

Beyond MILF: Exploring Sexuality and Feminism in Public Motherhood

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Abstract

At first glance, the contemporary phenomenon of MILF (standing for “Mother I’d Like to Fuck”) in both pornography and popular culture seems to stand as an antidote for the desexualization of women who become mothers. Yet a more nuanced analysis of this archetype exposes the limitations of the genre and the ways that it serves to objectify women and reify normative views of motherhood. In particular, the term is deeply raced and classed. Through an analysis of three white middle-class mothers who perform in varying sites of popular culture, the MILF trope will be explored and critiqued. The three examples include Emily Maynard, star of *The Bachelor* (2011) and *The Bachelorette* (2012); Madison Young, feminist porn star, artist, and entrepreneur; and Kendra Holliday, blogger, sex activist, and social media celebrity. The specifics of each woman’s performances of public sexy motherhood are discussed with reference to dominant discourses of motherhood and sexuality, and particularly in relation to MILF.

Résumé

Au premier coup d’œil, le phénomène contemporain de la MILF (acronyme anglais signifiant « Mother I’d Like to Fuck » ou « mère que j’aimerais baiser ») dans la pornographie et dans la culture populaire semble servir d’antidote à la déssexualisation des femmes qui deviennent mères. Pourtant, une analyse plus nuancée de cet archétype expose les limites du genre et les façons dont il sert à réduire les femmes à un simple objet et à réifier les points de vue normatifs de la maternité. Plus particulièrement, le terme est profondément lié à la

race et à la classe de la mère. Le trope MILF est exploré et critiqué par le biais d’une analyse de trois mères de race blanche et de classe moyenne qui paraissent dans différents sites de culture populaire. Les trois exemples incluent Emily Maynard, vedette des émissions *The Bachelor* (2011) et *The Bachelorette* (2012), Madison Young, vedette de films pornographiques, féministe, artiste et entrepreneure, ainsi que Kendra Holliday, blogueuse, activiste sexuelle et vedette des médias sociaux. Les détails des performances de chaque femme comme figure publique et mère sexy font l’objet de discussions en ce qui a trait aux discours dominants de maternité et de sexualité, particulièrement en relation au concept de la MILF.

Introduction

Made popular by the 1999 film *American Pie*, the acronym MILF, standing for “Mother I’d Like to Fuck,” has evolved into a complicated and contradictory term. Perceived simultaneously as porn genre and source of empowerment, this term exposes some of the tensions surrounding sexuality and motherhood and the ways that considering mothers as sexual beings can be both a provocative and risky enterprise.

MILF presents a very specific archetype of a sexualized woman. In pornographic settings, as well as in other, less sexually explicit, sites of popular culture, MILF refers to a slightly older, very polished woman who is expected to have significant sexual prowess; MILFs are almost always white and usually middle to upper class and are universally presented in heterosexual contexts. While the term has only gained currency in the last fifteen years, the archetype of the older sexual adventuress involved with a naïve young man is well established in literature, film, and theatre. Examples range from Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, written in 1786, to the 1967 film *The Graduate*, to contemporary representations on television shows such as *Desperate Housewives*. The newest iteration, however, brings a new twist: MILF focuses on the naughty older *mother*, explicitly suggesting that older women are, in part, defined by their maternal role. By coupling the archetype of the predatory older female with maternity, the contemporary MILF may be seen as a new mode of engagement with female maternal sexuality. This is an important representation given the historical and contemporary disconnect between motherhood and sexuality in both popular and scholarly realms, but it also suggests a problematic popular engagement with the intersections of motherhood, femininity, and sexuality.

At first glance, the contemporary term MILF would seem to disrupt this disconnect by suggesting that mothers do continue to have sexual desires and engage in sexual activities after bearing children. Yet as a form of reconciliation, MILF is not unproblematic. The term’s use too often denies sexual agency, positioning mothers as the recipients of sexual attention and as sexual objects, rather than as active participants. Furthermore, the term is deeply raced and classed: the synthesis of motherhood and sexuality is not equally offered to all mothers—with this blending often having dire consequences for mothers from non-normative social loca-

tions—such as young mothers, racialized mothers, and poor mothers.

