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**Negotiating Lone Motherhood: Gender, Politics and
Family Values in Contemporary Popular Cinema.**

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Abstract

In 2001, four out of the five Academy Award nominations for best actress went to women who played the role of a lone mother, Juliette Binoche for *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallstrom: 2000) Julia Roberts for *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh: 2000), Laura Linney for *You Can Count on Me* (Kenneth Lonnergan: 2000) and Ellen Burstyn for *Requiem for A Dream* (Darren Aronofsky: 2000). The fact that these four films each prioritized a narrative of lone motherhood became a point of interest for cultural observers who saw the popularization of lone mother narratives as indicative of mainstream cinema's policy of inclusion and diversity and reflective of a broader political acceptance of lone motherhood. And yet, despite the phenomenal political and cultural significance of the lone mother figure, little academic attention has been paid to the cultural prioritization of this oftentimes demonized female figure. This thesis offers a critical account of the cultural investment in mainstream cinema's lone mother figure to argue that she plays a crucial role in shoring up postfeminist, neo-liberal and neo-conservative family values rhetoric in ways which highlight the exclusions on which postfeminism thrives.

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Introduction

In 2001, four out of the five Academy Award nominations for best actress went to women who played the role of a lone mother, Juliette Binoche for *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallstrom: 2000) Julia Roberts for *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh: 2000), Laura Linney for *You Can Count on Me* (Kenneth Lonnergan: 2000) and Ellen Burstyn for *Requiem for A Dream* (Darren Aronofsky: 2000). The fact that these four films each prioritized a narrative of lone motherhood became a point of interest for cultural observers who saw the popularization of lone mother narratives as indicative of mainstream cinema's policy of inclusion and diversity and reflective of a broader societal acceptance of lone motherhood. And yet, despite the emphasis on the cinematic lone mother figure in the popular media, little academic attention has been paid to cultural prioritization of this oftentimes demonized female figure. This thesis offers a critical account of the cultural investment in mainstream cinema's lone mother figure to argue that she plays a crucial role in shoring up postfeminist, neo-liberal and neo-conservative family values rhetoric in ways which highlight the exclusions on which postfeminism thrives.

In the introduction to his article 'Oh Baby!: Representations of Single Mothers in American Popular Culture', film scholar Robin Silbergleid writes, "If Hollywood is any indication, 2001 was the year of the single mom".¹ According to Silbergleid the out-of-wedlock pregnancy of celebrities such as Camryn Meinham and Calista Flockhart's adoption of a baby boy "placed single motherhood in the national spotlight" and was indicative of the public acceptance of the "new millennium family".² Film scholar Sarah MacAdam's similarly themed article 'Tracing The 'Sin' in the Single Mom' also foregrounds the cultural

¹ Robin Silbergleid. 'Oh Baby': Representations of Single Mothers in American Popular Culture'. *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*. Fall 2002. Vol.1. (Not paginated).

http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/Silbergleid.htm

² Ibid

prioritization and industrial investment in the lone mother archetype, and much like Silbergeild, she points to 2001 as the watershed year for the ‘mainstreaming’ of lone motherhood.³

While MacAdam’s article takes a brief historical overview of cinematic presentations of lone motherhood to argue that more recent incarnations of this female archetype are illustrative of an ideological shift from lone mother as victim to lone mother as heroine, Silbergeild’s article is concerned with the recent emergence of the Single Mother by Choice paradigm. This category of female reproduction and maternalism has garnered furious political debate yet Silbergeild argues that this form of lone motherhood has come to represent a distinctively positive figure in the cultural world. Highlighting the US sitcom *Friends* as an example of the cultural excitement this ‘new’ familial paradigm seemed to attract, Silbergeild suggests that the narrative of lone motherhood in the story of Rachel’s (Jennifer Aniston) illegitimate pregnancy is illustrative of the ‘mainstreaming’ of a form of female agency which has traditionally been perceived as deeply threatening to the patriarchal social order. But Silbergeild also urges a cautious approach to these texts noting that the narrative of the ‘single mother by choice’ is predominantly one of negotiation and disavowal. By analysing films that emerged in the early 2000’s which prioritized narratives of women suffering from “‘Familial Infant Envy Disorder’”—(and by that he means a pathological desire for and fetishization of husband, family and children)—Silbergeild cogently argues that the structure of the traditional narratives in which this form of maternalism was centralized makes “it impossible to envision a true alternative” to the traditional family.⁴ Instead the narrative focus of romantic failure for the female protagonist coupled with her decision to embark on single motherhood serve as the precursors to what will eventually

³ Sarah MacAdam ‘Tracing the Sin in Single mother’. <http://home.att.net/Rdfalzone/singelmom.html> (sourced 11/07/06).

⁴ Ibid

emerge as a 'fairy tale' ending where she not only achieves motherhood but also secures the romantic relationship she longed for. Rather than depicting fatherless pregnancy as the obstacle to romance, these films employ the trope of lone motherhood as a means of attracting and securing the film's love interest.

Such conspicuous disavowal of lone motherhood is illustrated in the 2007 film *Baby Mama* (Michael McCullers) in which the film's 'single mother by choice' (via surrogacy) is later rewarded with a romantic relationship. Indeed the film concludes with a heterosexual coupling for the lone mother and the surrogate mother as well as the promise of further reproduction for both women. As such, *Baby Mama* re-produces what Judith Roof might describe as a narrative "ineluctably inflected with heterosexual ideology", because as she notes, heterosexual coupling provides a "metaphorical if not literal model for the traditional narrative arc".⁵ The "interdependence of narrative and reproductive ends" ensures that *Baby Mama* closes with a re-endorsement of the hetero-normative patriarchal family (as does *Friends*). Silbergeild is correct in seeing the celluloid lone mother figure as a highly recuperative figure who serves to reinforce the ideological schema of 'family values'.⁶ Films in the tradition of *Baby Mama* not only reveal the problems in envisioning an alternative family within the traditional heterological narrative structure, they also reveal the inability of Hollywood to imagine lone motherhood as nothing more than a phase; a transient social identity that is only ever seen as positive if it enables the lone mother to secure a husband/romantic partner. In this regard, the lone mother is always depicted as lacking; a lack which serves as a negotiation and repudiation of her as a mother and as an active agent.

⁵ Judith Roff. *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Pg 59

⁶ Ibid.

Although Silbergleid's essay is highly cognisant of the ways in which cultural representations of the 'single mother by choice' are mediated through the traditional heterological narrative arc, I suggest his analysis is limited. The lone mother figure, whether characterized as a widow, a divorcee, abandoned or a woman of loose morals or, indeed, a 'single mother by choice', has long been an established figure in mainstream cinema (see *Her Defiance*: Cleo Madison 1916 for example). Furthermore her presence within mainstream cinema is trans-generic; she does not exist only within the family or maternal romance narrative—both of which are slippery categorizations at best—as Silbergleid's analysis suggests. The lone mother character is a highly significant archetype in the gangster/crime genre where, since silent cinema she has been cast to play the mother of the most villainous criminal characters (see William Wellman's *The Public Enemy*: 1931). She is cast as the figure of sexual deviancy in films such as the Australian text *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf De Heer: 1993) and Asia Argento's *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2004). The lone mother figure has been utilized in the *American Pie* trilogy (Paul Weitz: 1999, JB Rogers: 2001, Jesse Dylan: 2003) as the object of adolescent teenage male lust, and is the figure through which incestuous desire is embodied in the French film *Ma Mere* (Christophe Honore:2004) and Spanish art-house hit *All About My Mother* (Pedro Almodovar:1999). The visibility of the lone mother character in highly successful Disney films (albeit presented as animal characters) is notable. Films such *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff: 1994), *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall: 2001), and *Ice Princess* (Tim Fywell: 2005) and other highly successful animated texts such as *Toy Story* (John Lasseter: 1995, 1998) utilize the lone mother figure in stories of childhood loss and rites of passage narratives. Her presence is established in the newly emergent 'Brom Com' (a hybrid of gross out and romantic comedies concerned with male bonding) in films such as *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow: 2007) and David Wain's *Role Model* (2008). "Smart cinema", a term borrowed from film scholar

Jeffrey Sconce which describes films with a serious social and political intent, employs the lone mother character in more high-brow texts such as *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis: 2007), *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck: 2007) and *Things We Lost in The Fire* (Susanne Bier: 2007). And the lone mother character has become a fully integrated member of the ensemble cast for the ubiquitous postfeminist staple, the chick flick in films such as *Because I Said So* (Michael Lehmann: 2007), *Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers:2003), *One Fine Day* (Michael Hoffman: 1996), *Jerry Maguire* (Cameron Crowe: 1996),and *About A Boy* (Chris and Paul Weitz: 2002).⁷

The high visibility of the lone mother figure in contemporary mainstream cinema cannot be treated as a nonissue especially because the figure of the lone mother is so often at the flashpoint of political and social anxiety. Thus this thesis will ask why the lone mother has become such a popular archetype. Can we see the high visibility of the cinematic lone mother figure as indicative of a positive shift in representational practices? Are these recent configurations of motherhood reflecting a more positive attitude towards lone mothers in general? If so why? Or do the representations disguise more familiar conservative accounts? And, if new representational strategies do veil a more conservative account of lone motherhood what is the symbolic purpose of the celluloid lone mother? What forms of negotiations are at play in these films? If, as Silbergeild argues, 2001 became the watershed year for the 'mainstreaming' of lone motherhood what does this reveal about the cultural and political moment in which the narrative of the celluloid lone mother has gained such cultural currency? In adopting a critical approach to cinematic representations of and narratives about the lone mother figure I aim to present a critical theorization of the ways in which lone motherhood is both constituted and negotiated within mainstream popular cinema.

⁷ Jeffrey Sconce. 'Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film. In *Screen*, Vol.43, No.4, 2002. Pp 349-369

Theorizing Lone Motherhood

Our current ideas about lone mothers and about lone motherhood have been shaped and re-shaped through the collective actions of individuals, by institutions and in cultural movements. As such, film as an institution and a cultural movement can be seen as a meaningful cultural lens from which to view and explore the shared value systems that inform notions of and ideologies about lone motherhood. Although recent developments in media technology such as digital television, internet streaming and so on, have altered some of the ways in which we assimilate image and narrative, mainstream cinema remains a dominant product in the imaginary field of representation and as such is recognised as an established medium in which fiction does political work.⁸ However, this is not to say, in line with Pamela Church Gibson's contention that there is a "simplistic one-to-one correspondence between film and political climate".⁹ Rather, films offer at least a partial reflection of the cultural climate in which they are imagined, produced and consumed. And, because film has to actively connect with the ever shifting social, political and cultural landscape in which it is produced in order to locate its audience, the dialogic relationship between film and its broader cultural, social and political context is often complex and contradictory. It is within these tensions that a vast multiplicity of meanings are generated, providing a rich and compelling resource for textual analysis. Thus operating within a feminist framework—and by that I mean a political worldview that quite simply believes, as does Barbara Arneil, that "all schools of knowledge must be re-examined and understood to reveal the extent to which they ignore or distort gender"—I combine a textual and contextual

⁸ See Henry Giroux, 'Reclaiming the Social: Pedagogy, Resistance and Power in Celluloid Culture'. In Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins. *Film Theory Goes To the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). Toby Miller 'Cinema Doesn't Matter or I know What You Did Last Summer'. In Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo(eds) *Keyframes. Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). Pamela Church Gibson 'You've Been in My Life So Long I Can't Remember Anything Else: Into the labyrinth with Ripley and the Alien. In Tinkcom and Villarejo. Susan Faludi. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. (London: Verso, 1995) for more in-depth analyses of the relationship between politics and the cinema.

⁹ Gibson. Pg 41

film and cultural studies methodology as well as using critical discourse analysis to explore constructions of the cinematic lone mother figure and the relation between her cultural representation, systems of meanings and political and social power.¹⁰

While this methodology does not offer concrete answers to the problems inherent in discussing political and social power and its relation to cultural representational strategies it does offer the opportunity for access to the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are made about lone motherhood. By locating the origins of the discursive practices which surround the lone mother figure I will be more able to fully understand the ways in which cinematic lone motherhood is being negotiated in mainstream film. In other words, seeing how the social identity of the lone mother figure has been ‘brought into being’ highlights the discursive function of lone motherhood as a subject. The primary reason for employing a discourse analysis approach is that it has the potential to reveal how language is used in the construction and maintenance of a form of female social identity which is surrounded by ‘common-sense’ social and cultural ideologies embedded in social, political and cultural forms of communication about women. Mindful of the inconsistencies and complexities inherent in the foregrounding of discursive practices that emerges from the popular press, I argue that their relevance echoes in the catalogue of articulated shared cultural anxieties that they draw from and reflect upon. By exploring discursive strategies that surround the figure of the lone mother within the popular press, the aesthetics of the films, their narrative structures and representational practices I aim to more fully outline the ways in which the films I use employ certain discourses to mediate lone motherhood within the ideological terrain of neo-liberal and neo-conservative family values rhetoric, capitalism, gender and of postfeminist maternalism. The methodologies deployed in this thesis reflect and build upon

¹⁰ Barbara Arneil. *Politics and Feminism*. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999). Pg 4.

the work of academics such as Diane Negra whose scholarly work utilizes similar methodological practices in her consideration of the ways in which certain ‘lifestyles’ (an extraordinarily provocative term to use in relation to lone motherhood) are normalized within popular culture.

This thesis does not open with a preliminary literature review chapter rather I have chosen to include smaller reviews of the contextual literature in each chapter. I have employed this structure because each chapter’s focus is thematically divergent and draws from diverse schools of knowledge. Significantly the lack of film scholarship concerned with cinematic representations of lone mothers has forced me to look outside of the academic specificities of film studies. Thus much of the conceptual framework of this thesis emerges from scholarship that does not focus on cinematic representational strategies but rather it is informed by a combination of cross discipline academic studies which relate to the thematic concerns raised within the films. The paucity of work within film studies focusing attention on the cinematic lone mother is surprising given the amount of emergent work on media representations of lone motherhood from social sciences, political studies and cultural and media studies. This lack is especially heightened when we take into account academic emphasis on motherhood within feminist inflected film, media and cultural studies.¹¹ E.

¹¹ Although the relationship between feminism and the subject of motherhood is oftentimes contradictory and contentious it has been the focus of much feminist informed work. These include: Naomi Wolf. *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001), E Ann. Kaplan. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. (London: Routledge, 1992), Shari Turner. *Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*. (London: Penguin, 1995), Nancy Chodorow. *The Reproduction of Motherhood: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1978), Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (Eds). *Representations of Motherhood*. (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994), Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (New York: Norton, 1986), Elizabeth Bortolai Silva (Ed). *Good Enough Mothering: Feminist Perspectives on Lone Motherhood*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), Sharon Hays. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996), Janelle S. Taylor, Linda Layne and Danielle F. Wozniak (Eds). *Consuming Motherhood*. (New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2007), Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. (New York, London: Free Press, 2004), Judith Warner. *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. (London: Vermillion, 2006), Barbara Katz Rothman. *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society*. (New York: Norton, 1985).

Ann. Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* has become a seminal reference point for understanding the changing representations of the mother from the 1830s to the postmodern present. Lucy Fischer's *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood and Genre* investigates how the trope of motherhood presents itself in a wide range of film genres to show how certain genres tend to promote a particular set of social and psychological characteristics of motherhood. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Maher Kaplan seek to understand the impact of culturally constructed images of motherhood across all forms of popular culture in their book *Representations of Motherhood* and Evelyn Nakano Glen, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey incorporate the work of feminist film academics in their investigation of *Mothering, Ideology, Experience and Agency*. These texts prove useful in providing broader analysis of the relationship between film and motherhood and culture which I undertake in Chapter One. Yet, while the lone mother looms large as an abject figure in the political arena and as an aspirational figure in the cultural world, analysis of representations of the lone mother figure are seldom acknowledged within these books.

Despite the rigorous nature of Kaplan's analysis of the representation of the mother figure in *Look Who's Talking*, there is no account made of the social and political discourses that impact on the film's presentation of Mollie Ubriacco (Kirstie Alley) as an unmarried, lone mother. This is not to suggest that Kaplan is obliged to consider the lone mother figure rather, that by understanding how the lone mother figure is being constructed we will better understand some of the relations between gender, representation and social, cultural and political power that Kaplan suggests are bound up in images of the maternal. Similarly, while Lucy Fischer observes how the classic maternal themed *Mildred Pierce* has initiated much critical engagement so as to become a "cottage industry", none of the investigative

accounts of the film documented in her book explicitly acknowledge the social status of the central protagonist's role as the film's lone mother.¹² Again, this is not to suggest that Fischer's book is limited in its approach rather than by interrogating representations of the lone mother figure in greater depth a more detailed theorization of cinematic motherhood can be developed.

Thus in the following chapters I begin to explore the complex relationship between postfeminism and mainstream cinematic representations of lone mothers within broader social and political discursive practices about race, class, gender and sexuality. In order to do this I draw from cultural studies scholarship concerned with the politics of motherhood and the rhetoric of family values. Susan Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels' book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* serves as the primary reference point of the thesis. Douglas and Michaels' offer a critique of the shared cultural obsession with motherhood and demonstrate how the rhetoric of new momism has had a direct impact on policy making in the US. Angela McRobbie builds upon the observations made by Douglas and Michaels to argue that the emphasis on motherhood is directly linked to the capitalist market-place where the image of the 'yummy-mummy' has proven to be especially lucrative and particularly pernicious. The concept of 'yummy mummy-hood' creates division between women whose maternalism and consumerism enhances their cultural capital and those whose financial and relational position denies them agency. McRobbie's argument serves as the overarching theoretical conceit for this thesis as it highlights a reliance upon, and exclusion of an already disenfranchised group of women from this postfeminist, post-race, neo-liberal economy. And as Chapter Two will argue, it is the figure of the black, welfare lone mother who experiences persistent exclusion from the

¹² Lucy Fischer. *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre*. (New Jersey: Princetown University Press, 1996). Pg 7

political, economic and social sphere at the same time that she is so regularly invoked as the symbol of social and political unease.

Structuring this thesis with a chapter focused only on the black lone mother figure is deeply problematic; I could be rightly accused of continuing a process of differentiating and distancing black women from other groups of women. However I do so because the figure of the black lone mother has been consistently deployed within the cultural, social, historical and political world as a distinct female figure. And yet, just as representations of the lone mother are rarely invoked in film studies, interrogations of the ideological ramifications of a neo-conservative, postfeminist, post-race ideological environment, the celluloid black lone mother is also cast as a peripheral figure in these debates. Given her pivotal role in maintaining the hegemony of white femininity and white maternalism and her central role in the US political landscape, it would seem this is necessary work to do.

Thus alongside Ange Marie Hancock, I will maintain that the media's consistent over association of black lone motherhood with fecundity and moral decay functions to sustain hierarchical paradigms of class, race and motherhood. I use Hancock's book, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* because it so concisely demonstrates a relation between representational stereotypes in policy making. I will also be referring to race theorist such as bell hooks, Cornell West and Michelle Wallace. This chapter considers historical accounts of black motherhood and explores the ontology of the African American family to illustrate the ways in deeply problematic historical renderings of black masculinity and femininity are drawn upon to in configuring Hollywood cinema's black lone mother. This chapter raises crucial questions about the relationship between race, nation and

motherhood which I hope will be instrumental in widening the boundaries of academic interrogations of postfeminist and post-race politics.

Integral to the social and cultural presentation of the lone mother are her children. This thesis notes that the terms ‘child’ and ‘parent’, and more specifically ‘lone mother’, have become highly powerful discursive tools to use in debates about social and material relations between individuals, classes, races, ideologies, societies and governments. The potency of these terms is strengthened when we place the adjective male/female in front of the word ‘child’, creating distinctions between the male child and female child which find their basis in Freudian principles of a ‘genuine’ gender performance. These distinctions serve to produce distinct discourses about male and female children, about gender power dynamics and about society as a whole. In Chapter Three I suggest the high visibility of the distinctive lone mother and son dyad within mainstream popular cinema is marked as a register of contemporary concerns about the risk that lone mothers pose to the psychological well-being of their male children. Thus I consider the discursive strategies employed in the popular press and within the literature of Father’s Rights activist groups to better understand how the fatherless child figures in the negotiation of the lone mother.

I will argue that the socio-political and cultural emphasis on the lone mother/son dyad serves to testify to the primacy of fatherhood in the formation of an active and ‘genuine’ performance of masculinity, as the cornerstone of the family and as the panacea to a troubled society. Regularly invoked within the popular press as the anti-social thug, the hater of women and the psychopath, this thesis will draw attention to the distinctly different presentation of the lone mothered son evident in films such as *Jerry Maguire*, *Fight Club* (David Fincher: 1999), *All About My Mother*, *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan: 1999),

About A Boy, Pay It Forward and *Are We There Yet* (Brian Levant: 2005) amongst others and note that the negotiation of lone motherhood within these texts is couched in homophobic rhetoric which codes young fatherless boys as proto-gay. Such discursive practices function to exclude lone mothers from the cultural and political celebration of hetero-normative masculinity as the remedy for a ‘dis-eased’ society.

While Chapter Three is concerned with the cultural ‘sissification’ of the lone mothered son, Chapter Four seeks to explore popular representations of the fatherless daughter. The figure of the fatherless daughter has caused much less consternation for those concerned with the effects of being raised by a lone mother. Suffice to say that when she is under scrutiny it is the performance of her sexuality which defines her as what Anita Harris might call, a ‘can do’ and an ‘at risk’ girl. Indeed, it is issues of sexual promiscuity and early unwed pregnancy foreground in the popular media and mental health literature that are seen as wholly indicative of what is now referred to as ‘Fatherless Daughter Syndrome’. By referring to existing research on fatherless daughters from the fields of mental health and social sciences this chapter will argue that there is a discrepancy between our shared collective knowledge about the ‘problem’ of the lone mothered daughter and the narratives about and images of this dyad within mainstream cinema. Popular films such as *The Princess Diaries*, *Mamma Mia* (Phyllida Lloyd: 2008) and *The Ice Princess* code their lone mothered daughters as their mother’s redeemer—not from a life of promiscuity and broken relationships, as might be the assumption, but from the threat of feminism. As such, I will argue the lone mothered daughter has been appropriated by popular culture to do the ideological work of postfeminism. With all these issues in mind, this chapter draws from and adds to the already growing body of academic work emerging from film academics such as

Diane Negra and Anita Harris that are concerned with the complex matrix of girlhood, popular culture, consumerism and politics.

