rather than to give a comprehensive overview of the field itself.

The distinguishing of “normative” and “queer” time is an especially relevant conceptual framework for my own project. Motherhood implies a specific temporal logic of its own. Using Edelman’s ideas of “reproductive futurism” and “heterofuturity,” it is easy to connect reproduction, attached to the bodies of women, to a whole schema of linear, future-oriented logics. As the “producer” of children, the woman becomes implicated in the progress of society while progress is mapped onto her own body through classifications as pre-mature, reproductively-mature, and menopausal; her life is charted by her fertility. Halberstam makes this connection in *In a Queer Time and Place*:

Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives:

The time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples. Obviously, not all people who have children keep or even are able to keep reproductive time, but many and possibly most people believe that the scheduling of repro-time is natural and desirable (5).

Halberstam here links reproductive time to normative time, stressing the social norm of a linear trajectory of maturity, marriage, and childbearing. In contrast, Halberstam provides a definition of queer temporality as specifically not related to reproduction and the family: “‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Halberstam’s work thus specifically centers on sites of production of queer time and queer space, namely, queer subcultures:

Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. (2)

Halberstam here shows that queer temporalities may play with the concept of “future” outside of normative linearity, saving the possibility for *something* besides death but refusing the heterofuturity of the reproductive narrative. I will return to what “no future” “futures” may look like later on. First I would like to offer a brief discussion of other work in the field of queer temporality to illuminate the implications of my project and the importance of antisocial feminism in general.

While Edelman remains the most vocal critic of the future, many queer scholars in working in the realm of queer temporality take the negation of the future as an opportunity to turn to the past. Heather Love declares her desires regarding queering time as separate but in conversation with Edelman’s:

I am more interested in the turn to the past than I am in the refusal of the future itself, and this puts me in a closer dialogue with critics working on shame, melancholia, depression, and pathos – the experience of failure rather than negativity itself. (23)

Love’s work specifically focuses on the impact of the past on present experience and affect. She advocates, “[r]ather than disavowing the history of marginalization and abjection, I suggest that we embrace it, exploring the ways it continues to structure queer experience in the present” (29). By refocusing on the past, Love shows a dedication to alternative constructions of time that trouble the notions of progress and future by embracing the “backwardness” that has structured queer experience. Love positions the difficulty in reconciling

linear narratives of time in which “[q]ueers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past?” (27). She ultimately concludes that “[c]ontemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of ‘looking forward’ while we are ‘feeling backward’” (27). The trouble with using normative constructions of time to understand queer experiences comes from the separation of past, present, and future and the seeming one-way street of progression.

While Love troubles the notion of linear, future-oriented narratives, she does not completely dismiss political hope or futurity. Her main claim is to an incorporation of the past, not a complete denial of the future, thus she states, “[a]lthough we cannot do away with the notion of progress, I want to attend more closely to what remains unthought in the turn toward the future” (28). Progress only becomes problematic when it does not take account of the past. Indeed, unlike Edelman, Love remains committed to the ideals of progress, future, and optimism stating, “[i]t is crucial to find ways of creating and sustaining political hope. But hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future” (29). The future is mobilized to provide a justification for the turn to the past, and she ultimately concludes that, “the question that faces us is how to make a future backward enough that even the most reluctant among us might want to live there” (163). While a backward future offers an alternative temporality through which to engage politics, social change, and the desire to understand experience, it situates us once again in what Edelman cautions as a social-preserving, not social-destroying discourse of futurity.

Elizabeth Freeman also evidences a desire to take into account past and history in new formations of “queer time.” In “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” she critically engages the use of drag in queer theory to question politics that dismiss the past and promote the future. Using the work of Judith Butler, Freeman contrasts the transgressive component of drag that relies on “repetitions with a difference – iterations that are transformative and future-oriented” whereas those that incorporate elements from the past are “merely ‘citational’” and “can only thereby consolidate the authority of a fantasized original” (728). Freeman criticizes how “[t]he political result of these temporal formulations can be that whatever looks newer or more-radical-than-thou has more purchase over prior signs, and that whatever seems to generate continuity seems better left behind” (728). Instead, Freeman argues, “the genuine *past*-ness of the past” can become an “interesting threat” to the “political present” (728). Freeman is thus dedicated to alternate conception of time, one that may “articulate instead a kind of *temporal* transitivity that does not leave feminism, femininity, or other ‘anachronisms’ behind” (729). This “temporal transitivity” has radical potential for Freeman thus the project of “queering time” by thinking the past in the present is a political one.