The following analysis seeks to explore specific examples of mothers in popular culture who are shown at the intersections of motherhood and sexuality. I begin by looking at the ways in which maternity and sexual engagement are generally decoupled. I then explore the specific positionality of three white middle-class mothers who are presented, to varying degrees, as MILFs. I consider the privileged social location that allows these particular women to blend sexuality and motherhood, as well as the controversies and constraints that surround their public maternal sexualization. Emily Maynard, the star of TV shows *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, is first analyzed as an example of sexualized motherhood performed within normative and moralistic constraints. I then discuss feminist porn star Madison Young and the repercussions of her path toward motherhood. Finally, I examine the story of sex-positive blogger Kendra Holliday and the implications of her decision to simultaneously unmask sexuality and motherhood. Based on my analysis of these three very public stories, I consider the limits of MILF as a means of transcending the ongoing chasm between sexuality and motherhood, and the very real risks of blending motherhood and sexuality in ways that deviate from the standard social script. This standard script establishes mothers as selfless caregivers, in stark opposition to hedonistic women with voracious sexual appetites. It is the contradiction borne of the unification of these archetypes that makes MILF an important trope to explore.

Mothers and Sexuality: Feminist Scholarship, Popular Culture, and Beyond

In order to understand the impact of MILF as an archetype, it is important to contextualize motherhood and sexuality. A staple of patriarchy across many cultures and eras, the notion of women engaging in non-marital sex has been viewed as immoral at best, and illegal at worst. While ramifications varied, in British and colonial societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, some sexually active mothers were, by dint of custody removal, effectively “de-mothered” (Smart 1992, 21). Feminism’s second wave engaged with analyses of the connections between motherhood and sexuality, but did so in biologically

deterministic ways, considering the impacts of sexuality and procreation on women's oppression (Ferguson 1986, 1989; Oliver 2010). While some feminists of the second wave eagerly embraced unencumbered female sexuality, for the most part, this activism and scholarship did not focus on women in their roles as mothers, further deepening the rift between women's sexual and maternal personae.

Contemporary feminisms increasingly argue for the centrality of sexual expression—in all its variability—as an essential form of social transformation. Feminist scholarship, such as Merri Lisa Johnson's *Jane Sexes It Up* (2002) and a 2007 special issue of *Atlantis*, engage with "sexy feminisms," by viewing a flexible and open-minded sexual life as synonymous with healthy development. Despite the increasing prevalence of sex-positive feminist scholarship, contemporary feminisms have, in large part, failed to consider the implications of motherhood on sexual expression, or the material and emotional shifts in sexuality that may follow pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting. Petra Büskens suggests that, "We assume mothers are prudent, tamed creatures who selflessly and, most importantly, *platonically* love others" (2002, 35). Amid the myriad of dominant discourses of motherhood (as well as in maternal scholarship), sex-loving mamas are meant to remain silent, or worse, are thought not to exist (Friedman, Weinberg and Pines 1998). In her excellent essay, "Egg Sex," popular sex expert Susie Bright writes about her frustration in having sexuality essentially erased from her experience of pregnancy: "Steeped in a romance-novel notion of marriage, sexual advice to pregnant moms—whether revealed in print or in the strange silences at the doctor's office—gives short shrift to the dramatic changes in women's sexual physiology and desires" (2008, 103). Heidi Raykeil, author of *Confessions of a Naughty Mommy: How I Found My Lost Libido* (2006), sets up this erasure of mothers' sexuality in terms that are even more alarming when considered in relation to feminist ideals of autonomy and empowerment, in and beyond sexuality. While Raykeil praises the move toward raw truths in motherhood storytelling as exemplified through motherhood memoirs such as Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions* (1993) and collections like Ariel Gore and Bee Lavender's *Breeder: Real Life Stories from the New Generation of Mothers* (2001), she notes that sexuality remains notoriously absent. Raykeil writes,

No one ever told me that I would call my husband 'Poppy' where once I called him 'lover.' Or that soon I would find sleeping to be the most satisfying part of sleeping with him. No seasoned mom ever slipped a bottle of Probe or Liquid Silk into my baby shower basket with a little note letting me know that nursing can cause vaginal dryness. No one explained to me not to do it in front of mirrors that first year, or to avoid walking by stacks of dirty dishes on the way to the bedroom, or not to waste any time and just say, up front, 'if you touch my boobs, all bets are off' (2006, 6)

In light of the general erasure of maternal desire from both feminist and popular texts, MILF might seem to be an improvement—since this fetish/genre of sexual expression at least acknowledges that mothers do, indeed, have sex. Mothers who are presented as *femmes fatales* are at least immune from the sanitized and insipid assumptions about mothers as exclusively caregivers with no erotic engagement. Yet MILF instead seems to be evidence of what Nina K. Martin has termed the "tyranny of sexiness":