This thesis then presents a discussion of a series of films made since the late 1990s through to the mid 2000s: *Fight Club* (1999), *Monster's Ball* (2002), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Baby Boy* (2001), *Bullet Boy* (2004), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), and *Because I Said So* (2007). Given the proliferation of cinematic lone mothers I might have chosen any number of different texts to analyse, however with Silbergeild's concept of the 'mainstreaming' of lone mothers in mind I position my analysis in popular mainstream film. That is not to say that analysis of the lone mother figure in more elite spaces of culture would not be a highly relevant undertaking (and may offer the potential for a more subversive and positive representation), however I am concerned with the strategies of negotiation that occur in representations of mainstream lone motherhood. Although I suggest that the concept of 'mainstreaming' the lone mother figure is a central factor in the process of choosing films to analyse, there is a more focused rationale behind the choices of films under scrutiny. For example, in Chapter Two I consider John Singleton's film *Baby Boy* which he argues is an explicit response to the cultural criticism he has received about his problematic representation of black women. Singleton suggests that *Baby Boy* is a film in which black women are accorded a form of agency that is so singularly lacking in his other films. Significant to this thesis is the fact that Singleton uses the stories of three black lone mothers as the focus of his more progressive gender politics and, because of this, *Baby Boy* is a highly salient film to use to consider whether the presentation of a usually politically and culturally vilified female figure is reflective of a more positive attitude towards black women who parent alone.

Analysis of David Fincher's *Fight Club* forms the initial focal point of Chapter Three. *Fight Club* has been analysed by numerous film scholars concerned with representations of masculinity and the impact that capitalism has had on the performance of hetero-normative masculinity but none have acknowledged that at the heart of this film is a narrative about the feminization of masculinity by women who parent alone. It would seem that the lack of attention paid towards *Fight Club*'s lone mother narrative is characteristic of an entrenched and 'commonsense' understanding about the threat posed to the inner well-being of the fatherless male child. The film offers a highly relevant cultural lens thorough which we can begin to consider and challenge the 'commonsense' nature of such discourse. The film analysis then shifts from *Fight Club* to the representation of pre-pubescent fatherless sons. The underlying principle informing this move to representations of younger male children reflects political and cultural anxieties about young fatherless boys that abound in the popular media. While politicians and law enforcers pontificate about the violent, young fatherless male child, social sciences, psychologists, men's groups, women's groups and some feminists have raised concerns about the rise in rates of homosexuality among young, fatherless boys. Thus, with these issues in mind I focus on *The Sixth Sense*; a film which locates a lone mother's home as the cause of the fatherless son's nightmares.

The Sixth Sense is interesting for a number of other reasons not least because it stars the young male actor Haley Joel Osment. Osment has played the son of a lone mother in numerous films and television programmes and has reportedly felt forced into publicly confirm his heterosexuality which has been cast as unstable precisely because of the characters he has played in his film career. *The Ice Princess* and *The Princess Dairies* figure as case study films for Chapter Four because they exemplify a trend of presenting the lone mother/daughter dyad within a 'princess' narrative—a genre which is normally associated

with the widowed father/daughter relationship. Each of these films raises a distinct set of issues which are reflexive of political, medical, religious and social anxieties about women who parent alone and the concomitant concerns about the successful maturation of the fatherless younger male child and the teenage daughter.

Emphasis on the lone mother as a problematic subject is firmly embedded within the British and American political context. Thus, whilst there are moments within the thesis where I note trends within other national cinemas, this thesis offers a composite study of British and American mainstream cinema. Although the choice to engage with the cinemas of two distinct nations complicates an already complex field of research, the interplay between, and overlaps in the fields of British and American social, political and economic policies, the trans-national appropriation of postfeminism and the shared dependence on ‘family values’ discourse has had a homogenizing effect on American and British casting of lone motherhood as deeply threatening to the social order. What is more, the influence of the Hollywood film industry within British and American film industries has resulted in a hegemonic representational palette of what Richard Dyer and Orin E. Klapp refer to as ‘social types’, which, regardless of cultural variations have been appropriated trans-nationally, and often utilized for the same ideological end.¹³

Significantly the case study films I use focus on in this thesis emerge at a moment in time where the rhetoric of neo-liberal family values and the politics of postfeminism converged to create a cultural and political context in which motherhood became the essential component in the successful performance of femininity. While the subject of lone motherhood is not explicitly expressed in all of these films, the very presence of the lone mother figure, whether as a central protagonist or as a peripheral figure, foregrounds political

¹³ Richard Dyer. *Stars*. (London: British Film Institute, 1998). Pg 47

and cultural discourse in which the lone mother is always subject. My aim here then is to show how contemporary social and political discourse is appropriated in recent cinematic narratives in ways which sanction symbolic claims about women who parent alone. As such, films from this era can play an important role in developing an understanding of the shifting discourses of motherhood and femininity as well as highlighting some of the exclusionary practices which maintain the hegemony of postfeminist politics and of family values ideology.

Positioning Postfeminist Politics

I employ the term postfeminism throughout this thesis without entirely securing the complex array of meanings with which it is associated primarily because there has been so little consensus about the exact nature of postfeminism as a critical and theoretical paradigm. Indeed, Amanda Lotz in her essay 'Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes' succinctly described the surrounding vagaries of postfeminism as "terminological confusion".¹⁴ One only need note the different ways in which the term is written—as a complete word (postfeminism) or a hyphenated (post-feminism) even as postfeminism is also referred to as Third Wave Feminism and the politics of backlash to recognise a lack of synthesis.¹⁵

¹⁴Amanda Lotz. 'Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes'. *Feminist Media Studies* Vol.1, No.1 (2001) pp 105-121

¹⁵ My decision to employ 'postfeminism' throughout this thesis rather than the hyphenated format is politically motivated. I understand the term post-feminism as emphasizing the 'passing' of feminism to a much greater degree than I am willing to accept. To reference all the academic work interrogating postfeminism would take more space than this thesis allows, however the following works provide cogent analyses; Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Eds). *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and The Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Judith Stacey and Deborah Rosenfelt. 'Second Thoughts on the Second Wave' in Karen V.Hansen and Ilene J. Philipson (Eds). *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist Feminist Reader*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), Charlotte Brunsdon and Lynn Spigel, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, 2nd Edition. (Open University Press: 2007), Angela McRobbie. 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture'. *Feminist Media Studies*. Vol.3, No.2 (Nov 2004) pp 255-264, Joanne Hollows. *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

From the moment that the concept of postfeminism emerged into the public arena in the late 1980s, debates have ensued from cultural observers such as Susan Faludi¹⁶ and academics like Sarah Projansky¹⁷ about the value of feminist scholarship and purpose of political activism in a cultural environment that sees gender equity as already achieved. Such debates have been prioritized in academia but have been pronounced within the popular press where postfeminism was declared as a more relevant concept for female academics as well as a more positive lifestyle philosophy for women in general. It is little wonder that the ideologies of postfeminism had such an appeal for professional women who, it was reported were experiencing problems finding, and then affording decent child care; for women who were caring for their elderly parents since the impact of government policies had seen the provision of state nursing care diminish; or for women who had seen the glass ceiling move further from their reach even though pay equality still has not been achieved. Postfeminism offered women (read that as middle-class white women) the opportunity to ‘retreat’ to the sanctuary of the private, and domestic space far away from daily realities of the public sphere.¹⁸ But postfeminism also has much to offer men; within its rhetoric is a heightened emphasis on the victimization of masculinity at the hands of feminists who, according to cultural wisdoms have stripped men of their ‘natural’ roles as husband, father and primary breadwinner. Indeed, Erin Pizzey, founder of the British women’s refuge service (a network of safe houses for women and children escaping domestic violence) was just one of the iconic feminist figures who publicly announced that her political turnaround had emerged after witnessing injustices meted out to men. Fay Wheldon, feminist author grew more and more concerned (and more and more vocal) about the gender inequities men were reporting as integral to their every day lived experience, and Camille Paglia waxed lyrical about the

¹⁶ Susan Faludi. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. (London: Verso, 1995)

¹⁷ Sarah Projansky. *Watching Rape: Film and TV in Postfeminist Culture*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001)

¹⁸ Diane Negra speaks of ‘retreatism’ as a central tenet of postfeminism in her book *What A Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

alleged dire effect of the feminist project to reconfigure masculinity as decidedly more feminized. Indeed, other self-proclaimed feminist scholars and cultural observers such as Natasha Walter¹⁹ and Christina Hoff Summers openly identified their politics as distant from and distinct to Second Wave Feminism, arguing that the ideologies of female empowerment and liberation have caused huge fissures between the sexes which has been damaging for women but especially detrimental towards men. Rather than challenging systemic gender inequities which still exist, postfeminism holds feminism to account for encouraging women to ‘have it all’ and blamed for taking ‘it all away’ from men.²⁰

For Susan Faludi, the anti-feminist feminism propagated in postfeminist media culture and celebrated by academics such as Paglia functions as a backlash—a reactionary discourse which repudiates feminism in a hegemonic negotiation, which even as it acknowledges feminism, renders feminist ideology as irrelevant. Most postfeminist writers openly acknowledge (albeit often assumptively) some of the gains of Second Wave Feminism made in areas of domestic violence, work-place inequities (although equal pay for men and women remains a thorny issue in Britain—one which has recently been made more contentious in light of the economic recession) health issues, access to the public sphere, sexual exploitation and child abuse. However, even though such gains are, as Angela McRobbie might say, “taken into account” they are, at the same time perceived as misguided.²¹ Thus postfeminism thrives on a paradox; even as it acknowledges feminism it renders it obsolete at best and dangerous at worse. What is important to note about this form of ideological backlash propounded by, to borrow a phrase from Sarah Projansky, “anti-feminist postfeminist feminists” is the way in which it has become highly useful discursive and oftentimes

¹⁹ Natasha Walter. *The New Feminism*. (London: Virago Press, 2005)

²⁰ Christina Hoff Summers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

²¹ Angela McRobbie. Pg 225

malleable tool in the re-articulation of more conservative ideologies.²² This is a point reiterated by Diane Negra when she writes that “the overwhelming ideological impact that is made by an accumulation of postfeminist cultural material is the reinforcement of conservative norms” which are emphasized through discourse that heralds traditional notions of the family, family values and heterosexuality as the moral requisites in the construction of the social citizen.²³

Despite the fact that there is little agreement about the usefulness of postfeminism as a stable theoretical paradigm, there is little doubt that the language of postfeminism has become embedded within the daily lexicon of cultural, academic and political life. Indeed, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note in their book *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and The Politics of Popular Culture*, that “through structures of forceful articulation and synergistic reiteration across media forms, it [postfeminism] has emerged as a dominant discursive system” especially for the construction and articulation of gender, and I would also add, for the re-enactment, construction and re-articulation of highly problematic discourses of race, sexuality and class. However, in this context I associate the term postfeminism, as does McRobbie, Tania Modleski and Lauren Rabinovitz among others, with a cultural, social, and political environment that sees the work of feminism as a) problematic because it complicates the hegemony of patriarchy and is accountable for a generation of women, who adhering to so-called feminist principles, are caricatured as single and childless, b) as unnecessary because women have already gained equality and c) as passé, since feminism is an old-fashioned, irrelevant theoretical and critical concept. Clearly one of the most insidious outcomes of these discourses is the de-politicization of issues that affects the daily lives of women; in particular women whose social and economic position denies them the

²² Projansky. Pg 71

²³ Tasker and Negra Pp 2-3

opportunity to fully partake in a middle-class inflected postfeminist culture that relies on particular forms of consumption to invoke a ‘correct’ and preferred performance of femininity which is presently bound in the image and rhetoric of motherhood. I argue that the exclusionary nature of postfeminism is particularly pernicious in the case of lone mothers, not only because they often lack economic resources that would accord them cultural power but because the cultural, political and social prioritization of the traditional family unit and the cultural celebration of married motherhood has rendered the lone mother as a ghostly figure only to be invoked as ‘other’ as and when politics requires.

Nonetheless, although I understand the ideological schema of postfeminism as inherently problematic and exclusionary, I also recognise an inherent paradox in that the incorporation of postfeminism within popular culture has opened up a new discursive space in which the assumptions made about feminism having done its job can be interrogated. As such, and paradoxically so, postfeminism has invigorated feminist scholarship. It has provided us with a new critical lens through which to analyze contemporary presentations of gender, a point reiterated by Lotz who acknowledges that postfeminism can be “an extremely valuable tool for recognizing and analyzing recent shifts in female representations”.²⁴ This thesis takes the opportunity to explore the cultural and social presentation of the lone mother within the broader articulation and realization of postfeminist ideology. In so doing I aim to foreground further exclusions on which a postfeminist media thrives whilst acknowledging the complexities inherent in mainstream cinema’s use of the lone mother as both abject and magical.

The arguments I propose throughout the thesis serve to intervene in, or at least add to a growing body of work about the construction of contemporary girlhood, postfeminist

²⁴ Lotz. Pg 106

masculinity, and childhood studies as well as highlighting the paucity of work focusing on the mediation of certain paradigms of class and race under the rubric of postfeminist and post-race politics. In addition, it is my aim to broaden the parameters of already established feminist inflected scholarship about representations of motherhood. More especially, this thesis serves to intervene in the ongoing interrogation of postfeminism; if we ignore the significance of the cinematic lone mother we ignore the ways in which a set of highly misogynist, homophobic and racist discourses are being re-enacted and re-articulated in narratives about and images of women who parent alone.

This study spans almost four political decades; from the 1970s which witnessed a systemic attack on and persistent disavowal of the Trade Unions and Civil Rights Movement and the rise of neo-conservatism which resulted in the 1980s political climate dominated (in the UK and US respectively) by Thatcherite and Reaganite politics. This political transition, via the presidency of George W. Bush and the latter days of Tony Blair to a neo-conservative, Christian based approach in US and UK politics occurred in the opening years of the 21st Century. In acknowledging the shifting political and social climate of the last forty years this thesis will explore the function of popular culture in “sustaining the social formations” which as Toby Miller has contested, “have arisen in the explosion of industries that produce popular culture and ideologies”.²⁵ I do so to substantiate my contention that the celluloid lone mother functions chiefly to do the political work of reifying ‘family values’; a set of ideologies which are neither apolitical nor ahistorical but rather function as an amorphous term to be applied whenever politics and society deem it necessary and a easily recognisable phrase which immediately re-replaces ‘family’ back under the authority of patriarchy

²⁵ Toby Miller. Pp 303-312.

Although I refer to fatherhood narratives within the main body of the thesis, I choose not to fully engage here with discourses of lone fatherhood—suffice to say that the cinematic lone father is more often than not coded as a heroic and noble figure. The heroism of the celluloid lone father reflects and consolidates the cultural, social and political reification of lone fathers who are almost always seen as exemplary men. Whilst I refer to films which centralize a lone father as examples of the cultural and political currency of this representational figure my choice not to centralize them within this project is not indicative of any attempt to negate the difficulties faced by fathers raising their children in motherless homes. Rather I argue the prevalence of radio programmes, television series, self-help guides, political campaigns and cinematic texts that promote, elevate and empathize with the physical and psychological demands of being a lone father (or indeed, the demands made by any form of fatherhood) have participated in a silencing of the lone mother. This thesis quite consciously serves as a response to that process of silencing.

At this point I want to note that my choice to write a thesis with the lone mother as subject mirrors the very workings of a media that denies lone mothers an autonomous identity by presenting them as objects for scrutiny, or examples of a trend. However, that I write this as a lone mother of three children may go some way in mediating unease (although this is not to suggest that one can only write an authentic account from a position of personal and individual knowledge but rather I want to acknowledge that in the process of writing this I am always aware that I am writing about real women and their everyday lived experiences). My own experience will no doubt inform my reading of the films and surrounding discourse about the lone mother. I do not mention this as an apology since I see it as a motivating force in attempting to understand texts that promote problematic discourses which directly impact on me and my family at the same time that I find myself moved to tears at the close of *Because I Said So*, *Mamma Mia* and *The Princess Diaries*.

On a more formal note, this thesis will refer to women raising children in fatherless homes as the lone mother (unless within a quote). The cultural understanding of the British single mother and US welfare mother is informed by discourse and images that mythologize and demonize this category of women as incapable, inadequate, and immoral and a drain on the nation's economy. In contrast the lone mother, imagined as divorced, separated or widowed has been cast as the 'respectable' face of motherhood without men. She is, as Jane Juffer describes, a "moral mother", once part of a nuclear family, now attempting to "operate as if they were a nuclear family".²⁶ That Juffer should highlight the attempt made by lone mothers to operate as if a nuclear family speaks to the restrictions placed on lone mothers to operate within an alternative family structure with impunity. The distinctions between the acceptable and non-acceptable faces of lone motherhood are divisive and political and are only maintained if women are being pit against each other. In the following chapter I offer a brief overview of the cultural and political landscape in which the lone mother figure is consistently employed to do ideological work of shoring up neo-liberal, postfeminist politics.

²⁶ Jane Juffer. *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006). Pg 71

Chapter One

Disposable Motherhood: A Cultural Overview

The Sacred Vs The Profane.

On April 21st 2005, Abigail Witchalls was walking along a quiet country lane when she was approached by a stranger who held a knife to the throat of her 21-month-old son. The man plunged the knife into the young mother's neck, threw the pushchair on top of her and left Abigail Witchalls for dead. This horrifying attack was covered by every national newspaper in the country, and for weeks the British media followed the young mother's fight for life and her subsequent rehabilitation after being left paralysed and unable to speak. Public appeals for information became a regular feature of news programmes and newspaper articles, and the dogged determination of the police to find the perpetrator reiterated the sense of shock, we the British public, were encouraged to feel. Collectively, the media exhorted the Witchalls family to stay strong, praised Abigail Witchalls' bravery and rejoiced at the photographic images of this courageous, loving and united family.

Quite rightly Abigail Witchalls' story raised issues about the increasing level of violent crime in this country, made even more pertinent because the very quiet, affluent suburban village in which she was attacked was noted for its low crime rate. But more important, for my purposes in this thesis, is the way in which the attack on this young mother challenged our collective notions of motherhood as something sacred and untouchable. Note how the sentiments of one leading detective, describing his personal response to the crime, work to reinforce the philosophy that motherhood is sacrosanct. "It is hard", he says "to

imagine a more compelling picture of vulnerability and innocence than that of a mother and her child, chased, attacked and left for dead”.²⁷

At the same time these notions of motherhood were under attack, literally and symbolically, media reports operated in such a way that the very idealised attributes of motherhood under threat were highlighted and fortified through constant updates and stories about the Witchalls couple’s loving and supportive relationship, the strong maternal bond that Abigail Witchalls displayed towards her child and of her deeply held religious convictions. Abigail Witchalls the woman become subsumed under the role and label of mother in an almost Madonna-like formulation, and was appropriated by the media as the face of perfect, self sacrificing, traditional motherhood. As a result, the Witchalls family was imagined, in almost fetishistic terms, as the idealized image of the neo-conservative family now so widely celebrated in this post-feminist cultural environment. The Witchalls’ story played directly into the hands of a media obsessed with notions of motherhood and continued to be updated into 2007 on through media reports celebrating the birth of the Witchalls’ second child, the building of a chapel in the family garden (funded by newspaper appeal donations) and Abigail Witchalls’ recent trip to Lourdes.

In introducing this chapter with the real life experience of Abigail Witchalls I am no way making light of the terrible events that took place in April 2005 nor criticizing public reaction to them. Abigail Witchalls was not the author of her own story, but then neither was the 19-year-old lone mother murdered in her Glasgow council flat in front of her very young son just six weeks after the Witchalls’ case was reported. Nor the teenage lone mother murdered in 2005, in front of her baby daughter in a council house in Radcliffe, Manchester.

²⁷ ‘Press Conference Statement on Bookham Attack- 26 April’. www.surrey.police.uk/media

To name either woman would imply some knowledge of these mothers, however the truth is, except for a brief mention on the national news, further coverage of the two cases was non-existent thus rendering futile any attempt to investigate the stories further. There were no public offers of counselling for the children, no follow up stories, no public outpouring of anger or sympathy, no psychologist offering expert opinion and no personal police response.

I begin my thesis with this contrastive account of the attempted murder of Abigail Witchalls and the murders of the two teenage lone mothers because they raise important questions about the acceptable and non-acceptable face of contemporary mothering. How is it possible for one mother to be accorded the respect and support (indeed in elaborated and exaggerated forms) of the British media whilst the other two women are distinctly denied this?²⁸ Clearly issues of class create a divide between these women. Given our cultural perception of urban Scotland, and Manchester as impoverished, violent and drug addled one might expect incidents of violent crime on a Glasgow social housing scheme, or in a Manchester council house come to that, but certainly not in the leafy lanes of a small, affluent English village. Although issues of class are salient here they do not fully explain why the murders of two lone mothers were so clearly deemed less important than that of Abigail Witchalls. This thesis begins an exploration of the cultural, social, historical and political climate that has helped to produce a situation in which the murders of the two British teenage lone mothers may be treated as inconsequential.

²⁸ That Abigail Witchalls was attacked by a stranger heightens the 'horror' element of the story and reinforces discursive practices that warn women of dangers lurking behind the bushes (although Home Office statistics demonstrate that women are more likely to be killed or experience violence in the home). I would also argue that the high possibility the two lone mothers were murdered by someone they knew, rather than a stranger as in the Witchalls case, means that the perpetrator was unlikely to pose any further risk to the public.

Typecasting the Lone Mother

The stereotypical images of the lone mother, dependent on the state, living in social housing and raising delinquent children that have been systematically employed over a vast spectrum of political, cultural, social and economic discursive practices, and promulgated by the media throughout the last twenty years, have, I argue, created a legitimated hierarchy of motherhood which has become pivotal in conceptualizing the maternal and central to our cultural understanding of what constitutes good and bad mothering. (See Fig. 1) Over the last two decades, motherhood has been re-inscribed as the signifier of true femininity; “the only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves that first you are a real woman and second, that you are a worthy one”.²⁹ The ‘culturally focal event’ of motherhood and cultural reinvestment in mom-ism as described by Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels has become integral to our daily political, cultural, social, personal and economic discourses.