Freeman’s interest in the past involves a recuperation of the concept of generations, but one influenced by “temporal drag.” For Freeman, the claim that “identity is always in temporal drag” allows the assertion, “perhaps the shared culture-making projects we call ‘movements’ might do well to feel the tug backwards as a potentially transformative part of movement itself” (“Packing

History, Count(er)ing Generations” 743). Thinking generationally means allowing the influence of the past to impact how we think about politics in the present. This interest in combining past and present is also evident in her recent book, *Time Binds*. In the introduction she argues against the “paranoid criticism” approach to queering that is “about having the problem solved ahead of time, about feeling more evolved than one’s context” (*Time Binds* xiii). Because the kind of radicality that requires “truly queer queers” to “be always ahead of actually existing possibilities” and thus to “dissolve forms, disintegrate identities, level taxonomies, scorn the social, and even repudiate politics altogether” becomes a form of future-oriented queer politics that has no place for the past, Freeman advocates an alternate understanding of queer temporality, one that takes note of history (*Time Binds* xiii). Freeman again turns to the past as a source of radical potential, stating, “[n]ow I think the point may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (*Time Binds* xiii). Though Freeman does not mention Edelman by name here, her work shows a clear departure from the “wing of queer theory that does privilege this kind of negating work,” namely, the negating work that remains oriented toward social destruction and thus “always ahead of actually existing social possibilities,” refusing to think the importance of the past (*Time Binds* xiii).

While queer studies scholars like Love and Freeman have sought to trouble the categorical distinctions of past, present, and future by looking at ideas of “backwardness” and “temporal drag,” it is important not to advocate

“past-ness” without complicating the interplay of past and present and simply turning to a legacy model for understanding feminist political projects. Susan Faludi, the feminist author of books such as *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, published an article in the October 2010 edition of *Harper’s Magazine* titled “American Electra: Feminism’s Ritual Matricide.” In this article, Faludi questions, “[w]hy does so much of ‘new’ feminist activism and scholarship spurn the work and ideas of the generation that came before?” Whereas both Love and Freeman look at the complex interplay of temporalities, Faludi implies a stricter adherence to the ideas of generation and inheritance. Voicing anger at the generational conflict in feminism in which younger feminists reject the legacy of those who came before in favor of commercialized “pseudo-rebellions” of “wordplay and pop-culture pastiche,” Faludi laments the matricidal impulse that kills the true mothers of feminism and replaces them with “the bountiful commercial breast, the marketplace’s simulacrum of the mother.” In this, Faludi appears to exhibit the type of “[p]ure nostalgia for another revolutionary moment” that Freeman finds “will not do” (*Time Binds* xvi). Whereas Freeman looks to a queer archive that is involved in “mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions,” Faludi dismisses the possibility of a coinciding past and present by claiming the crisis of feminism a matricidal one in which “a younger generation disavows the women’s movement as a daughter disowns her mother” (*Time Binds* xvi, Faludi). History is being mobilized for power consolidation in a way that ultimately denies the power of current

feminist projects that rely on pop-cultural archives and redefine both liberation and feminism and instead returns power to the mother.

Here we see the scorned mother of sacrifice whose anger comes from her daughters' indifference toward her past struggles. By positioning feminism within a power structure of mothers and daughters, Faludi destroys the possibility she so desires of an intergenerational coalition. As long as we remain committed to motherhood and articulate feminism as aiming "to *reproduce* itself as a strong and sturdy force," we return to a model of feminine sacrifice and resentment (Faludi, emphasis in original). Instead of shouldering the responsibility of *the* feminist movement, the "daughters" of feminism are accused of "infantile transgressiveness," living in the "ahistorical realm of the commercial" or rather "a perpetual nursery where no one has to grow up." The danger, then, of turning too quickly and too uncritically to the past is the all too easy reaffirmation of a family model of maternal sacrifice and responsibility as the cornerstones of feminist politics or a universalized feminist movement. Instead, perhaps we should turn away from an intergenerational model that glorifies feminism's "mothers" at the expense of their "daughters." We should consider a form of feminism outside of reproductive narratives of generational indebtedness and responsible futures, one in which feminists of all ages embrace "infantile transgressiveness" and consider the political potential of an irresponsible alternative, a queer temporality "where no one has to grow up."

This turn necessarily brings us to the work of Kathryn Bond Stockton on the subject of the queer child and what she calls "growing sideways." Stockton

puts forth a theory of the queerness of children, which relies on alternative conceptions of time and growth that reject linear maturity. She says:

I coin the term 'sideways growth' to refer to something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive. These I will theorize as moving suspensions and shadows of growth. (13)

Queer temporality for Stockton means thinking time outside the framework of reproduction and finding alternative modes of being and relating in the ideas of "suspension" and "sideways growth." Stockton locates this possibility in the queer child, for "[t]he child who by reigning cultural definitions can't 'grow up'" thus "grows to the side of cultural ideals" (13). Here we see the possibility of frustrating not only the normative temporal logic of linear growth or "maturing" but also the very normativity of "cultural ideals."