The ramifications of equating sexual power with feminist empowerment reach far beyond the issue of choice. Sexiness is not an option—it is a requirement! Mothers need to be sexy like Gwyneth Paltrow or Uma Thurman, housewives are 'desperately' sexy... (2007, 39)

Martin reminds us of the appropriation of feminist rhetoric for misogynist ends and the ways that the cultural embrace of sexuality may only be cosmetic, a light coating of raciness that does not begin to grapple with the full range of female desire. Furthermore, this sexiness comes with its own agenda—as Martin provocatively asks, "Who really benefits from more women spinning around the stripper pole?" (39).

MILF, as a raced, classed, and objectifying term, maintains the image that motherhood is generally desexualized, in its presentation of sexy mothers as distinct from other mothers. If the stereotypical definitions of mothers and motherhood excise sexuality from maternity, MILF exists in opposition to this sexual erasure, presenting mothers as possible objects of sexual desire. Yet it is precisely the positioning of MILFs as objects, rather than sexual subjects, that renders MILF so problematic. In this regard, MILF may be seen as a signifier

of a broader objectification of women in general, and mothers in particular, in that it presents female sexuality via a male gaze and does not engage with feminine or maternal desire. Ultimately, dominant discourses of both motherhood and MILF hold mothers to strong expectations. Mothers are held to many deeply contradictory standards, and the “tyranny of sexiness” detailed by Martin is a reminder that mothers must selflessly live for their children, while remaining well presented, busy, and red-hot after the babies go to sleep.

Sexy motherhood too is wrought with contradictions. In pornographic contexts, in contrast to the romanticized Hallmark presentation of motherhood, MILFs are meant to be sexually aggressive, in part because porn MILFs deploy an image of motherhood devoid of actual children. Off-screen, however, mothers may find that transgressive sexual appetites result in censure, interventions from child welfare agencies, and other significant consequences. MILFs are thus expected to be insatiable in the bedroom, but selfless mothers outside of it. MILF, in its marriage of “good” motherhood with sexual objectification, thus becomes a short hand for the only acceptable, normative way to incorporate sex into motherhood.

The three case studies under examination here suggest distinct, possible scripts for the pairing of maternity with sexuality in popular culture. Emily Maynard, Madison Young, and Kendra Holliday all inhabit and resist notions of public sexy motherhood. It is important to note that only Young, who works in the pornography industry, uses the word MILF, and that she chooses to do so ironically, reclaiming the limitations of this archetype through her own lived sexual identity as a mother. As illustrated by the first case, *The Bachelorette*'s Emily Maynard subscribes to dominant notions of the “good mother” and conforms to the objectification of sexualized motherhood that is within the scope of the MILF archetype. The two examples that follow, those of Madison Young and Kendra Holliday, move beyond MILF to suggest empowered possibilities for public maternal sexuality, while also conveying the possible risks that mothers face in maintaining sexualized identities that transgress stereotypes of “good” motherhood. The three women can thus be seen to differentially occupy, and grapple with, the constraints of MILF and sexy motherhood.

Doing MILF the Right Way: Emily Maynard

The deep ambiguity that a term like MILF betrays can be seen in the story of Emily Maynard, who rose to fame on the television show *The Bachelor*. Twenty-six-year-old Maynard attempted to find love following tragic circumstances. When she was eighteen, her fiancé was killed in an airplane crash. Within days of his death, Maynard found out she was pregnant. Years later, she sought love on the ABC show, *The Bachelor*, eventually outlasting twenty-four other women to become engaged to Brad Womack (“Episode 15.11,” *The Bachelor* 2011). After breaking her engagement with Womack, Maynard became the popular franchise's star in the spinoff series, *The Bachelorette*, in which twenty-five eligible men vied for her attention. In the final episode of the show, which aired in the summer of 2012, she became engaged after finally introducing the last lucky bachelor to her daughter, Ricki (“Episode 8.11,” *The Bachelorette* 2012) (though subsequently, this relationship, too, failed).