A brief look at any book shop best-sellers list will attest to the currency of contemporary motherhood in the many texts dictating the skills required to be a good—or even better—mummy, and the proliferation of “chick” literature whose central female characters explicitly reject feminist principles of autonomy, subjectivity, choice etc for the sacred role of mother; or best selling narratives highlighting psychological problems experienced by the children of mothers who do not exhibit ‘proper’ maternal skills. Nor are such plots relegated exclusively to low-brow or advice literature. The Orange Prize-winning *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) by Lionel Shriver tells the story of a mother coming to terms with her maternal disengagement after her son is involved in a Columbine-inspired

²⁹ Douglas and Michaels. Pg 5

school massacre. What is more, the dogmatic treatment of motherhood so conspicuous in these books is not limited to female genres as one might expect; indeed the recent proliferation of 'lad lit' foregrounds issues of motherhood. Books such as *About A Boy* (Nick Hornby: 1998) and *Man and Boy* (2004), *The Family Way* (2005) and *One For My Baby* (Tony Parsons: 2005), look back 'at the glory days of marriage' and explore issues of contemporary female morality, motherhood and marriage within what would be widely recognised as female orientated plots of family, community, relationships and love.

With neo-conservative 'family values' rhetoric at the centre of both British and American politics, these motherhood narratives explicitly emphasise the importance of marriage as the only proper foundation on which to build a healthy, economically viable, family life. As Estella Tincknell writes, "the discourse of traditional family values became increasingly hegemonic as a central political trope through the early 1980s, with the moral superiority of conventional heterosexual relationships loudly and insistently proclaimed."³⁰ Although the term 'family values' is typically vague in its definition and amorphous in its use, it conveys the impression of an epistemology that is beyond reproach. So, whilst we may not be entirely clear of the actual definition of the term we certainly have a collective understanding that the concept of 'family values' (or the equivalent 'Back to Basics' rhetoric introduced into British political ideology in the early 1990s) relates to a traditional notion of female morality and values that strengthen the hegemony of the patriarchal nuclear family. Such persistent incorporation of, and attention paid to "family values" ideology complicates further the position of the lone mother and her family because their very existence as an alternate social grouping undermines core ideologies behind the rhetoric of family. Note how the following coarse sentiments, voiced on the *FathersforLife* website (an activist group

³⁰ Estella Tincknell. *Mediating the Family: Gender, Culture and Representation*. (London: Hodder & Arnold, 2005). Pg 36

elevating the centrality of fatherhood within family formations), reject any notion that the lone mother and her children constitute ‘family’: “Family is a married couple and their kids—not a slag and her illegitimate bastards”.³¹

The endless celebration of ‘family values’, and associated traditional forms of female behaviour and motherhood create, “agreed upon norms” dictating how we should understand and respond to contemporary philosophies of motherhood³². And, as Ange-Marie Hancock observes, “culturally focal events, those that are important subjects of daily discourse, have clear norms that dictate how to interpret such topics and how to respond to them”.³³ Such socially constructed ideologies, notions, myths, and narratives are naturalised in stereotypes that reflect, sustain and legitimate dominant power relationships. Thus the recent re-emergence, re-incorporation and re-presentation of 1940s ‘momism’ into contemporary political, social and cultural life has worked to create a pernicious hierarchy amongst women, fetishizing those who conform to the pre-requisites of motherhood whilst sanctioning attacks on, or marginalizing those who do not. And, as Douglas and Michaels assert, the binary of good and bad mothering has firmly placed the lone mother as the “anti-Madonna, the hideous counterexample good mothers were meant to revile”.³⁴ Reinforcing stereotypes of race (in narratives of the hypersexual black welfare queen), class (welfare lone mothers dependent on the state) and gender (because the argument is really about errant single female sexual behaviour), and methodically rehearsing them in discourse about lone motherhood creates a cultural environment where we may view the Glasgow and Manchester murders, and the traumatic consequences for the children involved as par for the course; particularly if we heed

³¹ <http://forums.gumtree.com.topic> (link) found at www.fathersforlife.org (Sourced 17/10/06)

³² Douglas and Michaels. Pg 18

³³ Ange-Marie Hancock. *A Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. (New York: New York University Press, 2004). Pg 8

³⁴ Ibid. Pg 20

the sentiments of the Fathers for Justice Network who declare “The most dangerous place for a child is the home of a single mother”.³⁵

Loathsome Lone Mothers

The established typecasting of the lone mother that abounds in our cultural, political and social landscape, consistently associating her with slovenliness, immorality, fecundity, incompetence and danger create, what Hancock terms a ‘politics of disgust’; a cognitive process that denies democratic deliberation of the disenfranchised, poor and socially peripheral by reinforcing an emotional response of revulsion. This legitimated loathing of lone mothers is encouraged in the thousands upon thousands of newspaper articles locating lone motherhood as the cause of a number of contemporary social problems such as anti-social behaviour and disenfranchised youth that dominate British politics at present; the (supposed) rise in homosexuality; of promiscuity, drug abuse and alcoholism; the increase in incidences of depression and suicide; and an escalation in the amount of sexually motivated violence and child sexual abuse. Hardly a week goes by without headlines that link lone mother households to the production of “fragile children who are unlikely to do well at school, suffer worse health, cause anti-social behaviour and face a more difficult start in life”³⁶.

The loathing of lone mothers is endorsed in television documentaries that, under the guise of highlighting hardships faced by lone mothers living on welfare, place a well known

³⁵ www.fathers4justice.co.uk (Sourced 15/10/06)

³⁶ Steve Doughty. ‘One in Five Babies Grow Up With No Father’. *The Daily Mail*. 18/06/04

celebrity or politician into the home to see how they manage with such a meagre income.³⁷ Take for example, the BBC series *My Week in The Real World* aired in 2003 in which former conservative cabinet minister, Michael Portillo took on the role of lone parent. As one would expect, the new initiate to poverty found the week an extremely challenging, though ultimately rewarding experience. Portillo demonstrates his ability to keep house, to teach the children to behave properly by instilling “old values of eating together and asking permission to leave the table”, to help with homework, and prepare nutritional meals successfully; and he manages to accomplish all this with enough money left over to throw a party for one of the four children and her young friends.³⁸ In this scenario the lone mother is suitably shamed and taught to do her job ‘properly’, whilst Portillo is empowered to draw upon his experience for self promotion as a caring and progressive politician. Note the sentiments of two of many viewers who contacted the BBC with their opinions of the documentary; “Portillo has undergone a massive transformation as a man and as a politician” and “Portillo endears himself to voters outside the bounds of traditional conservative support”.³⁹ All this support for a politician so detested by the British public, that television footage of him losing his parliamentary seat was deemed necessary viewing and is often included in British television shows such as the *Top 100 Best Television Moments*. The lone mother of this documentary served as a prop in mediating and transforming the personal and political position of Portillo from a deeply despised, Right wing, and extremely privileged politician to a socially aware, compassionate and able fatherly figure. Whether or not the producers intended that the lone mother of the documentary would act as a catalyst for Portillo’s redemption is not certain. Nonetheless, the programme clearly mirrors the ideological workings of mainstream cinema

³⁷ *My Week in the Real World*. BBC2. 15/10/03

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Comments. www.BBC2.co.uk (Sourced 16/10/03)

which, as I will elucidate later within this thesis, systematically employs the lone mother as a device for the renegotiation of troubled or obsolete masculinity.⁴⁰

And how did Portillo's host lone mother fare after the documentary? It is true the piece highlighted issues of poverty, lack of child care provision and low wages for part-time workers. However, for all its benevolent outcomes the majority of viewer comments drew on and reinforced, entrenched stereotypes of lone motherhood. Comments posted on websites criticized the lone mother for 'choosing' to have children she could ill afford; commented on the unruly behaviour of her young family; the house décor and hygiene; rejected her claim of poverty because she had a computer and received her criticisms of the way in which Portillo managed her children with derision. Clearly Portillo proved himself better at the job of raising children than the programme's lone mother; any criticism of Portillo's parenting/management skills were immediately rendered invalid because this lone was already perceived as ineffective and lacking. Putting it crudely, in the words found on the BlogSpot of the 'eternal bachelor', "Single mothers are invariably fucked up dirty skanks, who don't know anything and whose children, when young are usually grubby, rude and miserable, and when older, aggressive, and setting on a path to skankness".⁴¹

The cultural sanctioning of loathing towards lone mothers is further inscribed in documentaries featuring stories of young men (usually drug addicts, self harmers, prisoners, alcoholics, mentally ill or sex offenders) who have been traumatised by the loss or lack of a father figure in their lives. Whilst the narrative focus of these documentaries is upon the role of fatherhood in the successful maturation of masculinity, it is without doubt that the problem

⁴⁰ It is perhaps important to note that Portillo agreed a fee of £15,000 to take part in the televised challenge, an amount that would take this programme's lone mother of four over three years to earn from her two jobs where she received just £80 per week!

⁴¹ www.eternalbachelor.co.uk (Sourced 04/06/04)

of lone motherhood is central to their polemics. As such, these programmes continue a process of denying agency to lone mothers by reinforcing the hegemony of fatherhood. Worse still, they sustain a discourse that accuses lone mothers of abusing their children precisely because they have removed them “from the protection of their fathers who are natural protectors of children”.⁴²

The dysfunctional young men highlighted in such scenarios both visually and cognitively attest to the well rehearsed ‘cause and effect theory’ of the danger of lone motherhood and the threat the lone mother poses to her child’s emotional well being⁴³. Such well established narratives work to highlight and maintain traditional psychological and sociological claims (often produced in the context of research funded by religious and far right groups) that points to the patriarchal nuclear family as the only environment in which to ‘breed’ healthy children. Based on Christian dogma found in the book of Genesis that divinely sanctions man’s cleaving to his wife, traditional social science and psychology based studies have continued to try “to prove the importance of this cleaving for years” in an attempt to elevate and maintain the hegemony of fatherhood, to the absolute detriment of the lone mother and her family.⁴⁴

Such legitimated discursive practices typecasting the lone mother as a danger to the internal well-being of her child [ren] and to society as a whole are highly conspicuous in

⁴²‘Women and Children- Is There Any Difference?’ (unauthored piece) www.fathersforlife.org. Note how the title clearly functions to infantilize women, rendering them incapable of undertaking the ‘adult’ and explicitly male task of raising children successfully. (Sourced 17/10/06)

⁴³ The most serious charge that the lone mother is ineffective as a parent is based on research carried out over 25 years ago when ‘illegitimacy’ was less common than it is presently. As such, Mary McIntosh argues that rather than comparing the effects of lone motherhood on children with children of intact marriages, comparisons should be made with those children who live with unhappily married parents who have decided not to separate. The arguments are too easy. Rather than investigating the many causes of childhood problems, the most immediate, commonsense reason that a lone mother is raising her child becomes the only reason. Mary MacIntosh. ‘Social Anxieties About Lone Motherhood and Ideologies of the Family: Two sides of the same coin’. in Elizabeth Bortolia Silva. (London and New York: Routledge. 1996). Pg 152

⁴⁴ ‘Family Values’. *Critical Issues*, Vol 1, Issue 2. 28/10/03 www.leaderu.com/critical/family.html.

contemporary politics. British and American politicians, from all persuasions, spout about the ills of lone motherhood and the danger they pose to the nation's economy. From the late 1980s, the lone mother became a marked feature of the British political landscape after Nigel Lawson, the then Conservative cabinet member of the Thatcher administration claimed teenage girls were deliberately choosing lone motherhood as a means to secure housing and a guaranteed income. The rhetoric about these young mothers became part of daily cultural discourse replacing that of the 'the social security scrounger'—a term normally used by the media to describe people thought to be less deserving of welfare support. Whilst media panics (and the problem of the teenage lone mother in the 1980s certainly became a media led panic) are not planned as deliberate attempts to strengthen the power of government authority, they do function to “reinforce conservative political stances and policies not shared by the majority of the population, but now deemed necessary because of the panic”.⁴⁵

For all the rhetoric about the epidemic of teenage mothers Sarah S. McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, authors of *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, claim there were far “fewer babies born to teenagers in this period than in 1950, 1960, 1970”.⁴⁶ In 1956, 525,000 teenage births were recorded, but by 1985, with the availability of birth control and legalized abortion, the numbers dropped by 10,000 to 513,062.⁴⁷ The real issue then is not about teenage mothers; it is that they are unmarried teenage mothers. Where there were 525,000 teenage births in 1956, less than 15% were illegitimate compared to the 70% of out-of-wedlock births recorded in the 1990's.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the media panic about the epidemic of lone teenage mothers and the political rants of the Tory government ignored statistical

⁴⁵ Douglas and Michaels. Pg 88

⁴⁶ Sarah S. McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press. 2006). Pg 47

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pg. 47

⁴⁸ Although there was a sharp increase in numbers of illegitimate births in the 1990's, three quarters of the births were registered by both sets of parents, the majority of which lived at the same address.

evidence that showed the median age of lone mothers has long been, and remains, 35 years. Teenage lone mothers make up just 3% of the overall population of lone mothered households in the 1980s, a number that has seen very little change over the past two decades. Hardly the amount normally associated with epidemic proportions! Rhetoric about the epidemic proportion of teenage single mothers and the ensuing media panic ensured that unwed teenage mothers were understood by the general populace as the commonsense cause of rising national expenditure and the motivation for subsequent welfare cuts the Conservative government were about to impose. Thus the teenage unwed mother became the scapegoat for economic and political experts attempting to rescue the government and country from the results of poor fiscal policy.

As a consequence, the shift that brought the political position of the lone mother from the late 1970s through to the 1990s, to centre stage, says Patricia Alert, contributing author of the independently produced research document, *Positive Images, Negative Stereotypes: Representations of Single Parents in the 1990's* (produced for SPAN- Single Parent Action Network) guaranteed that discursive practices ignored issues of welfare focusing entirely on the financial burden of welfare dependent lone mothered households. “In less than ten years [1980-1990]”, she writes, “Lone mothers have moved centre stage in the debates about rising expenditure on social security, fraud and abuse”.⁴⁹ Their increased visibility in social policy debates “was not, as the debates had been in the late 1960s-1970s, about child welfare, poverty and social inclusion” but was tied to their scapegoat role and frequent associated criminalization.⁵⁰ Despite clear evidence that most lone mothers found themselves raising children single-handedly through abandonment, death of the spouse, or because they were

⁴⁹Patricia Alert, Diane Burns and Sue Cohen. ‘Setting the Historical Context’. In *Positive Images: Negative Stereotypes. Representations of one parent families in the 1990's*. (Bristol: Single Parent Action Network. 2003). Pg 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Pg 12

escaping domestic violence, all lone mothers “were universally demonized as wilfully choosing to have children out of wedlock for personal gain”.⁵¹ As a consequence, McIntosh maintains that “any smears about any sub-group of lone parents [particularly lone mothers] get thrown into the pot and stirred up into a toxic brew to be administered to them all”.⁵²

Such discourses ensure that lone mothers continue to be portrayed, if not negatively as is most often the case, then at least with deep ambivalence. These representations become embedded in our subconscious thus guaranteeing ideologically preferred sets of responses that, repeated often enough, feel valid and even commonsense. One only need to call to mind, as an example of this cognitive process, the lone mother character Vicky Pollard (played by Matt Lucas) in the British television comedy programme *Little Britain* to see how entrenched and familiar stereotypes of the lone mother have become.⁵³ (See Fig.1)

Overweight, with her bleached blonde hair dragged back into a tight ponytail (a style often referred to as a council estate face lift), and dressed in the pink tracksuit so associative with working class young women, Vicky Pollard is the lone mother of six young children, all from different racial backgrounds (thus explicitly highlighting her promiscuity in both sexual and racial terms) living on an inner city council estate.

⁵¹ Sarah Harwood. *Representations of the Family in 1980's Hollywood Cinema*. (London: MacMillan Press Ltd. 1997). Pg 180

⁵² McIntosh. Pg 149

⁵³ Transvestite casting helps to signal the lone mother's abject, 'unfeminine' status. Men often appear in drag to designate women whose femininity is deviant and deficient. One only needs to think of traditional British pantomime characters such as *Aladdin's* Widow Twanky to see how established this trope is. Whilst she is not the show's main character, her appearance ruptures the flow of the show's narrative and introduces a space in which the audience is invited to laugh at her over sized, de-feminized underwear and the sexual innuendos that are exchanged between this lone mother and her son (and it is always a son). Her unruly behaviour, exaggerated costuming, overweight body and excessive makeup that flags up the facial hair she/he is attempting to hide reinforces the process of defeminizing the pantomime's lone mother.



Fig. 1: Vicky Pollard (Matt Lucas) with her 'rainbow' children

Whilst Vicky Pollard is clearly an exaggerated characterization employed for comedic effect, her creators (Matt Lucas and David Walliams) have sketched Vicky as the most dislikeable, unsympathetic, pathetic and laughable lone mother on British television. Their portrayal of this young, uneducated, working class lone mother explicitly draws from our cultural understanding of the much frowned upon constituents of what we recognise as working class femininity: vulgarity, promiscuity, brashness and an apparent lack of hygiene. Lucas and Walliams expose patriarchal middle class fear and loathing of women who they perceive as deeply unruly subjects, incapable of controlling themselves, and unable to be controlled; unruly women who do not have the ability or economic currency to display their 'self' in a way that proves their moral and social worth.

Lucas and Walliams claim “at its heart *Little Britain* is a celebration of diversity”, nevertheless, British film director, Ken Russell, famous for his own “controversial film oeuvre”, heckled the pair at a TV award ceremony arguing the programme was “soulless, snobbish and makes jokes at the expense of every section of society without intelligence or

humour”.⁵⁴ Russell’s sentiments are reiterated by Peter Tatchell of the gay human rights group, Outrage, who claims *Little Britain* “reinforces old fashioned, negative clichés about gay people”.⁵⁵ More important, for my purposes, are the remarks made by sociologist Lesley Spiers who writes; “The show reinforces every day attitudes towards women by presenting their bodies as an unruly, chaotic and uncontrollable threat”.⁵⁶ For all the challenges laid at the feet of the show’s creators regarding depictions of race, sexuality, and gender, there seems to be no explicit criticism of the portrayals of this show’s lone mother. No other marginalised group represented perceive these portrayals as anything other than offensive, yet the lack of critical attention paid to Vicky Pollard surely exposes our conscious and subconscious prejudices about working class women in general, and working class lone mothers and their families in particular. Perhaps we do not deem it necessary to oppose and challenge a set of discourses about lone mothers that feels so commonsensical.

These persistent stereotypical representations of, and discourses about the ‘one parent family’, the single mother and the lone mother, depict them as wholly unworthy, shameful and deceitful women, whose attitudes and behaviour hold no moral, cultural or social value and are the cause of psychological, social and economic instability. As I have suggested, the very real fact that many of these women raising children alone are doing so after escaping domestic violence is seldom reflected. Such acknowledgement would complicate notions of the family (propagated by politicians and the media) as a safe haven against the world. The negative stereotypes of evil, licentious women, with overfed, badly behaved, parasitic

⁵⁴Tony Barrell. ‘The Battle of Little Britain’. *Sunday Times Magazine*. 05/11/06. Pg 17

⁵⁵Ibid. Pg 18

⁵⁶Ibid.

children give licence to governments to enforce punitive financial cuts to welfare aid and impose tighter economic restrictions on women raising children alone.⁵⁷

Across the water, the U.S welfare, lone mother is subjected to a similar vitriolic treatment that, as Douglas and Michaels observes, has particularly affected the black welfare lone mother (commonly known as The Welfare Queen, a term coined by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s), whose body was, and remains, the site of all societal ills. Given the legacy of slavery and the rhetoric of black, female hypersexuality, and the enforced sterilization of thousands of African American lone mothers in the 1970s, it is clear that the lone, black, welfare mother continues to be perceived as a danger to society, at the forefront of underclass trends, and more particularly, as a threat to the supremacy of whiteness from outside and within the nation.⁵⁸ Note the famous warning of Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Assistant Secretary of Labour to President Lyndon B Johnson before he became a long-serving Senator) in his report 'The Negro Family: The Case for National Action' (1980) which prophesied that the large numbers of children raised in black, lone mothered households (1 in 5 black children) heralded problems for both black and white America. "Unless this direction of family formation was reversed", he writes, "the black community was in grave danger of losing whatever gains it was making in its struggle for civil rights".⁵⁹ Moynihan continues his highly racist misogyny by playing on the fears of a white middle class America that was ever aware of the threat to its domination from outside the nation: Moynihan states "From the wild Irish slums of the nineteenth century Eastern seaboard, to

⁵⁷ Celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver's recent 'healthy school dinners' campaign rightly raised concerns about the nutritional welfare of the nation's children. Although Oliver was happy to challenge politicians to change school dinner policy, he ignored the economic costs and restrictions for mothers (and the programme was explicitly criticising mothers) on low incomes. Instead, he vehemently berated poorer mothers for ignoring his advice, often referring to them as arseholes, whilst regularly celebrating his own affluent parenthood and domesticity. *Jamie's School Dinners*. Channel 4, 2005.

⁵⁸ Sasha Roseneil and Kirk Mann. 'Unpalatable Choices and Inadequate Families' in Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva. *Good Enough Mothering? : Feminist Perspectives on Lone Motherhood*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). Pg 201

⁵⁹ Ludtke. Pg 27.

the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history; a community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any rational expectations about the future – that community asks for and gets chaos...[in such a society] crime, violence unrest, unrestrained lashing out at a whole social structure- these are not only to be expected, they are virtually inevitable”.⁶⁰

Often ghettoized and living in abject poverty, the US black, welfare, and lone mother is the object of racially motivated discourses that have appropriated her body as symbolic of unfit motherhood and of urban decay. And as Giroux, contests, she functions as a flexible enough figure that she can be easily invoked to ideologically manage a range of national problems.⁶¹ These discursive practices are highly resonant with political, social, economic and cultural dynamics that make the US black, welfare, lone mother highly significant to this project. Chapter Three argues that the disparity between Eurocentric and American notions of family and the historical construction and formation of the African family renders representation of the African American lone mother as ineluctably tied to slavery and assimilation.