While my reading of Edelman suggests the impossibility of grounding feminism in the politics of futurity and the rancor of Faludi's generational model warns against turning only to the past as *the* source of transformative power, Stockton offers another direction for feminism: sideways. Rejecting reproduction as it appears in both "heterofuturity" and mother-daughter lineage does not necessarily mean stasis. Instead, Stockton saves the possibility for imagination and improvement:

As for dreams, of course, our futures grow sideways whenever they can't be envisioned *as* futures – due to forceful obstacles, forms of arrest, or our wish to be suspended in the amplitude of 'more,' as in our simply wanting more time, more leisure, more luxury, even more destruction (as odd as that may sound) – just 'more.' (52)

The desire “to be suspended in the amplitude of ‘more’” is, in my opinion, what a feminism that rejects reproduction and all its baggage would seek to articulate. If we as feminists built a politics on demanding more, not because of indebtedness to our mothers and not for our children’s futures but for ourselves in the present, we could break with the dominant narrative of normative feminine sacrifice and declare a selfish politics of feminine pleasure *now*.

My foray into the subject of “queer temporality” thus finds currency in the time of the current. The project of “queering time” intersects with my interest in conceiving of a form of feminism that places primacy on present desires, the desires that become sacrificed in discourses of feminine sacrifice. Tom Boellstorff’s article “When Marriage Falls: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time” offers an interesting counterpoint to the texts mentioned thus far and a possibility for how to conceptualize this present-oriented politics. Boellstorff accuses queer temporality scholars of ultimately remaining within a framework of “straight” time. He writes, “[t]he most fundamental and consequential limitation of conceptions (and thus practices) of queer time to date is that they share with dominant, heteronormative temporalities the assumption that time is ultimately linear,” claiming, “[t]heir intervention lies in slowing down, stopping, or reversing that linear trajectory, rather than calling it into question” (229). Theories of suspension, “no-future,” or “backwardness,” and lag and decay all alter but do not refuse linearity. Instead, Boellstorff proposes what he terms “coincidental time.” He says, “I suggest a queer time of coincidence as one possible alternative, a queer time in which time falls rather than passes, a queer

meantime that embraces contamination and imbrication” (228). I would like to focus not on the technical argument of how time “falls,” but rather on Boellstorff’s implication that multiple possibilities coincide in any given moment. The “queer meantime” awaits no apocalypse, no “cataclysm to come,” no future “moment of ‘liberation’” (232). Using Boellstorff’s idea of “copresence” allows the theorizing of a politics that take place *now*. Edelman’s conception that the queerness of the death drive is not outside of but within the Symbolic is echoed in Boellstorff’s assertion of inevitable “contamination and imbrication.” This project, which seeks to undo the logic of reproduction by rejecting sacrificial modes of femininity and argues instead, as Stockton does, for “more,” thus does not require discovering a magical “outside” to systems of normalization and liberalism. These systems afford the possibility of their very destruction; by claiming the figural position of deviance, the death drive harbored within the social, the coincidental copresence of a way to be otherwise, we may find a place for a feminist form of selfishness in the present.

While Edelman’s dedication to antisocial negativity in queerness appears at first a dead-end for politics, indeed the site of antipolitics, he accords space if not for hope, at least for possibility. For Edelman, “[s]uch queerness proposes, in place of the good, something I want to call ‘better,’ though it promises ... absolutely nothing” (5). Since Edelman refuses both the future and the constitution of negativity as a form of “good” itself, we can only take this to mean that the “better” supposes both “nothing,” meaning the destruction of the social which can make no promises but only destroy them, and the present. I propose

we think this “better” in Stockton’s terms of suspension and desire and in Boellstroff’s notion of coincidental copresence. In this time – not an apocalyptic future – and in this place, within the structures of the (neo)liberal normative social, we may suspend a coinciding present in order to articulate the better: simply a demand for “more.” Instead of giving up our self-interest, our desires, and our pleasure, against the model of maternal sacrifice that makes do with less and “saves” it for the future, we need a politics that can articulate the selfish claim for more *now*.

Throughout this project I have tried to show the costs of the discourse of liberal inclusion that holds women to the normative standard of sacrificial motherhood. In this conclusion I hope I have offered enough of an articulation of what a rejection of this discourse entails. My last thoughts return to the topic of pleasure, not only the *jouissance* of the destruction of discourse or the social, but also the pleasures of critical study in general. As long as the process of critical engagement remains a pleasurable one, we may view critique as a demand for “more” as well as an embrace of selfishness in the present. According to Elizabeth Freeman, “[t]o close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm” (*Time Binds* xvi-xvii). Critical reading and writing practices offer the potential to destabilize the norm and become pleasurable enterprises in and of themselves. When the norm implies feminine sacrifice, claiming the selfishness of a pro-pleasure politics, even in the present act of reading and writing, becomes a radical feminist statement. Ultimately, this project is not

interested in articulating a call for action in the name of the future of feminism.

Instead, I offer a politics of the present that situates feminism in the now.

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