Maynard's role on both shows see-sawed between her portrayal as an attractive “catch” and her role as a mother. While she was consistently presented on the show as not only attractive, but explicitly sexy—through her dress, hair, and makeup, and her sexual engagement with the bachelors (especially in *The Bachelorette*)—Maynard repeatedly made it clear that her daughter was her main priority. Indeed, in one of the show's more controversial episodes, she found out that one of the bachelors referred to Ricki as “baggage” and, after confronting him, ordered him to “get the fuck out”—strong language for the star who was usually portrayed as a stereotypical Southern belle (“Episode 8.5,” *The Bachelorette* 2012). Maynard was also very careful to establish certain limits to her sexual freedom. As the show progressed, she was shown falling in love with six or seven different suitors simultaneously, but her intimate contact with the men did not go beyond passionate kissing. Indeed, in a significant deviation from the show's standard format, Maynard hesitated before taking her final three bachelors to the “fantasy suite” for the expected overnight date. About one man, she said, “I would love nothing more than to stay up with him all night and take every minute I can get with him. But...I'm a mom. It just doesn't line up with what I believe in and the example I want to set for my daughter” (“Episode 8.9,” *The Bachelorette* 2012). In the case of the

bachelor with whom she had the most chemistry, she did not even present the possibility of an overnight date, stating that she did not trust herself to “behave” around him (“Episode 8.9,” *The Bachelorette* 2012). Viewers were presented with the notion that Maynard, while sexy enough to star in this show, had no right to her own sexual desire, given her status as a mother. Within the overly deterministic and highly scripted “reality” of Reality TV, Maynard was presented as a sexy mama, but only so long as “mama” took priority over “sexy.”

Throughout these two shows, Maynard’s limited sexuality was presented as a taken-for-granted truth: “obviously” mothers should represent “good” (therefore desexualized) role models for their young daughters, and thus the audience is meant to applaud Maynard’s restraint and her strong morality. Yet the shows themselves are a puzzling choice as venues for love for someone with such convictions. Sharing one boyfriend with twenty-four other women (as on *The Bachelor*) would not generally be seen as a normative road to romance; presumably, if Maynard were to simultaneously date twenty-five men off-camera (or even kiss six or seven men off-camera, as she does on *The Bachelorette*), she would not expect to be lauded for her restraint. Furthermore, the simultaneous development of several romantic relationships with the men (who live as roommates) would seem to fly in the face of the prohibition against maternal sexuality. How, then, is Maynard able to negotiate this unusual role while maintaining the mores of good motherhood?

On the one hand, Maynard performs sacrificial mothering (O’Reilly 2004), referring to her guilt in failing to successfully provide Ricki with a father; on the other hand, she routinely leaves her daughter to date her twenty-five suitors. This represents a stark deviation from the standard motherhood script in which mothers are meant to have neither romantic nor sexual inclinations toward anyone except (and sometimes also excluding) their children’s father.

In the final analysis, however, it is Maynard’s constant affirmation that her role on the show is to provide for her poor, fatherless daughter that redeems her behaviour. As Jennifer Reich argues, “women can be both sexual beings and legal mothers so long as they are perceived as committed to their children above all else” (2002, 54). Maynard is clearly meant to be viewed as a good mother; she is seen baking cookies and attending

to her daughter’s every need whenever they appear on camera together. An extension of this maternal sacrifice is thus presented through the spectre of Maynard suffering the indignities of public dating (and presumably a limited display of sexuality as a result) in order to achieve her final starring role of perfect wife and thus, ideal mother. In this reading, normative expectations are suspended, allowing her to act simultaneously as a mother and a sexual object, because she is merely muddling through this stage in an effort to achieve her expected normative life role. If Emily Maynard is evidence of the narrow realm in which motherhood and sexuality can be paired without censure, what can be made of mothers who embrace eroticism with less caution? The perils of this intersection can be seen through the example of feminist porn star Madison Young.

Doing MILF the Wrong Way: Madison Young

If Emily Maynard presents the appropriate incarnation of MILF—the demure and tragic widow who deigns to kiss worldly bachelors only to help her little girl—then Madison Young, feminist porn star, activist, and artist, presents a completely different approach to the blending of sex and motherhood. Young is a white, educated adult film star and director. Although her life partner is male, she self-identifies as queer and has long been a queer and sex worker rights activist. She considers herself both an artist and a porn star and has always been interested in blurring the line between these two roles. She runs her own adult film company (though she often stars in films made by other companies) and runs a gallery, called *Femina Potens*, in San Francisco.