The murders of the two lone mothers highlighted at the beginning of this chapter and the lack of attention paid to their stories; the stereotypes that abound in our political, cultural and social landscape; and the discursive practices that reinforcing notions of class, gender and ethnicity that are systematically rehearsed in rhetoric that circulate around the lone mother will attest to a continual process of disenfranchisement central to the ‘Politics of Disgust’. As the object of political, cultural and social scrutiny, the lone mother is rarely imagined as

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Henry Giroux. *Stormy Weather: Katrina and The Politics of Disposability*. (Colorado: Paradigm Publishers. 2006)

anything other than an example of a social trend, an indicator of where we have gone wrong, thus diminishing the possibility for her to be recognised as the subject of her own life, or as integral in the process of democracy.

Celebrating Lone Mother 'Chic'.

Whilst the lone mother predominantly figures as problematic and in the need of cultural management, there have been a series of high profile stars such as Liz Hurley and Gerri Halliwell, Carmyn Meinhem and Calista Flockhart among others who have traded on their status as lone mothers for publicity value, testifying that the experience of motherhood has enhanced their professional life and completed their personal lives. By trading in such discourses of 'single mum chic', the popular press idealizes and eroticizes the affluent, white lone mother and creates an additional system of cultural mediation for poorer lone mothers. Alongside discourses of single mom chic, the recent investment in the archetype of the 'yummy mummy' has become commonplace in popular culture. Defined by the Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com) as "A young, sexually attractive mother, younger than thirty, who shops and lunches her way through pregnancy displaying her little bump like the latest little hand bag", these women epitomize the essence of post-feminism, affluent, glamorous and a new economic demographic for the fashion and lifestyle industries. As McRobbie points out, the 'yummy mummy' has offered the "ideal opportunity to extend the grip of consumer culture by suggesting that successful maternity now requires that mother and baby afford high maintenance pampering techniques as well as a designer wardrobe".⁶² One only needs to look to the books of the highly successful chick-lit author Sophie Kinsella

⁶²Angela McRobbie. 'Yummy Mummies Leave a Bad Taste for Young Women'. www.guardian.co.uk (02/03/06)

whose titles include *Shopaholic and Baby*, to validate McRobbie's polemic. In *Shopaholic and Baby*, the latest instalment from the 'Shopaholic' franchise (*Shopaholic Ties the Knot; Shopaholic and Sister; Shopaholic Takes Manhattan* etc), Becky Bloomwood, Kinsella's affluent, married and pregnant heroine, hires the services of a celebrity obstetrician/gynaecologist because it's the 'done thing to do' and frantically shops for two in every upscale baby shop to ensure her child will be as stylish as any baby can be. Bound up in these cultural discourses of the 'yummy mummy' is rhetoric about class and moral worth; women who have the capital to attain the signifiers of yummy mummy-hood display both their class and moral status by adhering to messages from the government who "fearful of the high rate of teenage pregnancies, advocates planned parenthood embarked upon by stable couples with secure salaries".⁶³ Thus the 'yummy mummy' plays a collaborative part in the politics of 'family values' and the endless celebration "in the media of wealth and status to create a pervasive system for popular morality".⁶⁴ As Karen McCormack asserts "the moral economy of wealth involves the discursive production and circulation of symbolic representations of wealth that serves to invest the behaviour of the wealthy with a certain moral identity".⁶⁵

The equation of morality with wealth ignores the cultural, political and economic structures that deny access to wealth for the many. Thus, it becomes particularly easy to see how the poverty stricken lone mother is further marginalized through the celebration of the 'yummy mummy'. For in this capitalist, post-feminist culture, a woman who is unable to consume is a woman without autonomy and a woman without autonomy deserves no respect. Women, who cannot afford the cultural signifiers of 'yummy mummy-hood', display

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵ Karen McCormack. 'Resisting The Welfare Mother: The Power of Welfare Discourse and Tactics of Resistance'. *Culture, Power and History: Studies in Critical Sociology*. (Eds) Stephen Pfohl, Aimee Van Wagenen, Patricia Arend and Abigail Brooks. (Leiden: Brill Academics Publishers. 2005) Pg 263

themselves as having no cultural or capital worth. As such they are perceived as having no moral worth. A brief examination of the discourse surrounding pop star and media icon Britney Spears exemplifies the pernicious nature of the 'class being made through symbolic value' paradigm; and demonstrates how the language of hatred about lower class, poor lone mothers is appropriated onto the bodies of mothers who do not behave 'correctly'.

Spears' decision in November 2006 to pose naked whilst pregnant for an advertising campaign caused brief international controversy when the Japanese government, concerned that the poster would over-stimulate its citizens, banned it from public display. However, their ruling was quickly repealed after Spears explained the poster was a public demonstration of her love for her unborn child, and celebration of the pregnant female body (in the tradition of Demi Moore who appeared nude and pregnant on the cover of *Harpers* in the early 1990s). Having changed her bleached blonde hair for a more subtle, sophisticated shade of brown, Spears appeared to look more akin to a young Jackie Onassis than the soft porn pop star we are more familiar with. Wearing nothing but a heavy gold and pearl necklace (signifiers of taste, wealth and moral worth), Spears looks straight out towards the viewer, not as a challenge to our cultural prejudices about the display of the naked pregnant body, but as an explicit show of her cultural competence. She is white, young, glamorous, sexy, affluent, married, and an expectant mother, and displays all the requirements of the post-feminist ideal. However, just a few weeks later Spears re-instigated controversy by posing for the cover of the birthday edition of *Q* magazine. (See Fig. 2)



Fig. 2: Britney Spears on the front cover of *Q* magazine. (November 2006)

Dressed in a polka dot bikini, her hair returned to bleach blonde, Spears stands sideways so as to highlight her pregnant belly, sucks on a red lollipop, and cocks her head coquettishly at the viewer. This soft core pornographic, naughty schoolgirl aesthetic, posed specifically to over-stimulate *Q*'s readers, is not so much a celebration of the pregnant female body as an explicit example of the recent eroticization and objectification of the pregnant body. Fans' opinions, voiced somewhat viciously in internet chat rooms, challenged the appropriateness of the *Q* cover. According to the 164,000 websites dedicated to voicing opinions on Britney Spears' maternalism (key words: trailer trash, Spears, single mother, *Q*), the *Q* photo was indicative of her status as a single mother (or prostitute), on welfare benefits and living in a trailer park. Paradoxically, at the time of writing, Spears was still married and living with the father of her two children, yet she is described time and time again as a single mother. Or at least on the path towards becoming one as the following quote demonstrates, "Spears-perhaps the world's most advantaged bad mother will be able to fulfil her life's

ambition of being a haggard, divorced single mum while she is still young enough to revel in it".⁶⁶ Although it is true that the media had been reporting that Spears' marriage was in trouble prior to the *Q* picture, and Spears had been questioned by children's welfare officers after an incident in which she was photographed with her son sitting on her lap whilst she was driving, the disapproval voiced about Spears centred on her cultural value, and by extension, her moral worth. By not adopting the correct signifiers, Spears is immediately associated with a social category of women who are similarly vilified, working class, poor, lone mothers whose bodies display a socially constructed "incorporated history" of narratives about immorality, promiscuity, and poverty.⁶⁷ Spears' soft core porn image on the cover of *Q* is sanctioned by the very same media that attacks the promiscuity and subsequent rise of teenage lone mothers, characterizing their sexuality as out of control and their bodies as images of disgust. It is not surprising then that recent media scrutiny of Spears after her divorce focused on her 'out of control' behaviour. The narrative of her fall from grace as the iconic post-feminist woman to the knicker-less, drunken, promiscuous lone mother had already been cast.

Yet, this dynamic, pernicious cultural backdrop has helped to create a plethora of literature of resistance, challenging contemporary constructions of motherhood and rejecting the celebration of the 'yummy mummy' narrative, (Kate Long's, *The Bad Mother's Handbook*; Polly Williams' *The Rise and Fall of A Yummy Mummy* etc). These books' themes of rejection and resistance reminds us of the work of Marina Warner who suggests that motherhood is the very social construction that allows women the opportunity to rebel against a patriarchal, oppressive set of governances because it is the only space in which

⁶⁶ www.postchronicle/news/entertainment.com (15/04/07).

⁶⁷ Angela McRobbie. Notes on 'What Not To Wear' and Post Feminist Symbolic Violence'. Lisa Adkins and Beverley Skeggs. *Feminism after Bourdieu*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Pp 99-109. See also Analee Newitz *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1997) where she explores stereotypes about the social conditions of poor whites in the U.S.

women still hold power.⁶⁸ Clearly Warner's sentiments are contestable; claiming that motherhood provides a space for resistance does not acknowledge entrenched power relationships that disavow the authority of mothers. As we have seen, power is inextricably bound up with cultural value; to have power as a mother one must obtain the signifiers of cultural worth, thus to view oneself as a subversive, bad mother giving children fish fingers rather than sun dried tomatoes (as these books indicate), or rejecting Susannah and Trinny, the fashion makers of television's, *What Not to Wear* advice on how to maintain the image of the 'yummy mummy' are offensive and exclusionary discourses for lone mothers whose economic position denies the choice to swap one cultural signifier with the signifier of another demographic as a means of female resistance and empowerment.

The new literature contesting 'momism' allows and celebrates the subversion of discourses of motherhood for middle-class affluent mothers (lone, but more often married), or more precisely for those women who are able to maintain a strong place in the capitalist consumer market. In so doing, they silence the real economic, social, and political condition of women without autonomy, the working class, and black welfare lone mothers governed by institutional rules and economic sanctions that dictate the way these women are allowed to behave. Welfare policy requires mothers applying for financial aid to detail their personal circumstances, subjecting women to invasive and moralistic questioning about their sexual and personal lives. Lone mothers cannot be unruly or they run the risk of losing their entitlement to welfare benefits. Lone mothers must raise their children in the way the society deems proper or they are obliged to attend parenting classes (sometimes even before the baby is born) to ensure entitlement to welfare aid. Lone mothers run the risk of eviction if authorities are unable to tick all the boxes that deem a woman a good enough mother. Lone

⁶⁸ Marina Warner. *Six Myths of Our Time: Managing Monsters*. The Reith Lectures 1994. (London: Vintage. 1994). Pg 11

mothers who refuse to give details of a child's father to local government authorities, for fear of violence, lose a percentage of their benefit payment as punishment.⁶⁹ Freedom of choice is not an option for these lone mothers; indeed the dictates of government ensure that children are firmly "anchored (financially, morally and legally)" within the preferred structure of the nuclear family and the ideological requisites of motherhood.⁷⁰

"Single mothers are HOT in Hollywood"

And yet, at the same time that the voice of the actual lone mother is being silenced in a political and cultural process of disenfranchisement, and rendered invisible under the weight of writings about her, lone motherhood has emerged as a rich, vibrant theme in popular culture. Considered by producers and advertisers as "family friendly fare", lone mothers have become a newly valorised marketing category employed to advertise products ranging from washing up liquid to children's goods, to promoting prominent U.S and U.K supermarket chains.⁷¹ Moreover the lone mother has become an established character in British and American sit-coms, drama series and reality television shows. More important to this thesis is the increased prominence of the lone mother as a well recognised archetype over a broad generic spectrum of cinematic texts. Films such as *Monsters Ball*, *Jerry Maguire*, *About A Boy*, *Are We There Yet*, *Dante's Peak* (Roger Donaldson: 1997), *The Gift* (Sam Raimi: 2000), *Pay It Forward*, *Chocolat* and Quentin Tarrantino's *Kill Bill* (2003) and *Kill Bill 2* (2004) centralize the figure of the lone mother. Whilst other texts, for example the

⁶⁹ A close friend and her young daughter had her weekly £70 Income Support benefit cut to £50 a week because she was too afraid of her violent ex-husband to give details to the Child Support Agency collection department. She was doubly punished by the state and by her ex-husband's violence and her uncooperative behaviour resulted in punitive measures being taken against her and her child.

⁷⁰ Jane Juffer. Pg 173

⁷¹ Ibid.. Pg 169.

recently released cult hit, *Snakes on A Plane* (David R. Ellis and Lex Halaby: 2006), and disaster movies such as the 2006 remake of *Poseidon* (Wolfgang Peterson: 2006) and *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder: 1996) have incorporated the lone mother into the mainstream as part of a well established ensemble of representations. (See Fig. 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4)



An ensemble of lone mothers. Fig. 3.1: Dorothy-*Jerry Maguire* (Renee Zellweger, 1996). Fig. 3.2: The lioness and her cub-*Kill Bill 2* (Uma Thurman, 2003). Fig. 3.3: Fiona-*About a Boy* (Toni Collette, 2002). Fig. 3.4: Annie Wilson-*The Gift* (Cate Blanchett, 2000).

And whilst the mother has always figured large in horror films more often than not as the actual figure of horror, recent films (particularly in Japanese texts that have been remade by Hollywood) such as *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu: 2003), *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski: 2002) and *Dark Waters* (Walter Salles: 2004) have positioned the lone mother as the central character who, although still a problematic figure, is often positioned as the active heroine of the story.⁷² Although not marketed or even specifically recognized as lone mother texts, these films' reliance on this figure clearly demonstrates cinema's re-investment in scenarios in which she plays a part.

⁷² For further reading on the monstrous mother see Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

Yet, it is worth reminding ourselves that whilst the investment in scenarios in which the lone mother figure plays a part might well be indicative of a more progressive cultural mindset, the lone mother character is not a new feature of cinema. Hollywood has portrayed her as a prominent character since the era of silent films albeit often depicted, as Sarah McAdam would argue, with an emphasis on sin. McAdam suggests that the rhetoric of sin surrounding classical Hollywood's lone mother character reflected specific historical concerns about female transgressive female sexuality. However it is important to recognise that the introduction of the Production Code (instituted in 1934) was often instrumental in defining and coding lone mothers in ways which averted issues of female promiscuity by regularly coding lone mother figures as either widowed or divorced. During the 1930s and 1940s, lone mother characters appeared on a regular basis as the central female protagonist in melodramas such as the 1937 classic *Stella Dallas*; Douglas Sirk's *An Imitation of Life* (1959) and the 1945 canonical maternal drama *Mildred Pierce*.

To offer a full analysis of these films would go beyond the remit of this chapter which is more concerned with contemporary representations. However I do want to argue that these strong female centred narratives of classic cinema offered the female viewer a space in which she could, albeit temporarily, resist dominant patriarchal ideologies. Rather than invoking the Madonna/whore female paradigm, these films presented lone mother figures who were victims of circumstance. Clearly the negotiation of the lone mother's agency in a narrative of victimization resulted in a limited representational palette. And it is hard to forget that Curtiz's film does code Mildred as an 'over-invested mother', directly linking Mildred's hyper-maternalism, her social position as a lone mother, and her independent status as a career woman to the destructive behaviour of her eldest daughter Veda's (Ann Blyth). Yet,

despite the narratological mediation of Mildred's maternalism, Mildred still maintains her own agency by building a successful business while single-handedly raising two daughters.

I suggest then that MacAdam's position that classic and silent cinematic depictions of the lone mother figure characterized her solely as weak and self-sacrificing in contrast to her contemporary cinematic counterpart is limited. I argue, alongside Andrea S. Walsh that the black and white celluloid lone mothers are presentations of women, who for the majority of the film, refused to be identified solely as 'mother' but as woman and as a professional female.⁷³ In so doing films like *Mildred Pierce* offered female viewers multiple points of reference which I suggest are less available in more contemporary texts. Indeed, maternal melodramas of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950 such as *Blonde Venus* (Josef Von Sternberg: 1932), *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* (Edgar Selwyn: 1931), *The Old Maid* (Edmund Golding: 1939), *The Great Lie* (Edmund Golding: 1941), *To Each His Own* (Mitchell Leisen: 1946), *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco: 1948), *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls: 1948) and *Peyton Place* (Mark Robson: 1957), while adhering to ideological strictures to do with female sexuality, maternal sacrifice and subjectivity managed to offer complex and shifting versions of lone motherhood. By the mid 1960s, and after the Production Code relaxed some of the earlier restrictions, filmmakers on both sides of the Atlantic were inspired "push the envelope" and a number of films emerged from Britain and America (the classic lone mother narrative *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Martin Scorsese: 1974) *The L Shaped Room* (Bryan Forbes: 1962) and *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson: 1961) are just three of many). These films were less about value judgements and more about "human beings dealing with a difficult situation".⁷⁴ By relaxing the restrictions of the production code, the lone mother figure no longer needed be coded as victim of circumstance. Instead,

⁷³ Andrea S. Walsh. *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950*. (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers. 1984). Pg.31

⁷⁴ MacAdam.

in films such as *The L Shaped Room*, the lone mother character, despite the social mores of the time, rejects an offer of marriage and chooses to return to France to raise her child alone. And it wasn't just in cinema that attitudes towards lone motherhood were beginning to shift. While the taint of illegitimacy still impinged on the 'good' character of a woman who found herself pregnant and unmarried, more emphasis was now being placed on helping the mother and child rather than punishing her. History tells us that some of the measures put in place to 'help' the unmarried mother were less than humane (see Ricki Sollinger's book *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe V. Wade* which describes some of the 'rehabilitative' measures enforced in the US and Kathleen Keirnan, Jane Lewis and Hilary Radner's *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain* for a comparative account) however MacAdam suggests that it is these ideological shifts that began in the 1960s which are presently responsible for positioning contemporary lone mother characters at the heart of the text and more often than not, as the heroine of the text.⁷⁵

The present high visibility of the lone mother archetype suggests that the cultural excoriation of the lone mother is over. Indeed, Barry writes that in these more "recent films" such as those celebrated at the 73 Academy Awards, "the women who portray the characters and the characters themselves are strong, courageous and willing to take risks".⁷⁶ Hollywood's investment in lone mother narratives is a positive trend, argues Jeff Sharpe, co-producer of *You Can Count on Me*, one "that reflects the real lives of lone mothers...strong, successful women who are raising families and having good careers without partners. These women aren't victims. Hollywood has realised they should be given stronger, more visible roles".⁷⁷ In casting such popular and well established actresses as Julia Roberts, Juliette Binoche, Ellen Burstyn and so on to play the role of the films' lone mother, Hollywood can

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ebner. *Lone Stars*. Pg 2

⁷⁷ Jeff Sharpe cited in Ebner.

legitimately claim to be giving “recognition to actual lone mothers”.⁷⁸ However, it is worth taking a moment to consider the full implication of Barry’s claim that “the women who play these characters and the characters themselves are strong, courageous and willing to take risks. Is Barry intimating that these actresses are taking a risk when playing the texts’ lone mother? If so why? Is the lone mother still perceived as such a non-normative character that portraying her poses a threat to an actress’s career trajectory?

With these questions in mind, I consider whether the increased prominence of the lone mother archetype should be understood as a political gesture on behalf of mainstream cinema to position itself as inclusive and diverse. Does Hollywood reflect the sentiments of actress Janet McTeer, lone mother of the film *Tumbleweeds* (Gavin O’Connor: 1999), who suggests “single moms regularly pop up because it’s more typical for a woman to have to raise children on her own”.⁷⁹ Is mainstream cinema really reflecting an ideological shift that sees lone mothers as an integral figure in the social world so much so that the industry has moved away from the days of moral judgementalism? Certainly, given statistical evidence that says 1 in 4 children live in lone mothered households it would not make fiscal sense for the film industry to do otherwise. Indeed, Professor Ron Falzone asserts that the rise in lone mother narratives has had as much to do with financial acumen as a shift in ideological perspective. “The entertainment industry”, he writes, “is not socially innovative and follows what it believes the public wants and finds acceptable. Single moms in cinema are without question more acceptable now because the American public is more willing to accept the idea of the single mother and willing to see these movies with these characters- if there were no market, there would probably still be few positively portrayed single moms on film”.⁸⁰ Undoubtedly,

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ruth Steine. ‘Mommies Dearest: Mothers Raising Their Daughters Alone is A Popular Theme in Hollywood’. www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article 01/11/99

⁸⁰ Falzone cited in MacAdam

films such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000) prove the financial worth of investing in the cultural prioritization of the lone mother.

Erin Brockovich may be the most successful and significant lone mother to grace cinema screens. Certainly the choice of Julia Roberts to play the role of a lone mother attests to the marketability of the narrative trope. And the film clearly elevated the status of Julia Roberts to that of a 'serious actress'; commanding very high financial remuneration and burnishing her strong box office record with the artistic credibility of an Oscar. And how refreshing to see this uneducated, twice divorced, former beauty queen, lone mother succeed against all odds and win the legal taken case against the monolithic corporation (Pacific Gas and Electric). *Erin Brockovich* explicitly highlights issues of inadequate child care provision and the spectre of poverty; it challenges our preconceptions about uneducated, lone, working class mothers and distorts a well established narrative in which selfless women have stood by with their children while men pursued their own destinies.

Whilst *Erin Brockovich* does not openly punish its lone mother, I argue that there is need for a more cautious approach to the celebration of historical and ideological progression in this representational field. Yes, the lone mother is there, and yes, she is often played by well known actresses but I suggest she remains a deeply problematic figure. Central to *Erin Brockovich* is an explicit examination of the protagonist's maternal skills voiced by the film's surrogate father figure and Erin's paternalistic boss, Ed Massry (Albert Finney). Although I could argue that the film does not shy away from addressing the personal sacrifices working women face when balancing a family with a career, the inclusion of such scenes as one in which the youngest child speaks her first word while Erin is away function to code her as a negligent mother. (How often is the same narrative scenario repeated in films about

fatherhood?) What is more, the use of the film's surrogate father figure, Jorge (Aaron Eckhart) to voice concerns about Erin's parenting reinforces cultural discourses that continue to invest the father with moral authority.⁸¹ According to the film, Jorge is such a good man to take on the responsibility of this lone mother's children, and he seems to do it so much better than she can. Yet, in her self help guide, *Take it From Me- Life's a Struggle- But You Can Win* (2002) Brockovich notes that in a film celebrated for its realism, the portrayal of Jorge drifted far away from reality. "Remember Jorge", she writes "that "great guy" in the movie who 'volunteered' to take care of my kids while I worked on the case, Ed Masry's law firm hired Jorge to be my children's nanny. That's right; Jorge was paid to take care of the kids".