Young’s art and activism draw on what has been labeled sex-positive feminism. She encourages a wide range of sexual practices including rope bondage, discipline, submission, and other forms of power play. While Young, as a feminist bondage enthusiast, would already seem to be quite a provocative character, it was her entry into motherhood that proved to be her most controversial role. Several months after the birth of her first child, Young mounted an art show at her gallery. The show was titled *Becoming MILF* and its various component parts were about transition: the before and after of new motherhood. The exhibit included a quilt, titled the *Porn Star Panty Quilt*, which was hand sewn from underwear worn by Young throughout her pregnancy and postpartum period; these panels were interspersed with

burp cloths. At the opening of the show, Young mixed up milkshakes and added a dollop of freshly pumped breast milk to each, arguing that, “This performance uses traditional women’s work and the re-appropriation of breasts for nourishment to address our thoughts on breast-feeding” (Young 2011, n.p.). Her work disrupted the dichotomy of breasts as either sexual or nutritive (Galupo and Ayers 2002), by presenting both aspects in tandem.

The different artworks featured in this show followed in a long tradition of mother artists using various themes and techniques to consider the shifting subjectivity that follows new motherhood (Chernick and Klein 2011). For the most part, Young’s identity as an adult film star was outside of this exhibit, a postscript to her identity as artist and mother. It is perhaps surprising, then, that one particular image from the show caused such a firestorm of controversy. Young posed in a photograph based on the famous Richard Avedon photo of Marilyn Monroe in a halter-top dress. She loosely re-created the image, but added a twist; in her photo, she was breastfeeding her weeks-old infant. This image was the only piece from the show that was displayed online, and it led to a storm of hostility, controversy, and passionate debate. In considering who would respond negatively to a kinky porn star publicly displaying motherhood, there is no shortage of candidates: Focus On The Family, conservative politicians, or religious institutions, perhaps. Young’s exhibit, however, went largely unnoticed by these groups. Instead, the first real opposition to her photograph came from another porn star. As the Monroe-inspired image of Young began to circulate, it came to the attention of pseudonymous “Furry Girl,” a sex worker and sex work activist, who turned to Twitter to express her revulsion. Samples of her tweets included: “Am I the only one in the perv community who is creeped out by those who fetishize breastfeeding? Since when is an infant a sexy accessory?” (@furrygirl, 12 August 2011); and “I am so happy I don’t live in San Francisco. I would hate to have to pretend that borderline pedophilia is transgressive and revolutionary” (@furrygirl, 12 August 2011). Young tweeted back: “I know lots of queer & kinky mamas in SF and have never heard of anything like this” (@madisonyoung, 12 August 2011), to which Furry Girl replied, “That’s funny coming from a semi-pedophile like you. Infants aren’t butt plugs or a kink accessory” (@furrygirl, 12 August 2011). In

the cat-fighting, name-calling, tweeting, blogging, and tear-filled, recrimination-laden drama that ensued, the issue of the appropriateness of blending sexuality and motherhood was central to the argument. Furry Girl argued that the reason she was horrified by Young’s public breastfeeding, both in the Monroe knock-off image and at public events, was that her reputation as a porn star was so embedded in her public persona that she could not publicly appear without being sexualized, and thus, inappropriately exposing her infant. In a blog post responding to the angry defenses of Young, Furry Girl wrote: “Madison has spent her career making everything she does about sex. There’s nothing wrong with that, of course. I’m a sex-loving pornographer myself! But you can’t spend most of a decade purposefully building an environment where people come to masturbate and then feign confusion when someone like me ‘mistakes’ that environment for being *sexual*” (2011, n.p.).

It is true that the line between Young’s porn life and her art life (and perhaps her mother life as a result) are, deliberately, very blurry. Her personal website—distinct from that of her gallery, *Femina Potens*—has a giant pop-up warning, requiring the user to confirm they are above the age of eighteen before entering, and the site immediately loads very explicit sexual images. By way of a decidedly non-scientific measure, doing research in my faculty office for this paper, I closed my door and was a little nervous that I would be getting a terse phone call from computing services. It would seem, then, that Furry Girl’s major assertion—that Young is posting pictures of her infant and of breastfeeding, while being linked to “where people go to masturbate”—is true. The bigger question, however, is whether this is actually, in fact, a problem. In castigating Young, Furry Girl argued that,

The kinky and sex working parents I know create separation between their lives, they definitely don’t seek to combine them at every turn to prove how transgressive they can be. Not because my friends are prudes, but because they understand that it’s deeply *inappropriate* to mix small children and horny adults. (2011, n.p.)

Furry Girl thus deploys a rhetoric of child welfare; a rhetoric that echoes common responses to non-normative practices of motherhood. Lesbian mothers, for

example, have been threatened with the implications of denying their children a male role model and have been exposed to stigma (Arnup 1989). Single mothers have been accused of limiting their children's potential in a myriad of ways (Ajandi 2011). Disabled mothers have been viewed as ineffective caregivers and have been kept from motherhood (sometimes through involuntary sterilization) due to a discourse that views them as incompetent (Kallianes and Rubinfeld 1997). Entire generations of Indigenous children were torn from their mothers in an effort to ensure they learned the "proper" colonialist lessons (Fournier and Crey 1998). Since this rhetoric of child welfare often masks a deep distrust and a maligning of mothers and motherhood, it is important to remain suspicious when the question "what about the children?" is asked. Pro-sex mothers are no more a threat to their children than the mothers referred to above. To reject the invisibility of sex and motherhood and reclaim these connected realms, we must apply a critical feminist lens: exploring how such rhetoric often leads to behaviours that are deeply harmful to children, promoting normativity and social control over dialogue and critical thinking. A critical engagement with this rhetoric suggests that an argument for child welfare does not provide a credible rationale for the limitations placed on maternal sexuality. Parenting discourses need to move beyond an explanation of sex as solely procreative (which is, in any event, heterosexist and dismissive of families built in non-normative ways) and be explicit about discussing sex as recreational. In order to build dialogue around maternal desire that moves away from normative categories of sexual objectification, sexual desires (including those often considered "taboo") must be expressed openly. The commitment to, and consequences of, such loud, honest living can be seen in the case of Kendra Holliday.

MILF and Danger: Kendra Holliday

When self-proclaimed slut Kendra Holliday began a blog in 2006, it was, like many blogs, simply a collection of her private musings. Over time, however, Holliday began to share more and more details of her sex life and provided advice to her readers. She revealed on her site that, "always pushing the envelope, she even had an ongoing project where she slept with her readers and then posted reviews" (*The Beautiful Kind* n.d., n.p.). Like Young, Holliday is interested in sexual explora-

tion and in experimenting with transgressive sexuality. Though she has a life partner, she is polyamorous. She self-identifies as bisexual and often presents kinky sexuality that explores bondage and submission tropes on her site. Holliday, a middle-class white woman, is also the mother, with her ex-husband, of a twelve-year-old daughter. When her employers eventually linked Holliday to her then-anonymous website through cached data on her computer, she was immediately fired. After much reflection, Holliday decided that she owed it to the kinky and sex-positive community to reveal her identity and enhance her capacity to host her site as a safe space for sex-positive behaviour and community connection. On Coming Out Day in 2010, Holliday publicly revealed her identity and showed her face to her readers (Meinzer 2010). While her family and ex-partner were informed of her decision to come out and were initially positive, the backlash against Holliday alarmed her daughter's father, who then sued her for full custody.

While Holliday's website offers a range of services including certain types of intimate consulting, she does not make her living as a sex worker. That her sex life is solely recreational, however, did not protect her from censure as a mother who considers sex to be a central component of her identity. At the time of her revelation, she was simply a woman who publicly enjoyed sex, especially sex that went beyond the kind of intimacy that "nice girls" (girls who become good mothers, presumably) are expected to enjoy. Notably, it was not her fierce sexuality itself that led to her custody dispute; rather, it was the puritanical backlash that alarmed those around her into assuming she could not be a good mother. Holliday discusses how she was stripped of her role as a Girl Guides "cookie monitor" and asked to avoid her daughter's school. She notes,

People think they have to choose. If I'm going to be a volunteer at my daughter's school, I can't be this wild and crazy woman having parties.

And I argue that yes, you can be a wonderful volunteer, upstanding citizen, hold down a job AND you can go to an orgy if you want to. I think that's OK. And I think that a lot of people do it but they don't talk about it. (Holliday, *Idea City*, 2010, n.p.)

Holliday suggests here that silence and shame are the major contributing factors to the irreconcilability of

motherhood and sexuality. As a result, she lives a life of fierce honesty, but pays a high price. While Holliday has now successfully obtained joint custody of her daughter, she continues to face ongoing negative feedback from both her in-person and on-line communities about her choice to be an outspoken sex activist.