⁸² Why would such a crucial business transaction be left out of the film? Surely the fact that the law company was willing to pay for child care would demonstrate their financial and professional investment in the capability of the film's lone mother. To do so would accord Erin the agency to be fully independent and take control of her own life.⁸³ Instead, the film invites us to surmise that without Jorge's help Erin would never have been able to continue her quest. The people of Hinkley would still be drinking polluted water and, more importantly, this film's working class, uneducated lone mother would remain poor, uneducated and alone.

⁸¹ Although most publicity material refers to the character played by Aaron Eckhart as George, Erin Brockovich, refers to Jorge. By changing the spelling of the name, Soderbergh could be accused of displacing Erin's authority. Furthermore, by replacing the Hispanic/Latino name Jorge to an explicitly WASP name George, Soderbergh continues a process of masculinization of the feminized masculinity of an ethnic other. It's worth noting that for eleven years out of the past seventeen, George has been the name of the American president. The choice to substitute Jorge for George strengthens the argument that at its core, *Erin Brockovich's* thematic concerns are about American masculinity and fatherhood.

⁸² Erin Brockovich with Marc Elliott. *Take It From Me-Life's A Struggle But You Can Win*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies. 2002). Pg 17

⁸³ After being asked to leave, Jorge stole from Erin, and took her to court for a percentage of the fee she won in the first instance in the claim against PG&E. When Masry's law firm threatened legal proceedings against Jorge for harassment, Jorge threatened to submit evidence to the court that supposedly proved Erin a negligent mother. Whilst no such evidence existed, Jorge had joined ranks with Erin's first husband and both men demanded money from her (even though she had given the financial backing to a business venture of her second husband). Eventually, after protracted legal wrangling, Brockovich made an out of court settlement in order to protect her children.

To write about *Erin Brockovich* and ignore the costume choices for the film's lone mother would overlook a key channel for the communication of cultural discourse about class, sexuality and lone motherhood. The film spends a considerable amount of its time looking at, and inviting the audience to look at this lone mother's body. (See Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: Erin Brockovich displaying her body, 2000

Tight fitting short skirts and cleavage enhancing tops are reminiscent of the clothes worn by Roberts playing a prostitute in another celebrated role in *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall: 1990) and strengthen the presuppositions about the errant sexual behaviour of lower class, lone mothers. This is reinforced in a scene where Brockovich informs Jorge that she is resolved not to have a sexual relationship with him—yet we witness the couple having sex in a later scene. *Erin Brockovich* explicitly appropriates backlash rhetoric by extolling the notion that the postfeminist woman can once again use their bodies as a legitimate means of gaining power. Time and time again Erin displays her body to men as a method of getting what she wants and in so doing she distracts attention away from the politics of the film by constant reference to sex.⁸⁴ In the words of Roger Ebert, film critic for the *Chicago Sun*

⁸⁴ There is a flaw in my argument, in that the real Erin Brockovich does dress in a provocative style. However, the consistent use of overtly sexual costume not only reinforces stereotypes about working class lone mothers, and working class women in general, it also serves to create a character that exists somewhere between an exaggerated cartoon and a diversion.

Times, the film's main message is sex, or in his words "If the medium is the message, the message in this movie is sex".⁸⁵ And if the message about lower class lone motherhood is also one about sex, then *Erin Brockovich* does little to elevate the social position of lower class lone mothers.

A further example of the mediated representation of lone motherhood is demonstrated in the international art house success and Oscar nominated film *Chocolat*. Hallstrom's film foregrounds the puritanical, bigoted, conservative and intolerant nature of the religious community that Vianne (Juliette Binoche), the film's lone mother has to negotiate. Adapted from the book written by British author Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* tells the story of Vianne and her young daughter Anouk (Victoire Thivisol) who appear overnight in a small French village and open a chocolate shop opposite the church during the Catholic season of Lent. Vianne's arrival and her subversive attitude towards religiosity infuriates the town's major, La Comte Paul de Reynaud (Alfred Molina), a staunchly fierce Catholic who watches in horror as the town's inhabitants (particularly the women) are tempted off the 'straight and narrow' by this mysterious lone mother and her seemingly magical confectionary. (See Fig. 5)



Fig. 5: Vianne opens her 'magical' chocolate shop, 2000.

⁸⁵ Roger Ebert. 'Erin Brockovich Review' www.Robertebert.com. 17/03/2000

In setting up a binary paradigm in which religion, patriarchy and social order are in conflict with paganism, femaleness, and nature it could be argued that *Chocolat* offers a supportive and celebratory space to critique preconceived ideas about the lone mother and the supposed danger she poses to society.⁸⁶

Clearly informed by established feminist discourses *Chocolat* offers vibrant images of strong female relationships and foregrounds the effects of domestic violence and of institutional and patriarchal oppression. In coding the central protagonist as a lone mother and presenting her as a sympathetic character, *Chocolat* is also concerned to highlight the pernicious nature of discourse that surrounds her body. Nevertheless, it is *Chocolat's* use of magic realism that begins the process of mediating the representation of its lone mother. Coding the film as a fairy tale and imbuing Vianne with a sense of magic begins a process of negotiating the primacy of the lone mother (which has already been mediated by using the voice of the daughter to narrate their story) and undermines the progressive nature of the text. We are invited to conclude that Vianne's power is a result of the magic she inherits through her mother; a woman of colour who bewitches Vianne's father in an almost primitive, hypnotic ritual and who left her husband to raise her daughter alone. Inherent in this narrative is social discourse on lone motherhood as a learned cultural behaviour, part of a detrimental cycle rather than a proactive choice (as well as an essentially racist discourse about the hypersexual black woman). In other words, *Chocolat* invites us to conclude that

⁸⁶ *Chocolat* incorporates implicit and explicit references to Mayan paganism. Maya rituals and ceremonies were very much based on natural elements and the celestial and terrestrial cycles so when Vianne arrives in the French Village on the North wind (a tradition passed on from her mother) the connections are made explicit. The links to paganism continue through Vianne's use of chocolate as a palliative for the ailments of the community. Cacao beans were cultivated by pre-Columbian civilizations such as the Maya and the first chocolate drinks were made by the Aztecs and Mayas. These chocolate drinks were thought to have a healing, hallucinatory effect, mainly due to the active constituent of *theobroma*, which means 'food of the gods'. In fact, it is the magical healing remedies of the Mayan Indians that motivates Vianne's father to journey to South America where he is intoxicated by a mysterious chocolate beverage, and bewitched by Vianne's mother, who, after marrying him, moves to France. However, the call of the North wind is too strong for Vianne's mother, and she leaves her husband to return to South America curing ill health and phobias with the magical chocolate cure. *Chocolat* is not a film that contrasts atheism with Catholicism, but paganism with organised, structured religion. South America is recognised as predominantly Catholic, it is a form of Catholicism very closely tied to a mix of ancestral Maya forms of paganism.

Vianne's destiny (and presumably that of her daughter) is predetermined by being raised by a lone mother. Furthermore her esoteric, exotic and magical nature codes Vianne as 'Other' which excuses and justifies her social and narratological position as an unwed lone mother.

Despite Vianne's centrality throughout the story, her voice becomes quieter as the peripheral characters emerge from the margins. Although the film challenges our preconceptions of lone motherhood, as *Chocolat* continues we are invited to start questioning Vianne's authority, particularly when Anouk is bullied at school because of her status as a fatherless child. Furthermore, Anouk's relationship with her imaginary friend (a kangaroo called Pontouff) reinforces Freudian psychoanalytic theory that perceives the imaginary friend as a replacement for the loss of, or lack of attention from a parent.⁸⁷ Anouk's friend Pontouff becomes a repetition of her 'self'. Pontouff substantiates Anouk's identity and supports her in situations of psychological threat. According to *Chocolat*, Anouk's imaginary friend not only functions as a replacement for the father, it also protects her from the threats made to her inner emotional health as the child of a lone mother. In so doing the agency of *Chocolat's* lone mother is mediated through well established (and well contested) psychoanalytic discourse that is central to problematizing lone motherhood.

Furthermore, whilst La Comte de Reynaud fails to transform the ailing masculinity of the violent husband Serge (Peter Stormare), *Chocolat* still maintains a male redemption narrative at its heart. Whereas Vianne only appears to gain acceptance from the community because of her extended role as a nurturer, healer, protector and confidant, by the film's conclusion, La Comte is empowered to face some personal truths, deal with the breakdown of

⁸⁷ According to Aboriginal shamanism the kangaroo symbolizes self- protection because it can kick very hard with its back legs. The kangaroo is also believed to teach "us how to jump over obstacles, prevents us from doing what we wish". Since it lives in family groups and takes good care of its young, the kangaroo is also associated with family ties, sharing and nurturing. www.dierinbeeld.com (Sourced 11/09/07)

his marriage, and find true love again, all of which function in a process redemption to enable La Comte to maintain his authority in the community. As such Vianne's subjectivity is marginalised because she functions as a conduit for social acceptance, a catalytic enlightening force of instruction and a device for the transformation of masculinity. Furthermore *Chocolat* employs a well established trope of contrasting a 'good' mother figure with a mother who the film codes as 'bad'; in this instance the suffocating and controlling lone mother Caroline Clairmont (Carrie-Anne Moss). In so doing *Chocolat* pits women against women and mothers against mothers thus perpetuating the 'momism' binary that so rigorously dictates desired requisites of 'good' motherhood. More insidious is the pathologization of the relationship between Caroline Clairmont and her artistic young son, Luc (Aurelien Parent Koenig). In its depiction of Clairmont as overprotective and oppressive, *Chocolat* maintains a social discourse that correlates dominant maternal influence with ruptured heterosexual masculine maturation. The fact that Luc is already coded as artistic and of fragile health immediately signifies that the threat to his successful maturation is already in process.

Chocolat and *Erin Brockovich* may well have offered a new representational space for the female audience but, in the words of Lauren Rabinovitz, "Several forces of containment are already in place working against the space."⁸⁸ Just as in society, mainstream cinema's relationship with the lone mother is at best uneasy, at its worst complicit in denying the lone mother character autonomy by employing her as a narrative and political device to service masculinity. Evident in *Erin Brockovich* and *Chocolat* are narratives that reflect commonplace social, political and cultural ideologies coding the lone mother as abject, disruptive, the cause of social upheaval, neglectful, and threatening to the welfare of her

⁸⁸ Lauren Rabinovitz. 'Sitcoms and Single Moms: Representations of Feminism on American TV'. *Cinema Journal* 29. No.1. Fall 1989. Pp 3-19

child/children. Pivotal in both films is a narrative that centralizes the lone mother to reconfigure the obsolete masculinity of the central male protagonist, reflecting the common held conviction that masculinity, (or more pertinently, white masculinity) is under threat.

The ‘problem’ of contemporary masculinity has advanced as a central cultural concern, initiating vast amounts of self- help and pseudo scientific rhetoric designed specifically to help men recover from their post-feminist affliction. Film scholars have vigorously argued that popular mainstream cinema has been a central force in the process of negotiating masculinity.⁸⁹ Films such as *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson: 1994), *Regarding Henry* (Mike Nichols: 1991), *Unbreakable* (M. Night Shyamalan: 2000), *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne: 1987), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson: 2000), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher: 1993), *Road To Perdition* (Sam Mendes: 2002), *Fight Club* , *Jerry Maguire* , *Liar Liar* (Tom Shadyac: 1997), *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac: 2003) foreground narratives of troubled and disempowered masculinity that purport to have been rendered invalid by feminist ideologies. Describing the shift in representations of masculinity in 1990s Hollywood from the macho hero to the compassionate, nurturing ‘new man’, Susan Jeffords emphasizes the vital function of family in the process of negotiation, stating “families provide both the motivation for and the resolution of changing masculine heroism”.⁹⁰ Such texts explicitly posit the belief that family provides the incentive for, and transformation of troubled masculine identity.

⁸⁹ Stella Bruzzi. *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in post-war Hollywood*. (London: BFI, 2005), Janet Thurmin, Sarah Harwood and Jo Campling (eds). *Family Fictions: Representations of Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (eds). *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998).

⁹⁰ Susan Jeffords. ‘The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties’. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds). *Film Theory Goes To The Movies*. London, New York: Routledge 1993). Pg 200

These films' reliance on the presence of woman and mother as 'Other' to regenerate masculine identity has been well accounted for. Yet the recent proliferation of texts with a lone mother positioned as 'Other' seems, surprisingly, to have been ignored within feminist debate about motherhood, female agency, subjectivity and the complex issue of post-feminism. Whilst Jeffords is concerned with the thematic of the renegotiation of masculine identity and the role of fatherhood in her analysis of the 1990 film *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman) she omits to mention that John Kimball (Arnold Schwarzenegger) transforms his identity from 'warrior cop' to a father figure with the help of a lone mother. I argue that the presence of a lone mother in the process of Kimball's makeover makes for a more complex reading. Whilst progressive in its representation of masculinity in response to feminist challenges, the film conforms to patriarchal, neo-conservative ideology that sees fatherhood as the saviour of obsolete masculinity and a troubled society, and marriage as the remedy to the problem of lone motherhood.

The choice to use a lone mother figure in the renegotiation of masculinity through a fatherhood narrative rapidly elevates the status of the male who chooses to 'take on' the responsibility of another man's child. That he takes on the role of father even though he has no biological imperative to do so is even more laudable.⁹¹ At its worst, *Kindergarten Cop* reflects Arnold Schwarzenegger's personal and political concerns (voiced as Governor of California), that "single parenting is a danger and that's what we have to avoid".⁹²

⁹¹ Paradoxically, the paradigmatic choice of fatherhood explicitly highlights the socially constructed nature of fatherhood as a learned behaviour.

⁹² www.archive.salon.com (29/01/ 2001)

Schwarzenegger's choice to play both father and mother in *Junior* (1994) complicates his earlier political sentiments. In the film, Schwarzenegger plays a scientist who is artificially impregnated as part of a fertility trial. The story follows the events leading up to the birth of the baby as we witness cinema's leading macho man melting with feelings of protectiveness and maternal concern. Clearly *Junior* incorporates a narrative of transforming masculine identity although through an elaborate and highly unbelievable trope. However, at its core is a narrative about a single, unwed mother who is advised to terminate her pregnancy and who refuses with the phrase "My body, my choice", a slogan particularly resonant with feminist politics. Ostensibly *Junior* could be read as a progressive text inasmuch as it does allow the central protagonist to continue with an out-of-

Likewise, as I noted in the introduction, Kaplan also fails to note the political status of the lone mother in *Look Who's Talking*, a status which was particularly vilified at the time of the film's release. Kaplan's work highlights the process of objectifying the mother through displacement and transference of her agency and centrality onto the films' male bodies. However, by ignoring the cultural, political and personal status of the film's lone mother, Kaplan neglects the political, social and cultural discourses that further strengthen her argument about Freud's displacement theory. The process of displacing the mother's agency through the presence of a male body is particularly pertinent for lone mothers who are warned that the only way to ensure successful maturation of a young boy is to hand over their parental authority to a man in order to raise her son within the structure of a patriarchal family unit. In the following analysis I pay close attention to the sentient and expressive details in *Look Who's Talking* to consider how Freud's displacement theory is deployed as a method of negotiating the agency of this celluloid lone mother figure.

Step Aside Mom, Daddy's Home.

Standing alone in a hospital corridor, Molly (Kirstie Alley), the 37-year-old, financially independent lone mother of *Look Who's Talking*, observes a group of new fathers crooning over their newborn progeny. Turning to face her baby son through the window of the nursery, Molly apologises for "messing up" and promises that life will improve just as soon as she "goes out there and finds the best daddy there is". It is poignant that at this point

wedlock pregnancy and certainly breaks conventional gender boundaries. However, choosing a male to 'carry' the child puts the film in the realm of the fantastical thus ensuring that any political reverberations are lost in the unreality of the narrative. In addition, we are assured by the close of the film that the blurred boundaries of gender and fatherhood/motherhood will be resolved and the child will be raised by a mother (Emma Thompson as Dr Reddin, the love interest) and a father, albeit an extra special father who instinctively understands the needs of both the child and those of the woman because he has been a woman.

in the film Molly is not seen in the company of the other new mothers because, as an unwed lone mother she is not sanctioned to be in their physical and emotional space. In fact, the spatial distance between Molly and the other mothers, and Molly and the fathers, symbolically reflects the space in which she resides—a place of improper motherhood because her lone mother status requires that she play the role of father too. It is through this space she must journey in order to find her ‘proper’ position and to make the transformation from lone mother to wife. Her journey from ‘improper’ maternalism to ‘proper’ motherhood explicitly disavows this lone mother’s autonomy and subjectivity by deeming her social status as transitory and her maternalism as wholly lacking. By the close of the film Molly returns to the same hospital to give birth to her daughter—the subject of *Look Who’s Talking Too* (1990). Both mother and father are positioned correctly; Molly is in bed in a room with the other mothers and her husband is looking through the nursery window at his newborn daughter alongside the other new fathers.

Neither the film, nor Molly, offer any explicit reasons for her resolve to find a father for her son. And yet, the opening of the film treats fatherhood with a degree of suspicion, coding the natural father as both selfish and adulterous. However, with the working title of the film, *Daddy’s Home* in mind, I argue *Look Who’s Talking* succinctly describes the narrative function of the film’s lone mother—as a narrative device which elevates and secures the position of masculinity and the role of fatherhood in a process which silences and disempowers her.

Indeed, the film’s thematic concerns are made clear from the moment of conception. Whilst we witness Molly experiencing the physical discomfort of early pregnancy our interest is directed to the feelings and observations of the foetus Mikey (voiced by Bruce Willis the

hyper-masculine hero of 1980's action cinema). According to the embryonic child a voice from the point of conception and having him describe his thoughts and experiences, might make for good comedy, but, as Kaplan suggests, it is at the expense of the mother. In displacing the mother-as-subject to mother-as-object from the moment of conception, the film sets up an oedipal triangle that must be resolved, so that by the close of the film we can be assured that Mikey will pass successfully from childhood into mature heterosexual masculinity. In order for a positive resolution to take place, Mikey must be taught by, or at least be in the company of a man, who we are certain can teach him the requisites of masculinity. According to *Look Who's Talking*, that choice can only be made by the male child himself, —a common theme in mainstream cinematic lone mother narratives such as *Pay It Forward*, *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang: 2002), and *Jerry Maguire*. Bestowing the male child the authority to choose a husband for the mother and father figure for themselves denies the lone mother agency in the process and in her own life. Such denial is made even more pertinent in a film that has its lone mother forcefully voice clear intentions to find a father for her son from the outset.

The negotiation of the lone mother's subjectivity and agency creates, as Kaplan intimates, further Oedipal rivalry between Molly's prospective boyfriends and the desires of the male child. In so doing, the lone mother of *Look Who's Talking* becomes an "object of exchange between, if not men, then males" and as such, she reflects the cultural, political, and social objectification of the 'actual' lone mother.⁹³ Standing at the threshold of the shifting representations of masculinity as described by Jeffords, *Look Who's Talking* is particularly noteworthy in its depiction of acceptable and non-acceptable masculinity. The film rejects the first three contenders for Molly's affections for their neurotic, aggressive, and self centred attitudes, and when it reunites Molly with the biological father of her child, the film codes

⁹³ E Ann Kaplan. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. (London: Routledge, 1992) Pg. 205

Arthur (George Segal) as a serial adulterer, concerned only with the material trappings of consumerism and lifestyle (all traits associated with femininity). According to *Look Who's Talking*, the preferred image of masculinity in this film comes in the guise of working class taxi driver, James (played by John Travolta) whose image as a 'real man' is juxtaposed with the 80s yuppie male we often see in films of the period such as *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker: 1990).⁹⁴

James is introduced to the audience driving Molly to the hospital while encouraging Molly to practice her Lamaze breathing techniques, a role normally and immediately associative with the transition to fatherhood. That Molly has to be told how to breathe by a man who does not have children of his own underlines and undermines her status as a dependent woman and questions her suitability for the role of mother that the film suggests she is so obviously unprepared for. As the film progresses we see James regularly visiting Molly's home, and fully at ease with Mikey (James refers to Mikey as his best friend), he quickly establishes a strong bond with the child. Indeed it is the two males who share the strongest bond; one that Kaplan suggests posits the two males as the "real couple" of the film.

⁹⁵ (See Fig. 6)

⁹⁴ The choice of Travolta as father figure, or the face of acceptable masculinity is particularly fascinating, given his previous role in the 1970's musical *Saturday Night Fever*, (a genre which has had to mediate male spectacle with masculinity) where the film explicitly foregrounds the erotic component of the male gaze in a homoerotic narrative and display of the eroticized male body, creating an extremely unstable image of masculinity. Furthermore, in coding Travolta as an Italian -American, *Saturday Night Fever* denies him the opportunity to be perceived as symbolic of true American masculinity. Whilst the link between *Saturday Night Fever* and *Look Who's Talking* is tenuous, I suggest John Badham's explanation for casting Travolta for *Saturday Night Fever*, for his "combination of macho-feminine traits" bears some light on *Look Who's Talking's* investment in Travolta. The 'feminine' traits of sensitivity, nurturance and protectiveness evident in Travolta's persona are exactly the requirements, as Jeffords reflects, of the new type of masculinity that was beginning to emerge in mainstream cinema.

⁹⁵ Kaplan. Pg 208.



Fig. 6: James and Mikey bonding.