Yet for many mothers who blend sex and motherhood, the choice to live an honest and authentic life comes at an even greater cost. The anonymous author of the blog, *Because I'm a Whore*, for instance, ruminates on her life as a sex worker and mother. This Australian mother was a sex worker before having children, and briefly stopped while she was in a relationship with her children's father. After her divorce, she began sex work again. She argues that,

My kids have never suffered because of my work, to the contrary, they have a happy, healthy respectful mum who has a well-paying flexible job that allows me to be the sort of mother I always wanted to be...Once again I see other people's stigma and discrimination about sex workers as the only innate problem of my work. It all comes down to what other people think. It means I have to have conversations with my kids about being careful about who exactly they say what to and about other people's bad attitude. I might even have to teach them to lie so they can protect themselves from *your* stigma. (*Because I'm a Whore* n.d., n.p.)

This mother can only tell her story because of the anonymity of the Internet. To publicly name herself as a sex-worker and mother would, at best, result in a great deal of shame for her children, and, at worst, could potentially end with her children being removed from her care. While it is tempting to assume that the coupling of sexuality and maternity, as suggested in the contemporary MILF archetype, shows progress, we see instead a hearkening back to an era wherein maternal, non-monogamous sexuality is met with public shaming and custody disputes (Smart 1992). This is true even for women who do not undertake sex work, but who have any sexual relationships while mothering. As Jennifer Reich writes of women already engaged with the child welfare system, "A mother's willingness to forego sexual relationships with men will immeasurably influence whether or not she is able to regain custody of her children" (2002, 46). Nicola Bailey and her co-authors

further suggest that, "Motherhood is something that all women are expected to do, but only in the 'right' social, economic and sexual circumstances" (2002, 202). These limitations remind us of Merri Lisa Johnson's assertion about the difficulty of being simultaneously sexy and "good":

We live inside the contradiction of a political movement that affirms and encourages expressions of female and/or alternative sexualities, and the 'real world' of workplaces, families, and communities that continue to judge women harshly for speaking of sex, much less expressing one's 'deviant' acts and complex erotic imagination. (2002, 2)

While all women dwell inside this contradiction, the binaries of female sexuality—between "good mother" and MILF—are especially stark for mothers.

Moving beyond MILF

While the three mothers profiled here begin to fill the schism between motherhood and sexuality, there are limitations to their disruptive capacity. Maynard, Young, and Holliday are white, all are relatively class privileged, and all have, at this writing, male life partners, despite their variable sexual orientations and behaviours. These privileges allow for a coupling of sexuality and motherhood, but do so in constrained ways. Women from different social locations might need to be even more circumscribed in their capacity to blend sexuality with motherhood. What, then, can we take away from an analysis of these three women, and of the phenomenon of MILF as a whole and as a way into considering sexual mothers?

Initially, MILF would seem to be beyond rehabilitation. The popular culture version of "Mother I'd Like to Fuck" takes away maternal agency and maternal desire; rather than being a site for mothers who like to fuck, mothers get fucked in this scheme—in every sense of the word. While the MILF archetype would seem to finally enable the possibility for sexualized motherhood, it presents this possibility as a passive undertaking. Mothers who are labeled MILFs do not own their sexuality; they are owned. MILFs are no longer subjects, but are objects to be pawed at and slobbered over. As Kelly Oliver argues, "their bodies and their desires are imagined for others, for men, for the viewing audience, and not for themselves or as women them-

selves experiencing their own sexuality and desires” (2010, 765).

In this respect, Emily Maynard is the quintessential MILF: mother first, (vaguely) sexual woman second, and deeply sweet and compliant about everything except her daughter’s care. In stark contrast to Maynard, Madison Young and Kendra Holliday are unequivocal sexual actors who embrace their own sexuality and pleasure and do so despite their position as mothers; they are women who emphatically reject the supposition that motherhood supplants sexuality. In this, Young and Holliday respond to the deeply problematic undertones of MILF, which position mothers as the punchline of an unstated joke: women who are sexy *despite* being mothers, mothers who can’t be naughty. As Heidi Raykeil writes,

Naughtiness, to me, is not just about sex—although that’s certainly a big fun part of it. It’s about the little imp that sits on my shoulder and tells me to push the limits, bend the rules, take a chance. It’s the *Why not?* side of me. It’s about fun and excitement, chills and thrills, the feeling of being alive. Of course, that’s not exactly compatible with the image of mothering out there; the angel on the other shoulder, sugar and spice, everything nice, *Careful now, careful.* (2006, 4)

In their words and their actions, Young and Holliday exhort us to stop being careful. They encourage us to be willingly explicit about our sexual lives as mothers—the good, the bad, and the difficult—and about the topic of sex as well. They advocate for the need to talk explicitly about sex with children, so that sex workers do not need to hide from their own kids, or teach them to hide from the children of others. They ask that discussions of sexuality and motherhood be freely integrated and that shame be resisted and shut down. The message I take from Holliday and Young is that I need to do this research with my office door wide open, heeding Audre Lorde’s words:

Visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned;

we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. (1984, 42)

Even while advocating for fierce sexual mothers, it is also important to remain mindful that an embrace of sexuality and motherhood is not a safe choice for everyone. Indeed, as Elisa Glick articulates, any form of transgressive sexuality (including practices such as those undertaken by Young and Holliday) may be especially dangerous for people from non-normative social locations (2000, 41). In lauding Madison Young and Kendra Holliday, we must avoid a wholesale campaign toward maternal sexuality that suggests that such a shift would be equally possible for all mothers. Certainly Young and Holliday do not hold themselves up as examples for others, but instead seek to live authentic and impassioned lives for themselves. They use their privilege to open doors that may begin to shift a dialogue for all mothers but must be read within a reckoning of power and privilege that makes clear that those doors will remain firmly closed for some.

A feminist analysis of MILF must be critical of an unselfconscious display of (constrained) maternal sexuality, such as that on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. It must view Young and Holliday as activists, while simultaneously remaining mindful of the privilege and oppression that allow only some women to be fervently sexual. Feminist dialogue must recall that “an understanding of the differing contexts in which women struggle over sex, technology, culture and terminology is clearly important if we are to appreciate what is at stake in that struggle” (Attwood 2007, 244). To this end, feminist scholarship must begin to build bridges between many contemporary feminisms’ embrace of transgressive sexuality and popular culture’s insistence on motherhood as sexy. To do so would allow for a radical reclamation of MILF, or, at least, a capacity for dialogue about motherhood and sexuality. Such analysis could draw on Adrienne Rich’s groundbreaking distinction between maternal identity (and the good mothers women are expected to be) and maternal practice (the complicated mothering they undertake) (1976/1995). This reckoning could build on Marrit Ingman’s assertion that motherwork is inherently sexy. As she suggests,

I think most of us misapprehend the ‘MILF’ phenomenon. Women are said to fight to retain their sexuality after

becoming mothers, but the reality is that motherhood is sexy. You don't get babies from a cabbage patch, after all. You get them from fucking, sometimes from fucking a lot. And from then on you just get sexier. You nurture. You listen. You comfort. You develop nonverbal communication skills, and that's really hot. You hang out on the floor with toys, and that's pretty hot, too. You have personal cleaning wipes handy, and you're good at persuasion and sharing and making snacks after free play. Best of all, you become conversant in fantasy from spending your days and nights with an imaginative, random human being who believes the garbage truck is going to fly to the moon. (2006, n.p.)

Looking at maternal practice allows for a refusal to see sexuality and maternity as entirely separate realms. This may provide the antidote to MILF: a reckoning of motherhood as corporeal, physical, and sensuous work. There is a need for further scholarship that considers the implications of reconciling sex and motherhood and the role of social location in this uncomfortable dyad. Such scholarship would greatly enrich the feminist fields of both motherhood and sexuality studies and would begin to bridge the great divide between these two critical realms. Furthermore, such scholarship would assist in helping individual women begin to make sense of their own complicated relationships to motherhood and sexuality and would expose the tensions, ambiguities, and risks that come with living as both sexual and maternal creatures.

The analysis here of specific instances of public maternal sexuality provides insight into the complicated tension between sexuality and motherhood. It is tempting to read the story of motherhood and sexuality simply as a stark separation of two realms, or by contrast, to view the ascendancy of MILF (and “yummy mommy”) culture as evidence of the compatibility of motherhood and sexuality in popular culture and daily life. A more nuanced reckoning with specific performances of maternal sexuality uncovers the difficulties of either lauding the separation of the two realms or endorsing a wholesale connection between mothers and sex. Rather, an examination of some popular culture examples of motherhood and sexuality exposes the core tensions underlying the cultural understanding of motherhood today: that mothers should be empowered women and selfless caregivers simultaneously, and that women should “have it all” and give it all up in the same breath.

Furthermore, by considering the difficulties of blending motherhood and sexuality—and the inevitability of doing so for most mothers—we may see the differential implications of the myths of good motherhood (Thurer 1994). By looking at public presentations of mothers' sexualities, we might consider who is performing and what is being portrayed, as well as who is absent from the discourse.

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