The film showcases the growing male bond in scenes where James and Mikey dance together, play cards, watch football, practice driving the car, and conspire and look to each other for mutual support when criticizing Molly's parenting skills. As a result, the primacy and authority of the lone mother is displaced and transferred onto the body of the film's father figure, a transference which begins the separation process of the mother and son deemed vital to the successful maturation of a male child. In so doing, *Look Who's Talking* assures us that the threat of an incestuous relationship forming between mother and son (the threat of incest is a discourse consistently underpinning all lone mother/son narratives). Indeed, the inherent threat posed by the lone mother to her son's heterosexuality is explicitly erased when James introduces Mikey to a female work colleague. Noting that the young boy is staring at the women's breasts, James laughs and states "You must be thinking the same as I am", to which Mikey replies, "Yeah, lunch". Obviously Mikey is too young to understand the sexual nature of such an encounter, but we can be sure, that under the tutelage of James he certainly will come to do so.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ *Look Who's Talking* was a breakaway hit and a rare commercial success for Travolta at that stage of his career. In contrast, Alley's career saw a sharp nose dive after the third film in the *Look Who's Talking* franchise. Working mainly in television, Alley's career revival has been centred on her struggle to lose weight in order to rekindle her Hollywood career.

Although Kaplan does not discuss the two remaining films in the *Look Who's Talking* franchise, *Look Who's Talking Too* (1990) continues the process of marginalizing the maternal figure. Whilst the first film was noticeably interested in the father/son relationship and the successful socialization and education of the young male child, *Look Who's Talking Too* (Amy Heckerling:1990) does attempt to address the 'gender' problem through the birth of a female child, Julie (voiced by Roseanne Barr). However, the follow up film, which centralises the female child, does not prioritize the mother and daughter relationship. Instead, *Look Who's Talking Too* makes explicit reference to the young girl's voice within the family as secondary, according Mikey the authority to teach her about her life. It is Mikey's common sense and reason that ensures they both narrowly escape a house fire, and it is Mikey who encourages the audience to laugh at his sister's adjustment to the world in a sardonic voice over in the immediate months after her birth. In all that process of learning, Molly is not to be seen or heard. Just as in the first film, the voice of authority is bestowed upon the male child thus to ensure that Molly's maternal agency is further diminished.

Look Who's Talking takes its place amongst the increasing number of films whose central male protagonist is enlivened and transformed with the support of the text's lone mother; increasingly positioning her on the margins, as the supporting actress, the one with the quieter voice but restorative impact. Whilst she may be coded as more capable and certainly less raucous than her classical cinematic counterparts (see *Stella Dallas* especially), she is employed primarily as a catalyst for change. Her role is reduced to that of Other; contained on the periphery of the text and in the service of masculinity. Remember Jerry Maguire's famous commitment speech and celebrated tagline "You complete me"? Dorothy (Renee Zellwegger), the lone mother of *Jerry Maguire* is utilized to reconfigure the obsolete masculinity of the film's central protagonist. In so doing, the film reflects and reinforces the

cultural conviction that masculinity has been disempowered and rendered invalid by feminism, positing the popular belief that family provides the incentive for, and transformation of, troubled masculinity. Whilst mainstream cinema does not treat the lone mother with the same vitriol as the popular press does, underlying *Jerry Maguire* is an insidious backlash narrative that offers the heterosexual nuclear family as the only remedy for men and women's post-feminist anguish. More problematically, *Jerry Maguire* reflects the political idea that the lone mothered household is disposable—lone mothers become a quick fix for masculinity in trouble.

This chapter has briefly mapped out a cultural landscape in which the lone mother plays a central role in the transformation and rehabilitation of masculinity, the social, political and cultural disavowal of feminism, the reinforcement the 'momism' hierarchy and serves as shorthand to explain numerous social ills. In the following chapter I consider the political and cultural currency of the black lone mother figure—a form of female identity so closely associated with social decay—with the specific aim of highlighting the exclusionary nature of this postfeminist, post-race society.

Chapter Two

Baby Mamas and Welfare Queens: Filmic Representations of Black Lone Mothers

“Black lone mothers are used up, run down, left over damaged goods in their thirties; they have wasted their youth and beauty on bad boys, getting dick rammed, licking and sucking off their dicks and balls and having bad boys cum in their mouth. Now these old cunts with their dried up breast and date raped STD infested, loose worn out pussy, are seeking good men to settle down with and they can’t find any”.⁹⁷ ColonelChoppa. 2009

“To say a black lone mother’s life is valuable would be a revolutionary thing”.⁹⁸ bell hooks

Theorizing Cinema’s Black Lone Mothers

I begin this chapter with the provocative and highly offensive words of *ColonelChoppa*, self-appointed spokesman for all things to do with black masculinity, (articulated in a video posting on the internet website *YouTube*) as a means of highlighting the vicious and continued nature of the attacks levelled at black lone mothers. I do not wish to accord *ColonelChoppa*’s rhetoric (nor that of his disciples, and be sure there are many) any more power, nor do I wish to cause further offence.⁹⁹ I foreground these sentiments

⁹⁷ ColonelChoppa. ‘Single Black Mothers and Their Thugs’. 5th March 2009 www.YouTube.com (sourced 09/05/09).

⁹⁸ bell hooks. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1996) Pg 113

⁹⁹ *SgtWilliePete*, *Lincolonontheweb*, *PresidentoftheBlack* are just three among many regular video postings who wax lyrical (and often, not so lyrically) in debates about black lone mothers on YouTube website. I maintain

precisely to highlight the high cultural currency of the figure of the black lone mother as abject and threatening within the social world, and more particularly within the African American population.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, for decades the black lone mother has been the victim of continuous vicious attacks on both a discursive and literal level. Historically constructed as the epitome of abhorrent femininity—overtly promiscuous and overly fecund—the black lone mother is described simultaneously as black men’s “club meat” and as white “men’s dried up whore”.¹⁰¹ The tradition of casting the black lone mother’s status as typically sexual has given credence to the disturbingly high numbers of threats of sexual and physical violence towards black women who raise children alone articulated on social network sites.

The historical, social and political construction of black lone motherhood as a distinctly pejorative social identity has been persistently incorporated into political and cultural discourse with particularly pernicious results for black lone mothers and their children. Such effects have been made most manifest in the punitive reform acts introduced in the Reagan era and by subsequent governments influenced by psycho-social and biologically deterministic theories and ideas that determine black lone motherhood as evidence of maternal failure and failed citizenship. With 40% of US black children being raised in lone mothered households, this demographic of women has thus emerged as a highly visible group for political and social target practice.¹⁰²

that it is vitally important to make visible such discriminatory discursive practices in order that we might challenge a global media conglomerate that heralds its service as one which promotes and embodies democracy and makes public its policy to monitor for defamation, pornography and material encouraging criminal conduct.

¹⁰⁰ In light of Cornel West’s argument about notions of an authentic ‘black community’ as being problematically ‘value-laden, socially loaded and ideologically charged’ I employ the term African American Community with unease because it requires that we adhere to an “uncontested consensus” regarding all black people. Nonetheless there will be times when I refer to the term in quotes or, on occasion as a way to highlight discourses of homogeneity. Cornel West. ‘The New Cultural Politics of Difference’ in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. (Eds) Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh.T Min-ha, Cornell West. (Cambridge; Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1995) Pg 28

¹⁰¹ PresidentoftheBlack. ‘Stay Away from the Black Single Mother’. www.Youtube.com (sourced 18.05.2009).

¹⁰² Statistics vary on the numbers of black children being raised without a father. While some studies have demonstrated that many lone mothers reside in homes where there is an established network of family support

This chapter seeks to explore the social and political landscape from which the black lone mother archetype has emerged as an established character type for black actresses within mainstream contemporary cinema. Acknowledging Sharon Willis's argument that the "position of black women has to do with representation and not with identity" within the realm of cinema, this chapter argues the cultural presentation of black lone motherhood is intrinsically bound up in homogenising mythologies about black femininity and black maternalism which have wholly disavowed her autonomy even as she is highly visible political figure.¹⁰³ Indeed, Ange Marie Hancock observes that the politicization of the black lone mother has resulted in her being employed as "an interpretive filter" for debates about femininity, masculinity, motherhood, fatherhood, class, economics and social citizenship.¹⁰⁴ Seldom do we hear about or see images of Chinese mothers who raise their families in fatherless homes even as 15% of them are lone mothers in America. Nor are the 10% of Pakistani or Bangladeshi lone mothers in Britain central figures in the cultural production of films which prioritize lone mother narratives. Since the 1960s the proportion of births to unmarried mothers has risen in all races, yet for a number of reasons, not least that these lone mothers do not 'fit' with the stereotypical imaging of lone motherhood nor with images of national identity, they remain unrepresented, or more poignantly, un-representable.¹⁰⁵ In the US the black lone mother has played such a crucial role as 'other' in determining and defining the requisites of American citizenship that to imagine her being replaced by the

(normally female oriented) these woman are still officially regarded as lone mothers. And, as Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of The African American Family*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and authors Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2005) point out, statistics for numbers of black lone mothers are slippery because they do not account for the fact that many of these women are cohabiting with the father of the child.

¹⁰³ Sharon Willis. *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. (Durham, N.C, London: Duke University Press, 1997). Pg 185

¹⁰⁴ Ange Marie Hancock. *A Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2004). Pg 27.

¹⁰⁵ The scope of this thesis does not allow for analysis of representations of lone mothers within their own national cinema. To do so would raise interesting questions about how Chinese cinema utilizes the lone mother and what ideologies are being channeled through her body-if indeed they are. This would be a fascinating undertaking which might further explain the relevance of the lone mother figure within mainstream cinema in the western and North American worlds.

figure of an Asian lone mother for example, would be to re-imagine specific racialized characteristics which function to ratify white neo-liberal and neo-conservative dogmas that reinforce the hegemony of white femininity and masculinity and the dominance of postfeminist inflected family values.

The main aim of this chapter then is to explore how these debates have impacted on the cultural presentation of the black lone mother and to what effect. I am not so concerned with whether these films offer ‘good’ or ‘bad’, positive or a more backwards representational strategy, because as Lola Young argues, the tendency to discuss “stereotypes and notions of negative and positive imagery in the question of representation is tricky....because such a stance implies that the answer to the constant parade of negative stereotypes is to produce a truthful or realistic representation”.¹⁰⁶ Rather my concern is how the black lone mother figures within the cultural world as the embodiment of political and social debates, anxieties and tensions about postfeminist gender and race issues. As such this chapter endeavours to undertake an analysis of what Projansky might describe as the maintenance of postfeminist whiteness “by distancing African American women’s racialization from the postfeminist aspects of narratives”.¹⁰⁷

I focus my analysis especially within US popular culture largely because the British celluloid black lone mother is virtually non-existent. Indeed, the poor visibility of the British black lone mother within the nation’s cinema reflects the invisibility of ethnic lone motherhood within the national identity. The invisibility of black lone motherhood is also evident within British social policy making and academia, a point that Song and Edward’s

¹⁰⁶ Lola Young. ‘The Rough Side of the Mountain: Black Women and Representation in Film. In Delia Jarrett-Macauley. *Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). Pg 178

¹⁰⁷ Projansky. Pg 161

note when they write that “race and ethnicity have been muted features” within these arenas.¹⁰⁸ And yet, the British black lone mother, just like her U.S counterpart, is emerging as the causal link to “current broader concerns that have identified parenting and family breakdown as key threats to society”.¹⁰⁹

That other ethnic groups are seldom incorporated into these debates illustrates a serious attempt to differentiate British blackness as distinctly problematic. Significantly even when the black lone mother does exist within British films she tends to be presented in much the same way as her American cinematic equivalent. Take for instance the British films *Bullet Boy* (Saul Dibbs: 2004) or Menhaj Huda’s *Kidulthood* (2006), both described by film critics as British renditions of John Singleton’s *Boyz ‘n’ the Hood* (1991). These three films foreground familiar urban narratives which highlight the effects of gang and gun culture in the lives of young black fatherless men and reinforce trans-national and trans-cultural social, political and cultural ‘commonsense’ assumptions about black masculinity and historically constructed bodies of stories about black lone mothers. That *Bullet Boy*, *Boyz ‘n’ the Hood* and *Kidulthood* should utilize similar thematic concerns about fatherlessness, violence and black masculinity raises questions about the ideological function of the lone mother in these texts. That is of course, not to suggest that every narrative in which a black character plays a part has a particular ideological agenda, nor that emphasis should always be placed on the black body as *always* politically charged. However, the fact remains that the black lone mother is a highly politicized female body; a body which resonates loudly with cultural and historical legacies and accusations of hyper-sexuality, fecundity, social decay, disease, and dis-ease.

¹⁰⁸ Miri Song and Rosalind Edwards. ‘Raising Perspectives on Black Lone Motherhood’, *Journal of Social Policy*. Vol 26 (2), 1977. Pp 233-244

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Pg 234

Treating black lone mothers as a divergent group from other non-black lone mothers runs the risk of colluding with cultural and political practises which code black lone motherhood as ‘othered’ — as a distinctly different form of femininity and maternalism. However, this chapter contends that the ways in which the social identity of the black lone mother is constructed and presented within the political and cultural imagination *is* distinctly different from the cultural presentation of the white lone mother. While the white lone mother figure is highly conspicuous within mainstream texts emerging from Hollywood over the last decade, the figure of the black lone mother is, perhaps surprisingly, seldom incorporated into texts positioned outside of the realm of male-authored African American cinema. Thus, this chapter also seeks to explore why the black lone mother, an archetype so visible and readily recognised within the social world is barely visible within recent contemporary mainstream texts.

The absence of the black lone mother archetype from mainstream cinema raises some important questions about the exclusionary nature of the so-called post-racial society. If blackness is now perceived as equal to whiteness can we read the absence of the black lone mother from cinematic narratives as representative of a more affirmative shift in ideologies about black lone maternalism and issues of race and gender in general? Indeed after Halle Berry’s acceptance speech upon winning best actress for her role as lone mother in *Monster’s Ball* (Marc Foster: 2001) where she challenged Hollywood to make “colour invisible” one might conclude that the paucity of black lone mothers on cinema screens is a response from an industry concerned with notions of racism and misogyny. While there might be a case to argue here I point to Gwendolyn Pough’s book, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black womanhood, hip-hop culture and the public sphere*, where she describes the lone mother archetype as the third representational paradigm for black actresses within mainstream

cinema.¹¹⁰ Telling of the industry's persistent use of the black actress to play the part of a lone mother (and reinforcing Pough's assertion) is the numbers of black actresses who have been cast as lone mother characters over the last ten years.¹¹¹ Take for instance Angela Basset in her role as Reva Devereaux, lone mother in *Boys n' the Hood*, and Forrest Whittaker's film *Waiting to Exhale* (1995). Vivica L. Fox plays lone mother Vernita Green in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003); Whitney Houston is lone mother in *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson:1992); Halle Berry in *Monster's Ball*, *Losing Isaiah* (Stephen Gyllenhaal:1995) and *Things We Lost in the Fire* (Suzanne Bier:2008). (See Fig. 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3)



Fig. 7.1: Audrey Burke (Halle Berry) *Things We Lost in the Fire*, 2007.

Fig. 7.2: Black Mamba (Vivica L. Fox) *Kill Bill 1*, 2003.

Fig. 7.3: Rachel (Whitney Houston) *The Bodyguard*, 1992

We may add to the list actresses Alfre Woodard, Lela Rochon, Jada Pinkett Smith, Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg.¹¹² While the number of black British actresses is far

¹¹⁰ Gwendolyn Pough. *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture and the Public Sphere*. (Boston. Mass: Northeastern University Press, 2004). Pg 96

¹¹¹ Empirical evidence of the numbers of black actresses compared to white actresses within the Hollywood film industry is at best sketchy. Certainly attention to the issue has been recently raised by influential black media players such as Tyra Banks who, in an interview with Essence magazine, admonished Hollywood for overlooking the talents of black actresses. ('Tyra Banks: Standing in The Spotlight' Jeannine Amber. www.essence.com 08/01/2008 Eva Mendez, who as a Hispanic woman, was cast to play the black love interest of Will Smith in the 2005 film Hitch voiced her concerns about the way she is perceived as being "too dark to be paired with the white lead but just right for an African American". Mendez argues these practices are indicative of the "closed" mentality of the film industry. 'Eva Mendez speaks Out About Latina and Black Actresses in Hollywood', (un-authored piece) in www.urbanmecca.com, 07/03/2008).

¹¹² As I write, *American Violet* (Tim Disney: 2008) opened in the US to mixed reviews. *American Violet* tells the true life story of a young black lone mother wrongly arrested in a race based drug raid in a small town in Texas. While the film's release might complicate the arguments posited in this chapter, the mixed reception of the film has an interesting resonance with some of the issues I raise: in particular the ways in which mainstream 'race' films tend to garner anxiety within a liberal white audience who see the film as not attending to the real politics of racism and black activists who see the film as "telling it as it is". The discourses surrounding *American Violet* speak to the inherent conflicts and tensions invoked when issues of race are being articulated within mainstream cinema which is, at its core, seemingly more concerned with financial remuneration than ideological

fewer than those in the U.S, performers such as Thandie Newton in *Run Fat Boy Run* (David Schwimmer: 2007) and Claire Perkins in *Bullet Boy* are also cast in the role of lone mother. The numbers of this black female character type are relatively small in comparison to their white counterpart but the archetype of the black lone mother is a 'normative' role for black women to play. The normalization of the black actress to play a lone mother is interesting when we take into account the earlier suggestion that the white lone mother character is perceived as non-normative and a risky choice for white actresses to make. If, as I have argued in Chapter One that the white lone mother is a crucial figure in the project of post feminism, why is the black lone mother character excluded from postfeminist inflected texts such as the romantic comedy and chick flick in which the lone mother character has become so established?¹¹³

Given the conspicuous lack of filmic texts in which the black lone mother plays a central role, this chapter analyses *Monster's Ball* to examine the cultural presentation of black lone motherhood outside the margins of African American cinema. I choose to analyze Foster's film not only because it is one of a handful of films in which the lone mother is visible but also because Halle Berry, who plays the film's lone mother Leticia, received criticism for playing what is perceived to be an un-maternal mother.¹¹⁴ In choosing to analyse *Monster's Ball* I am selecting a film which emerges from the generic tradition of

challenge. Whether the film manages to present an interesting presentation of its black lone mother is something British audiences will have to wait to see, but that it takes a white man to rescue her might offer insight in the ways that race and racism are once again being negotiated through a narrative of black lone motherhood. (Esther Iverem. 'America-Just As' at www.seeingblack.com).

¹¹³ Of course one of the central arguments here is about the lack of opportunities for black actresses to play anything other than a handful of racialized stereotypical roles; the mammy, the jezebel or the more contemporaneous incarnation of the mammy figure in the archetype of the prostitute; the 'magic' black woman or more recent roles of 'angry and self righteous middle class black women See Yvonne Tasker's *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1998) and Donald Bogle's book *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mummies and bucks: an interpretive history of Blacks in American cinema*. (New York, London: Continuum, 2000) for more in-depth analyses of traditional roles for black women.

¹¹⁴ As an interesting aside Berry claimed that her recent experience of motherhood had killed off her sex symbol status which could only enhance her acting career.

www.theinsider.com/news/929162_HALLE_BERRY_MOTHERHOOD_WILL_BOOST_MY_CAREER. 05/30.08

‘smart’ movies, films that Jeffrey Sconce, points out have “displaced the more activist emphasis on the social politics of power, institutions and representation and subjectivity so central to the 1960/1970s art cinema and replacing it with...personal politics of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity with the white middle class culture”.¹¹⁵ That this is the recent cultural landscape in which the black lone mother plays a part may have much to tell us about how black lone motherhood functions in the ‘evacuation’ of racial politics in male transformation narratives. Indeed, Herman Gray makes much the same point in his analysis of representations of race in television programmes when he writes: “When they exist, race, class and gender inequalities seem quite extraordinary and they always seem to operate on the level of individual experience. Put differently, to the extent that these conflicts and tensions are addressed at all, they figure primarily through individual characters with prejudiced attitudes who become the focus of symbolic transformation required to restore narrative balance.”¹¹⁶

If, as Gray suggests, racism is cast as the ‘problem’ of the individual and not as a systemic discriminatory practice then narratives of racial discrimination presented in ‘serious’ films such as *Monster’s Ball* can be seen to be mediated through the figure of a black lone mother character who as black, female and a lone mother, embodies three different forms of discrimination. Discrimination is being presented as the individual experience of the white man who utilizes a narrative of personal oppression to enable his spiritual and masculine transformation. In much the same way that postfeminism draws upon feminism in its repudiation of feminist politics, films such as *Monster’s Ball* foreground a racist narrative but cast racism as the problem of a social misfit, someone whose politics are out-of-date rather

¹¹⁵ Jeffrey Sconce. ‘Irony, nihilism and the new American ‘smart’ film’. In *Screen*, 43. No 4. 2002. pp 349-369. Pg 352

¹¹⁶ Herman Gray. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). Pg 86

than the discriminatory system that it is.¹¹⁷ With these issues in mind this chapter will foreground the intricate relationship between cinematic black lone motherhood, race, and class within this postfeminist, post-civil rights cultural and political moment to argue that the black lone mother character functions as a veil to highly racist and misogynist practices. I argue that postfeminist cinema erases, or at least contains whiteness from blackness in a process which recognizes political and historical discourses of race while at the same time rejecting their resonance for black race relations. In so doing, I note, alongside Kimberly Springer that “seemingly harmless cultural representations of black women are incorporated into institutional enactments of discrimination, including racist, sexist and heterosexist social policies”.¹¹⁸

Indeed given the lack of visibility of the black lone mother character within mainstream cinematic texts but the persistent coding of black actresses as lone mothers, it is surprising that so little attention has been focused on this representational paradigm. Although bell hooks rightly argues that the films emerging from ‘new black cinema’ of the 1980s largely maintained the hegemony of black patriarchy within narratives and representations of black femininity, she does not critique the persistent use of the black lone mother figure within these narratives. Certainly hooks does speak of stereotypical representations of black lone motherhood, and claims, as I mentioned at the head of the

¹¹⁷ Recent shifts in the cultural presentation of the problem of racism has seen films such as *Lakeside Terrace* (Neil LaBute: 2008) and *Something New* (Sanaa Hamri: 2006) code the film’s black character as behaving in a highly racist manner to a white character. Or more female centered texts where issues of race are mediated by class (Louise from Louisiana (Jennifer Hudson) in *Sex and the City: the Movie* (Michael Patrick King: 2008), or deviant sexuality (Alex Fisher (Jada Pinkett-Smith) in *The Women* (Diane English: 2008).

¹¹⁸ Kimberly Springer ‘Divas, Evil Black Bitches and Bitter Black Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil Rights Popular Culture’. In Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra. Pg 250. While Springer’s argument about an enactment of institutional discrimination is highly salient, I would suggest it would be more apposite to rephrase the sentence by re-placing enactment with re-enactment. To re-enact suggests a re-investment in ratifying these forms of discrimination which have been so forcefully challenged by feminism, and civil rights groups. Thus to claim that a re-enactment of these acts is taking place would connote a retrograde rejection of civil rights and feminism which it would seem is exactly the ideological schema of postfeminism. To re-enact has much more political resonance and would surely raise awareness of the hegemonic negotiation of race and gender that has enabled the re-integration of discriminatory social, cultural and political practices.

chapter that to value the life of a black lone mother would be a “revolutionary thing”.¹¹⁹

However her challenge is based on an assumption of a collective knowledge about the evolution of the archetype of the black lone mother figure as cinematic shorthand for a set of particularly racialized and gendered traits. Likewise, Sharon Willis’ exemplary exploration of the presentation and intersection of race and gender within mainstream contemporary cinema although astutely drawing attention to the emphasis on the trope of the family and the oedipal complex as having a very limited capacity to represent black women as anything more than “a symptom”, neglects to explore further the prioritization of the figure of the black lone mother within these narratives.¹²⁰

The many cinematic texts which prioritize the theme of black fatherhood including; *Higher Learning* (John Singleton:1995), *Get on The Bus* (Spike Lee:1996), *Are We There Yet* (Brian Levant: 2005), *Are We Done Yet* (Steve Carr:2007), *Boys ‘n’ the Hood* (John Singleton: 1991), *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabrielle Muccino:2006), *Antoine Fischer* (Denzel Fischer: 2002), *John Q* (Nick Cassavetes:2002), *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin:2000), *Carbon Copy* (Michael Shultz:1981), *The Game Plan* (Andy Fickman: 2007), *Meet the Browns* (Tyler Perry:2008), *Daddy Day Care* (Steve Carr:2001), *Dr Dolittle* (Betty Thomas:1998), *Dr Dolittle 2* (Steve Carr: 2001), *Get Rich or Die Trying* (Jim Sheridan:2005), *Little Man* (Keenan Ivory Wayans: 2006), *Daddy Day Camp* (Fred Savage:2007)—fit neatly with dominant culture’s representational agendas wherein fatherhood so easily functions to maintain and elevate masculinist privilege. However these films also incorporate, and rely upon the black lone mother figure who is not only marginalized in the film’s narrative but who remains largely critically invisible. Similarly Michelle Wallace, while keen to draw attention to the stereotypical representations of black

¹¹⁹ hooks. Pg 113

¹²⁰ Sharon Willis. *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Films*. (Durham, N.C, London: Duke University Press: 1997). Pg 23

lone motherhood with *Boyz 'n' the Hood*, likewise fails to critically account for her political and social prioritization in narratives which are more concerned with the disenfranchisement of black masculinity than the double disenfranchisement of black women both within the politics of black nationalism and white patriarchy.¹²¹

The absence of critical attention paid to the cinematic black lone mother is not only glaring, it is most remarkable in its persistence and, most puzzling in the work of film scholars such as Gwendolyn Pough who explores the established stereotypes and visual representations of black femaleness (mammy, sapphire, and 'castrating black mother') which she argues are being mediated by young black women. Pough's book offers a critical intervention in the ways that black lone motherhood has been utilized, and claims, as I earlier noted, that the lone mother character is cinema's "third representational paradigm" for black actresses.¹²² Yet she neglects to explore why this cinematic trope is so regularly imagined in the work of black filmmakers.

Of course, these scholars are not purposefully ignoring the narrative of the celluloid black lone mother, yet the lack of critical attention paid to this cinematic archetype betrays a cultural ambivalence towards lone black motherhood. In analyzing the archetype of the black lone mother, this chapter will seek out and explore what Michelle Wallace describes as "complicated combinations of strategies" to suggest that the lack of acknowledgement of the narrative function of the black lone mother endangers us to being blinded by the subtleties of the racist and misogynist ideologies that are rehearsed within these films and within the ideological schema of postfeminism.¹²³ Indeed I suggest that the ahistorical and apolitical nature of postfeminist ideology seeks to erase particular images of race and gender as no

¹²⁶ Michelle Wallace. *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*. (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹²² Pough. Pg 96

¹²³ Wallace. Pg 276

longer salient. This denies the actual black lone mother a voice and a position from which to contest the claims made about her; effectively we are ignoring a new form of marginalization of an already deeply demonized group of women. To overlook the ways in which she is excluded from postfeminist popular cinema is to also ignore her exclusion from a highly successful genre of films which at their core set out the prescriptive female characteristics deemed integral to the performance of postfeminist femininity. Springer maintains this point when she writes, “To date, studies of postfeminism have studiously noted that many of its icons are white and cited the absence of women of colour but the analysis seems to stop there”.¹²⁴ To argue, as does Springer, that “not so new manifestations of racism and sexism [are] impacting on black women in popular culture” is to draw attention to the urgent need for analysis of these contemporary cinematic representations.¹²⁵

Exploring films such as *Baby Boy*, *Bullet Boy* and *Monster’s Ball*, this chapter highlights the part race plays in the negotiation of cinema’s black lone mother and, conversely, how black lone motherhood is mediated by race. However I begin by establishing a historical and social overview of black lone motherhood to show how ideas about race have informed the social, political and cultural identification of the African American lone mother. Issues of slavery, assimilation, arguments about the formulation of black families as either matriarchal or matri-focal, the influence of religion and spirituality, the diasporas of black peoples, the cultural and social values of black children as distinct from attitudes towards children in white families, the rejection of adoption and the alleged hostility to abortion (although it might be more apposite to say the denial of abortion to black women), the complex relationship with contraception (again, a revision of this might say a

¹²⁴ Kimberly Springer. Pg 249

¹²⁵ Ibid

denial of contraception unless state enforced sterilization), and the history of black women's reproductive history must be taken into account.

One should also bear in mind the oftentimes troubled and fragmented relationship between second wave feminism and black women who argued that feminism was ignoring, and sometimes reinforcing the double disenfranchisement of black women within essentialized notions of what constitutes a shared experience of 'woman' and highly specific (by that I mean white middle-class) ideas of what women's liberation and female enfranchisement meant for women. Given the scope of the chapter and the complexities of the subject I cannot offer an extensive analysis of all the salient issues involved—indeed analysis of the social representation of the black lone mother is a subject worthy of a thesis alone—nonetheless, the following section does offer a brief contextualization of the socially constructed markers of black lone motherhood.

Mythologies of Black Matriarchy and Black Lone Motherhood: A Cultural and Historical Overview.

American Right Wing social and political commentator, author and syndicated columnist Anne Coulter recently caused a furore when she claimed that lone mothers were the cause of every social problem in the U.S. It is somewhat paradoxical that her outburst on ABC's *The View* should have enraged so many viewers given that the predominant cultural, social and political message about lone motherhood is exactly the same as Coulter's.¹²⁶ Nonetheless her comments voiced in the publicity interview for her new book *Guilty Liberal*

¹²⁶ *The View*. ABC Network. 12/01/09

Victims and Their Assault on America in which she argues (as she has many times before) that the impact of liberalism has had a devastating effect on the social mores of western society, caused controversy for the show's hosts and as well as amongst members of the general public.¹²⁷ In Coulter's view, the narrative of victimhood which she argues is utilized by liberals who advocate on behalf of the disenfranchised members of society is highly indicative of a culture which encourages a moral decline. Her emphasis on the immorality of the lone mother as the prime example for her anti-liberal argument (women who she described as the "farm team for future criminals and outcasts") is not a new debate, but what was fascinating about the discussion that ensued was how quickly it turned into a dispute about race. That Whoopi Goldberg, a presenter for the programme, a single mothered daughter and a single mother to a daughter herself, was outraged by Coulter's remarks might be one explanation for the emphasis on race, but commentators and respondents to the many forum debates (Google shows 1,330,000 websites at time of writing) also correlated Coulter's remarks about all lone mothers as specifically about black lone mothers.

That it was Coulter making these comments would perhaps explain the cognitive link of race with the identity of lone mother given her own often times racist politics. However I suggest that the conflation of lone motherhood and race in this instance is not wholly coincidental precisely because the conflation of social decay, failed maternalism and black lone motherhood has become such an established narrative within the U.S. The black lone mother has been targeted for blame (and continues to be blamed), for the alleged devaluation of black fatherhood and the emasculation of black masculinity. Her 'over-nurturing' nature is regulated and scrutinized just as rigorously and systematically as her alleged inadequate maternalism. The black lone mother is held to account for the loss of black men to drugs,

¹²⁷ Anne Coulter. *Guilty Liberal Victims and Their Assault on America*. (New York: Crown Forum, 2009).

crime, and gun violence, as well as the exponential increase in early unwed pregnancies for their fatherless daughters. Despite evidence that dispels the stereotype of black lone mothered sons as drug addled, gun-totting juvenile delinquents, responses to *YouTube* videos deriding the black lone mother maintain that black lone mothered children are nothing more than a liability.¹²⁸ And, as if that is not enough, the black lone mother has also been foregrounded as a significant figure in discourses of racial suicide—held up as the repugnant female body that has forced (and justified) black men to turn to white women for sexual and romantic satisfaction.

Whilst discourses of aberrant black lone motherhood have played a significant role in reassuring white America of its moral superiority, the black lone mother has also become a central figure in differentiating and determining a preferred performance of black masculinity. Rhetoric surrounding the figure of the black lone mothered son—often referred to as ‘nigga’, a highly pejorative term which, as Wallace asserts is used to imply “abject otherness”—illustrates the ways in which the black lone mother has been appropriated as a highly divisive figure within the black population.¹²⁹ Thus the lone mother status of black women who raise children in fatherless homes conflates, as Hancock argues, all the stereotypic “pre-existing beliefs about women who exist at the intersection of marginalized race and gender identities”.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ In 1995, Marc Zimmerman, an Associate Professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan published research findings that demonstrated “contrary to stereotypes, adolescent black boys living with single mothers were no more likely to use alcohol, drugs, engage in delinquency or drop out of school than those in other household constellations”. M.B.Levine. ‘Today’s Black Single Mothers; Successful Examples of Single Parenting’. www.associatedpress.com 11.01.2008. Also see Douglas and Michaels, Henry Giroux’s and Susan Fauldi’s work for evidence of similar arguments.

¹²⁹ Michelle Wallace. ‘Modernism, Postmodernism and The Problems of Visual Culture’ in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Pg 40

¹³⁰ Hancock. Pg 3

The historical, social and politically constructed characteristics of the African American lone mother serve similar discursive functions as that of the white working class lone mother. Functioning as a vessel for disturbingly misogynist attitudes to women in general, and raced based prejudices in particular, that have been heightened in this increasingly white, middle-class political, cultural and social milieu, the black lone mother has come to signify all that has gone awry with black female liberation and civil rights. I have argued that the lone mother figure has come to symbolize the failings of feminism; a feminism that encouraged women to be independent and reject fatherhood as irrelevant. This argument is established in much postfeminist work and has filtered into the rhetoric of Father's Right's groups and anti-feminist lobbyists. However it is really important to note that feminism is seldom invoked with such persistence when the causes of black lone motherhood are being debated. When feminism is located as the primary site of tension it is often only implied in discourse which is more concerned with the 'problem' of black women copying lifestyle choices of white women. Black lone motherhood is therefore spoken in the lexicon of race betrayal— and spoken in the main by black men. The scope of this chapter is too limited to explore this point in detail but it does require further attention as it raises issues about black women's identification with feminism (or more specifically that their agency in choosing their own personal politics are being mediated through a highly problematic discourse of racial suicide).

While there are distinct similarities in the way both demographics of women have been pilloried within politics and the pages of the popular press, the black lone mother has come to represent something more. Not only is she the symbolic 'other', an example of counter-hegemonic female citizenship which functions to shore up the ideological requisites of white femininity, she also symbolically serves as a discursive tool used to distance black

men from black women in ways which reassert the exclusionary hegemony of white patriarchy. Indeed as Audre Lord notes “It’s easy for black women to be used by the white power structure against black men, not because they are men but because they are black”.¹³¹ In framing black women and more precisely, black lone mothers as the key holders of power in discursive practices denigrating the hegemony of black masculinity, white patriarchy ensures, as Lord argues, that opposition towards black women in general and black lone mothers specifically, “is practiced not only by the white racist society but implemented within [our] black communities as well”.¹³²

This is not to deny that there has been an exponential rise in the numbers of African American children raised in lone mothered households, nor to disavow statistics demonstrating that absentee black fatherhood is a salient issue for fatherless children and husbandless mothers. Rather that the continued rehearsal of these discourses serves a particular political and social purpose which reinforces and celebrates the primacy of white masculinity. As such, images of, and discourses about the black lone mother have played and continue to play a crucial role in sustaining and reinforcing the nation’s social and ideological coherence.

This overview concentrates on post Second World War socially and politically constructed markers of black lone motherhood. Nonetheless it is important to note, as social historian and sociologist Franklin does that discourses about black lone motherhood as symbolic of anti-assimilation ideology were being articulated well before the beginning of the twentieth century. In her, *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of The African American Family* Franklin documents structural changes which have taken place within the

¹³¹ Audre Lord ‘Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference’ in *Out There: Marginalization in Contemporary Cultures*. Chp 16. Pg 284

¹³² Ibid

African American family since slavery. But Franklin also nicely demonstrates the complexities involved in asserting a linear narrative of marital and familial transformations precisely because work documenting such shifts have emerged from different forms of historical scholarship (revisionist, traditionalist and neo-revisionist). As a consequence of these divergent forms of analyses, the cultural, historical, political and social landscape in which the actual black lone mother exists (and from which the symbolic black lone mother figure has emerged) is highly complex and multi-layered. Indeed, academic and polemical debate which is specifically concerned with the identification of the black lone mother proves to be just as complicated mainly because the subject of black lone motherhood is perceived as a relatively contemporary issue which has not taken into consideration what Franklin describes as the, “Racial differences in marriage and family which have been 300 years in the making”.¹³³

In drawing attention to the difficulties of consolidating an accurate account of the history of the African American family Franklin reminds us that concepts such as such as “illegitimacy, infidelity and rape” are infinitely complex ideas when “applied to the sexual conduct of former slaves and masters” and western ideas of motherhood, marriage and family.¹³⁴ And, even when these issues are taken into account in historical or sociological work little is said about the diverse African familial formulations from which slaves were taken. Indeed, Bette J. Dickerson argues that the lack of coherent, solid accounting for historical, cultural and social specificities and changes in African, and African American family structures has lead to a direct misrepresentation and homogenization of the black family.¹³⁵ Failing to recognise that these narratives have had a uniform effect on the

¹³³ Franklin. Pg xxii.

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Bette J. Dickerson. *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families*. (London: Sage, 1995). Franklin makes a similar point arguing that ‘polemical differences’ in the subject of black lone

presentation of the African American family (and more specifically on black lone mothers) results in what Cornel West describes as an ‘impulse’ that imagines all black people and their experiences to be alike; a process which serves to erase or eliminate cultural difference between black people and between black and white people.¹³⁶ These divergent discourses illustrate the inherent problems of attempting to construct a chronological and concise account of black lone motherhood.

“Black Betty Had A Baby”¹³⁷

Since eighteenth century white colonial explorers first set eyes on the black female body it has been imagined as a highly eroticized and fetishized figure. Discourse about black women’s ‘primitive’ sexual anatomy and sexual appetite increased the degree, writes Ann duCille “to which the black female functioned as an erotic icon in the racial and sexual ideology of western civilization”.¹³⁸ From these discursive practices emerged a set of ideologies wherein “racial and gender alterity became a hot commodity that has claimed black woman as its principal signifier”.¹³⁹ While the discourse of the ‘primitive’ black woman became the subject of white men’s secret (and not so secret) exotic lust and desire, sociologists and historians began to focus on the social organization of the African family. This research was being framed in the language of matriarchy and polyandry, and served to foreground the difference between the gender parenting roles and social organization of

motherhood are confusing because they don’t take into account the historical, cultural and social evolution of the African American family. See also Michael Gordon [Ed]. *Persistent Myths About the African American Family: The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*. (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983)

¹³⁶ West in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Pg 27

¹³⁷ Black American blues singer, Leadbelly’s ‘Black Betty’ song declares that the wickedness of men is the result of women and their illegitimate children.

¹³⁸ Ann duCille. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women’s Writing*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Pg 73. See also Norma Manatu’s brilliant account of the eroticization of black femininity in *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema*. (N.C, London: McFarland, 2003).

¹³⁹ duCille Pg 73

family life of black and white families. Within these discursive practices, black matriarchy emerged as a key site of difference and was established as such in Melville J. Herskovitz' book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) wherein he documented that black mothers were “responsible for the upbringing, discipline and supervision of the children much more than the father”.¹⁴⁰

Much of the ontological work emerging in the early nineteenth century fell into two categories, those who as Franklin notes were “opposed to the idea of matriarchy” and those who “blamed slavery for disrupting black family life”.¹⁴¹ Central figures in these debates such as E. Franklin Frazier, W.E.B DuBois, Herbert Gutman, William J. Wilson Robert Fogel deliberated the social affects that the “unity of African culture.... had influenced the family systems of black Americas”.¹⁴² While historians such as Gutman¹⁴³ and Wilson argued that the black family was problematically and inherently dis-organized, “neither slavery nor economic deprivation, nor migration to urban areas” had a deleterious effect on the African American family, DuBois and Frazier were quick to note that slavery had impacted on the possibility for the black population to construct “an unbroken history from Africa”.¹⁴⁴ DuBois's objective was to demonstrate that slavery was the cause of the disorganization of the black family unit. His book, *The Negro American Family* focused on issues of class and poverty as factors in the disintegration of black family life with particular emphasis on the effects of slavery on the slave father. According to DuBois, black slave fathers were denied authority to govern and protect their families from the machinations of the white slave masters who made black wives the “master's concubine, his daughter could be outraged, his

¹⁴⁰ Herskovitz cited in Franklin Pg xiii

¹⁴¹ Ibid. Pg xxiii

¹⁴² Ibid. Pg 6

¹⁴³ Herbert Gutman's 1925 report on the black family concluded that the matriarchal family was poor compensation for the normative patriarchal family. Franklin. Pg 6

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

son whipped, or he himself sold away without being able to protest or lift a preventing finger”.¹⁴⁵

While DuBois asserted that the role of the wife and mother was undermined by her servitude, often forced to neglect her responsibility as mother to her children, he also asserted that a “weakened black family emerged from slavery with a dual set of sexual mores”.¹⁴⁶ In employing this approach DuBois immediately correlates female immorality with social status; it was the female slaves and their children (field hands who were often the victims of rape and enforced childbearing) positioned at the bottom of the slave hierarchy who were being “described as single parents and children born to unwed mothers”¹⁴⁷. DuBois’ ‘dual sexual mores’ theory was not intended as a critique of black motherhood and more especially black lone motherhood, but his work formed the backdrop for E. Franklin Frazier to posit a more critical analysis of black lone motherhood. Frazier’s work focused on the high rates of illegitimate births to black women, “replacing DuBois’s concept of the monogamic family and ‘dual sex mores’ theory” with a model which stratified the black family as either a two-parent family (artisans and family servants) or the single parented families (field hands).¹⁴⁸ In so doing Frazier constructed a family hierarchy which was fundamentally based on a social ‘class’ system (although it has to be recognised that such a ‘class’ system was enforced by slave masters who choose particular roles for slaves). More importantly, Frazier’s work also introduced the idea that the black lone mother was a deeply subversive figure lacking a “spirit of subordination to masculine authority”.¹⁴⁹ Frazier’s historical rhetoric became the very same rhetoric that future historians and politicians would rely on in work about the problem

¹⁴⁵ W.E.B DuBois. *The Negro American Family*. 1909 (Reprint, Chicago,IL; University of Chicago Press, 1978) Cited in Franklin. Pg 6

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg 6

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. Pg 8

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

of the black lone mother and her role in the “culture of poverty”.¹⁵⁰ And as Hancock writes, this “transition from academic to political discourse occurred through the now-well-known efforts of the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his 1956 book, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*”.¹⁵¹ Moynihan, who was serving as a member of the Johnson administration was concerned with finding an explanation for the enduring poverty experienced by the African American population. Drawing from Frazier’s work, Moynihan observed that one of the central contributing factors of African American poverty was the matriarchal nature of the African American family. Moynihan posited the argument that the black matriarch wielded some inexorable power within the domestic sphere which “prevented black fathers from assuming their rightful position as heads of the household”¹⁵² drew attention to the numbers of unmarried women raising fatherless children, linking the high visibility of this distinctly different family formation to the exponential rise in juvenile delinquency among black adolescents.

Although Moynihan was attempting to address the inhumane effects of slavery on the black family, he did much to characterize the black family as degenerate, problematically matriarchal, as producing too many children, emasculating black men and as wholly responsible for a culture of poverty. Already established discourses about black female morality, sexuality and promiscuity formed an ideological framework for the social identification of black lone maternalism and became, as Hancock points out the “guiding assumption underlying subsequent social science research”.¹⁵³ Moynihan’s report received the approval of the Johnson administration but was also praised by civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King. That the report was received favourably by King and his fellow activists

¹⁵⁰ Hancock. Pg 57

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Daniel Moynihan. *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. 1965 cited in Hancock . Pg 58

¹⁵³ Ibid

should not come as a surprise.¹⁵⁴ Moynihan's report served black masculinity well; by prioritizing matriarchy and lone motherhood as problematic and destructive to the black family and to black masculinity, civil rights leaders could position themselves as victims of overly independent black women and as in agreement with white patriarchy. Levelling blame at independent black woman, whether lone or married mothers diverted attention away from the social and political consequences of the urbanization of black families and the enduring lack of employment for black men specifically. That Moynihan saw the black matriarch as the holder of such power disavows the legacy of white, patriarchal, oppressive practices which had systematically disenfranchised black women as well as black men.

The mythologization of the black mother as head of the household has obvious consequences. Propagating these myths results in a process of 'othering' the black familial formation as distinctly different from white families and suggests that black families are required to re-educate themselves in order to 'fit' with national consensus that sees the family as patriarchal. More insidiously the rhetoric of the black lone matriarch as a powerfully threatening, inept, abject and unfeminine woman has been appropriated and incorporated into contemporaneous discourses about black lone mothers who, whether wittingly or not, serve as head of their household.

Academic interest in the black lone mother and the social formation of the black family began to be rigorously incorporated into social services policies and health care practices of the 1930-1940s so that by the 1950s, argues Solinger unwed pregnancy became racialized. Prior to the Second World War, the unwed black lone mother turned to her community to help with raising of her illegitimate child, indeed as Solinger points out "the

¹⁵⁴ bell hooks and other feminist scholars have highlighted the deeply patriarchal and often times highly misogynist attitudes of the civil rights movement which explicitly excluded women from this political sphere

experience of the single pregnant black mother was not the concern of white policy makers, tax payers or social services”.¹⁵⁵ Paradoxically, the high rates of unwed pregnancies among black females only proved what sociologists, anthropologists and historians had previously argued about black female sexuality which had been positioned as an inherently natural and typical behaviour of a more primitive group of peoples. Black lone motherhood as a normative mode of reproduction of less civilized people became known as the ‘biological determinist debate’; a set of discourses which Solinger argues was highly problematic since “by its nature [it] superseded and cancelled out the historical and social context of black childbearing” which meant it “did not have to square the white master’s response to female fertility”.¹⁵⁶ As a result, the problems faced by black women were framed as wholly determined by biology and as always “beyond remedy”.¹⁵⁷

By the 1940s societal attitudes towards the once ignored black lone mother began to shift when, after the proliferation of numbers of unwed white lone mothers had caught the attention of statutory and voluntary agencies, the government drafted new policies which gave financial aid to unmarried mothers, enabling black lone mothers to be potential recipients of public money. That public money was being provided to black lone mothers who were still positioned as lazy and biologically determined to produce hordes of illegitimate children garnered deep resentment towards, and resistance against tax supported welfare aid. Sollinger writes that politicians from all parties drew upon, and conflated discourses of biological determinism and the ‘culture of poverty’ theory in ways that

¹⁵⁵Rickie Solinger. *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe V. Wade*. (London: Routledge, 1992). Pg 17

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. Pg 44

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. Pg 18

constructed the “black unwed mother as a key symbol in the middle decades of endemic black pathology”, using her body as “a target in the service of racial control”.¹⁵⁸

While the 1950-1960s civil rights movement challenged much of the rhetoric of biological determinism, the body of the black lone mother remained a focus of institutional interference, whether academic (social science in particular) or governmental. Sollinger argues that such intervention into discourses of biological determinism created the possibility for the black population to take back some control over the treatment of black lone motherhood. As a consequence, black lone motherhood became one of the issues that defined the civil rights movement’s “larger agenda for self-determination”.¹⁵⁹ While the civil rights movement introduced new illegitimacy prevention plans and invested money into maternity homes specifically meeting the needs of black mothers, it is significant that lone motherhood once again became one of the central organizing features around which political discourse was being framed. Despite some small shifts in attitude towards the black lone mother the legacy of discourses about the unfeminine, independent, fecund and overtly promiscuous black lone mother as the root cause of poverty for African American families would take centre stage in the public identity of the Welfare Queen in the late 1970s.

Enduring beliefs about black lone mothers as “lazy, baby-making system abusers in violation of the country’s most cherished political values” enabled Ronald Reagan to introduce punitive measures which saw financial aid to lone mothers cut under new political and economic initiatives to reduce government spending.¹⁶⁰ Just as with the case of the British white welfare lone mother whose public image of welfare dependency and fraud replaced the ‘benefit scrounger’, in the US the replacement of faceless fraud stories to stories

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. Pg 75

¹⁶⁰ Hancock. Pg 60

about lone mothers directed discourses of excessive welfare payment and fraud onto the bodies of poorer women raising children alone. But for Reagan it was the black lone mother with her historical narrative of fecundity who was the real drain on the nation's economy. Coining the phrase 'Welfare Queen', Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign trail foregrounded the example of a black lone mother, Bertha Bridges (although named by Reagan it was never substantiated that she ever really existed) through rhetoric which served to establish the image of welfare fraud as a black, unwed mother and cast poverty as specifically female. And, as Douglas and Michaels argue, the popular media took centre stage in the proliferation of these discourses. Paying particular attention to the Bill Moyers 1980s documentary, *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*, Douglas and Michaels note that this was the moment in which the cultural, social and political imagining of the black lone mother, and more specifically the black teenage lone mother, found its visual, discursive and symbolic birth. Twenty years on similar discourses are still being rehearsed within the popular press, in stories which highlight the cycle of poverty and unwed pregnancy for daughters of black lone mothers, and a life of crime and violence for young black fatherless boys. Black lone motherhood has been constructed to serve as a scapegoat; they are the women upon whom "white culture projects its own fears about mothers neglecting their children, losing their 'maternal instinct' and neglecting their kids".¹⁶¹ Just as the white, working-class lone mothered son is cast as the central figure of cultural and political tension in Britain, the black lone mothered son has become the symbol of societal and political anxieties which are predicated on myths about uncivilized black masculinity.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Douglas and Michaels. Pg 174

¹⁶² Ibid. Pg 175

Black Testimony and Testosterone.

“I have a testimony about a father not being in the house. It’s hard when your dad is not there. It’s hard when you grow up as a young African American male and you don’t have a role model and there’s no one there to say respect women and that violence isn’t the answer. When there is not a man in the house to say there is nothing unmanly about being kind, generous and working hard, and being disciplined and reading”.¹⁶³

Barack Obama’s speech, given on the campaign trail in 2007 at Avalon Park’s Vernon Park Church of God, quoted above was noted by *New York Times* journalist Mary Mitchell as a moment wherein Obama spoke directly from the heart. Mitchell foregrounds this moment as significant not only because of Obama’s notable oratory prowess but also because he was speaking in the main to black women. As Mitchell notes, most male members of the congregation were conspicuously absent from the event.¹⁶⁴ Testifying in his speech that his personal experience of fatherlessness left him lacking a moral core, Obama negated the influence and agency of his black lone mother who raised her son so successfully that he became the most powerful man in the world. Obama’s reference to the difficulties faced by young African American men also positioned the ‘problem of fatherlessness’ as specifically and inherently more significant for African American males. In so doing Obama not only disavowed the value of his lone mother but he perpetuates misconceptions about black masculinity as always in need of control and containment.

Historically constructed misconceptions about the lone mother and her child/ren are more pernicious and disingenuous when preconceptions about race are added to the vitriol

¹⁶³ President Barack Obama. Avalon Park’s Vernon Park Church of God. July 2007

¹⁶⁴ Margaret Mitchell. ‘Obama’s Call for End to Violence Lacks Audience’ *New York Times*. 16th July 2007

consistently meted out against women who parent alone. Kay S. Hymovitz and Ivan R. Dee reinforce this point observing that while the popular media pontificate about the exponential growth of black fatherless families, statistics bear little relevance to the ‘evidence’ which is foreground in media-led panics about black morality and citizenship. They write that while “close to 70% of black children born to lone mothers today—(including educated black mothers), compared with 25% of non-black kids; black kids make up 12 % of the country’s population, and black children account for only 1/3 of the nation’s out-of-wedlock kids”.¹⁶⁵ Similarly accepted political, social and cultural wisdoms propagated about the British black lone mother and her family bear little relevance to the realities of the lives of British black lone mothered children.

Such false impressions are well illustrated in the continual analysis of the behaviour of British black teenagers and the annual panic about their educational achievements which would have us believe that black lone mothered children (and especially boys) are badly disciplined and have no investment in education. And yet statistics from the British campaign group Smart Justice show that while “Afro-Caribbean pupils from single mothered households are 4-6 times more likely to be excluded from school, yet they are no more likely to truant than any other pupils”.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, since 2002 36% of black pupils achieved 5 GCSE grades A-C in Britain and the figure is increasing year on year.¹⁶⁷ Indeed a report by the BBC News in 2004 claimed that the ethnic breakdown of educational achievement demonstrated that British Black girls were doing far better at school than white boys.¹⁶⁸ Of course the argument that all boys are underachieving is drawn upon every summer in Britain

¹⁶⁵ Hymovitz and Dee. Pg 21.

¹⁶⁶ ‘Smart Justice for Young People; Race, Crime and The Justice System. www.smartjustice.co.uk (un-authored piece). Sourced 16th November, 2008.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ ‘Black girls overtake white boys’ (un-authored piece). BBC News. 24.02.04
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3517171.stm>

after the release of GCSE exam grades and utilized by those concerned with the effects of a more feminized education service. Nonetheless the same report also indicated that educational achievements within school's black populations are not as widely divergent as they appear on first readings. Criminologist Professor Marian Fitzgerald argues that new policies for data collection and data dissemination instigated by the Blair government reflect the "long standing and highly polarized debates about crime and race in Britain" through policies which are increasingly difficult to interpret and "particularly threatening to the interests of minority groups".¹⁶⁹

While I have focused on the misrepresentation of the black population in education in Britain, traditionally research has focused on the reasons for the incarceration of so many black men in the American prison system (in 1993 figures showed that one black man is in prison for every eleven black men in the workforce).¹⁷⁰ This figure is somewhat disingenuous because comparisons are only being made between black men in prison and in employment and we know that the figures for unemployment among the black population are very high. Regardless of the incongruity of these figures, and despite the many socio-political and cultural reasons why black boys under-achieve and why so many more black men are accused of committing crimes than white men, these figures continue to be paraded as indicative of the failure of black peoples and more specifically the failures of black lone mothers who are consistently accused of raising black male uneducated juvenile delinquents.

The continued focus of attention on the stereotypes of the black lone mother as psychically and physically threatening, and her children as damaged and damaging not only serves to conceal the unspeakable, that is the numbers of white middle class women choosing

¹⁶⁹ Professor Marion Fitzgerald. 'Lies, Damned Lies and Ethnic Statistics' 2008 <http://www.kent.ac.uk>

¹⁷⁰ Richard B. Freeman. 'Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crime and What Might We Do About It'. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*. Vol.10, No.1 (Winter, 1996). Pp 25-42

to raise their children in father-absent homes, it also makes invisible the higher percentage of white lone mothers receiving welfare aid which, as Douglas and Michaels argue are illustrated in the statistics collected since 1994 showing that more white women are collecting welfare aid than black women (37% black to 39% white). Quoting these statistics as illustrative of persistent misrepresentation of black lone motherhood when the numbers involved are so close may seem like a mute point but when one also takes into account the numbers of black lone mothers who have left welfare within a year—75% to 62% white lone mothers it is hard to fail to recognise the currency of Douglas and Michaels’ argument about the media’s persistent racialized agenda setting.¹⁷¹

The determined rehearsal of these racialized misconceptions and misrepresentations of black lone motherhood functions to maintain the hegemony of black fatherhood which, as Charles J. Heglar, notes was established since slavery as the signifier of successful assimilation and citizenship by enslaved black male writers.¹⁷² By drawing attention to the inadequacies of black lone mothers and calling for the return of the father to take his ‘rightful’ place at the head of the family, the black man is encouraged to demonstrate his “dominance and a form of self assertion and aggression that is demanded by the idealized image of black masculinity”.¹⁷³ Such rhetoric is propagated in the popular media by men like SgtWilliePete, PresidentoftheBlack (viaYouTube), actor Bill Cosby whose infamous ‘Pound Cake’ speech to the NAACP on the 50th Anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education Celebration inspired his book *Fatherhood*, in the films of John Singleton and Spike Lee, the

¹⁷¹ Douglas and Michaels. Pg 175

¹⁷² Charles J, Helgar. *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave marriage and the narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft*. (Westport Conn, London: Greenwood Press, 2001).

¹⁷³ Douglas and Michaels. Pg 175

politics of black nationalists like Louis Farrakhan and in the songs of Ice Cube and Snoop Dog.¹⁷⁴

That black spokesmen are calling for a more aggressive form of domination over women and more specifically black lone mothers is a highly disturbing discourse but it is one that acquiesces with the requisites of postfeminist masculinity which is in turn concerned with the re-enactment of a more macho form of masculinity as a response to feminism's supposed feminization of all men. This determined iteration of black absentee fatherhood discourse within American and British popular media functions to conceal the approval and encouragement of a much more troubling form of masculinity. Indeed my argument that black father hunger rhetoric functions to conceal a call to return to a more dominant form of masculinity is illustrated in statistical evidence proffered by British journalists Patrick Wintour, Nicholas Watt and Alexandra Topping in their article for British newspaper *The Guardian* wherein they write that while the popular media and heads of state pontificate about the monolithic problem of black absentee fatherhood as the reason for an escalation of violence within the country's black population, statistics show that "86% of lone parents are white, and poor black fathers are less likely to be absent than white poor fathers".¹⁷⁵ If as Wintour, Watt and Topping argue, media and political attention that has focused on absentee black fatherhood (and by extension, black lone motherhood) in Britain is incompatible with actual figures of black absentee fathers, then the discourse is surely serving another purpose.

¹⁷⁴ Louis Farrakhan's polemic on black masculinity and fatherhood are shared by the new right wing Christian movement whose ideological schema is predicated on the task of redefining and shoring up the requisites of masculinity of which fatherhood functions as the status which holds most currency.

¹⁷⁵ Patrick Wintour, Nicholas Watt and Alexandra Topping. 'Cameron: Absent Black Fathers Must Meet Responsibilities'. 16.07.08 <http://guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/16/davidcameron.conservatives>

Not only is it clearly racialized rhetoric, it is implying that black men should be aggressively proactive in gaining control of their families—and, by extension, of their women.¹⁷⁶

The alleged crisis in black masculinity relies on invoking the figure of the black lone mother as the cause of the fissures between black women and black men, and between black and white men. Indeed much of the literature produced about black masculinity foregrounds the black lone mother as the principal site of crisis.¹⁷⁷ The correlation of black lone motherhood with the disintegration of African American masculinity is succinctly demonstrated in bell hook's documentation of an interview she led with African American rap artist, film and television actor and producer Ice Cube. When discussing Ice Cube's thoughts on the role of black women within the African American population hooks asks whether black men like black women. In his response Ice Cube reflects on the effects of consumerism and black women's investment in aesthetic markers of white femininity as justification for black men's discontent adding that black men's anger has more to do with

¹⁷⁶ Although I explore this argument further in the following sections of this chapter, films such as Singleton's *Baby Boy* (2001) explicitly foreground a narrative in which a troubled black man finds his authority as father and husband when he expresses a more aggressive form of masculinity. It is interesting to note too that in *Knocked Up*, Seth Rogan's character is given the 'all clear' by the sister-in-law when he performs a more dominant form of masculinity. Also, recent articles appearing in the *New York Times* and journal *PsychologyToday* reiterate the idea that men need to be more in control of 'their' women. Indeed, Professor of psychology, Marta Meana is quoted as saying that women enjoy a more aggressive form of dominance. Apologizing for her anti-feminist stance, Meana writes "Women want to be thrown up against the wall". 'What Do Women Want'. www.nyt.com Jan 22, 2009. Mark Sichel. 'Why Women Want Their Men to be Caveman'. *Psychology Today*. www.psychologytoday.com June 7th 2009.

¹⁷⁷ See; Daniel White II. *God Has Smiled On Me: A Tribute to a black father who stayed at home and a tribute to all black fathers who stay*. (New York: Torch Legacy Publications, 2009), James C. Dobson. *The New Strong-Willed Child*. (Illinois: Tyndale Publishing House, 2007), R. V. Brown, *Step Up To The Plate Dad*. (London: Winepress Publishing, 2005). Stephen James and David Thomas. *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys*. (Illinois: Tyndale House, 2009), Brian Pruitt. *The Power of Dad: The Influence of Today's Fathers and The Destiny of Their Children*. (Florida: Xulon Press, 2007), April Silver. *Becoming Dad: Black Men and The Journey to Fatherhood* (Illinois: Agate Publishers, 2006). See also; www.Fathers.com, www.DearPapa.org, www.Fatherville.com, www.fatherhoodinsititute.org, www.BlackFathersHallofFame.com, www.AfricanFathers.org, www.fathermag.com, www.SuccessfullyRaisingYoungBlackMen.com

those “black women who have 2 or 3 kids and then men don’t want to get with her and the cycle just continues and continues”.¹⁷⁸

Implicit in Ice Cubes’ response is an immediate correlation of the disenfranchisement of black masculinity with the figure of the overly promiscuous black lone mother. Ice Cube’s sentiments, whether consciously or not, reprise Senator Moynihan’s earlier reference to black lone motherhood as the central factor in the denigration and emasculation of black masculinity. But they also draw from a more contemporaneous trend of locating black lone motherhood as the pathologizing element of black masculinity found in the discursive practices of Million Man Organizer and guru Louis Farrakhan (himself the son of a lone mother), and as discussed above Barack Obama (who, as a son of a lone mother has drawn from his ‘difficult’ background for his own political gain) or Shawn Bailey, black British conservative counsellor and self-proclaimed spokesman for London’s black population and founder of the ‘Boy to Man’ foundation (the son of a lone mother), and reflect the oftentimes veiled sentiments of ex-British prime-minister Tony Blair, and the not so subtle invocations of David Cameron and Labour’s Justice minister Jack Straw. Similar rhetoric is to be found in videos posted on YouTube from men like ColonelChoppa, PresidentoftheBlack, and more recently in *The Re-Education of The Female.*, the best-selling book from African American author Dante Moore.¹⁷⁹ (See Fig. 8)

¹⁷⁸ bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1994). Pg 131. it is worth noting again that hooks’ does not use this opportunity to challenge Ice Cube’s rhetoric even as she has noted how undervalued black lone mothers are.

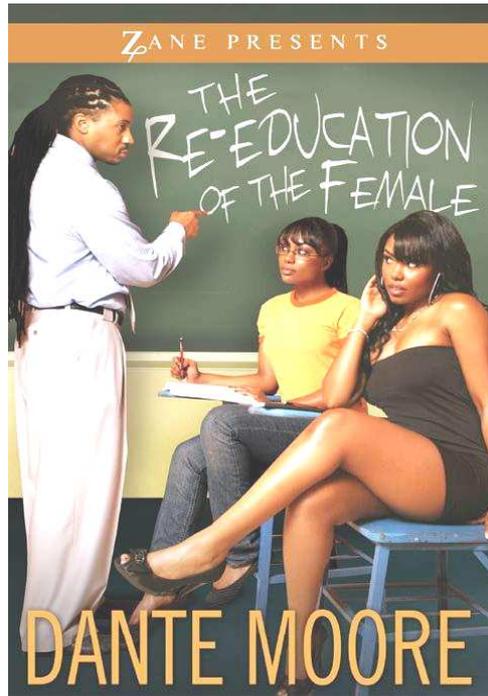


Fig. 8: Dante tells women how to behave.

According to Moore (son of a lone mother) the ‘answer’ to the ‘problem’ of the cultural, political and social obsolescence of black masculinity is for black women to “submit to the authority of God and man”.¹⁸⁰ Long gone, so it would seem are challenges to the historical and contemporary issues of unemployment affecting black men, or the systemic racism, poverty and poor housing as inimical to the success of black masculinity. In this post-civil rights era it is black women’s independence, or more poignantly, black lone mothers’ independence from men (and God), which is employed as the discursive tool through which issues of black masculinity are articulated. Indeed Helen Wilkinson, author of an essay exploring the ramifications of Farrakhan’s ideologies for women writes, “No longer is one emancipation—that of race—automatically linked to that of one gender. The crisis besetting America’s black community is a crisis in black masculinity”.¹⁸¹ This crisis has seen its visual and narrative birth in the work of African-American film makers John

¹⁸⁰ Dante Moore. *The Re-Education of the Female*. (New York: Strebtor Books, 2008). Pg 4. Moore also has a website (www.thereeducation.com) dedicated to the re-education of black women and expresses his views in his radio show on ‘Maximum Reality Radio’—an internet radio service. www.maximumreality.com

¹⁸¹ Helen Wilkinson. ‘What Are Women To Make of Farrakhan?’ *Opinion*. www.independent.co.uk 20/10/95

Singleton and Spike Lee whose oeuvre comes under the rubric of new black cinema and whose films see the “sons working overtime to secure the place of the father”.¹⁸² The following section explores the cultural presentation of black lone motherhood emerging from films produced under this rubric.

Baby Boys and Bad Boys: Cinemas’ Black Lone Mother and Her Son¹⁸³

Obama’s earlier negotiation of the agency of his lone mother through the rhetoric of father hunger is mirrored with persistent consistency in films that prioritize the black lone mother/son paradigm in male authored African-American films emerging from Hollywood from the late 1980s onwards. As I have already argued, the lexicon of father hunger is a highly utilized discourse in films which prioritize the white lone mother/son paradigm. In Chapter Three I focus specifically on the proliferation of this narrative trope within recent popular mainstream cinema texts arguing that these films are concerned to mediate any threat to the male child’s sexual identity. The codification of these white fatherless boys (who are in the main, much younger than the fatherless boys of cinema’s black lone mothers) as ‘Mama’s Boys’ or ‘cinematic sissies’ reinforce ideologies about heterosexuality within narratives which mediate the agency of the lone mother within a pernicious homophobic narrative.

The cultural presentation of the black lone mother and her post-pubescent male child are employed to foreground distinctly different discursive practices. Significantly the male child is older than his white counterpart, and the thematic concern of proto-homosexuality as

¹⁸² Willis. Pg 161

¹⁸³ I do not include an analysis of the black lone mother/daughter dyad in this chapter because it is an extremely rare visual and narrative pairing. This scope of this chapter does not allow me to specifically explore the absence of the black lone mothered daughter but I would suggest that her visual absence mirrors the marginalization of black girls from the political and social sphere.

featured in the white lone mother/son paradigm is conspicuously absent from the narrative of the fatherless black male. (See Fig. 9.1, 9.2 and 9.3)

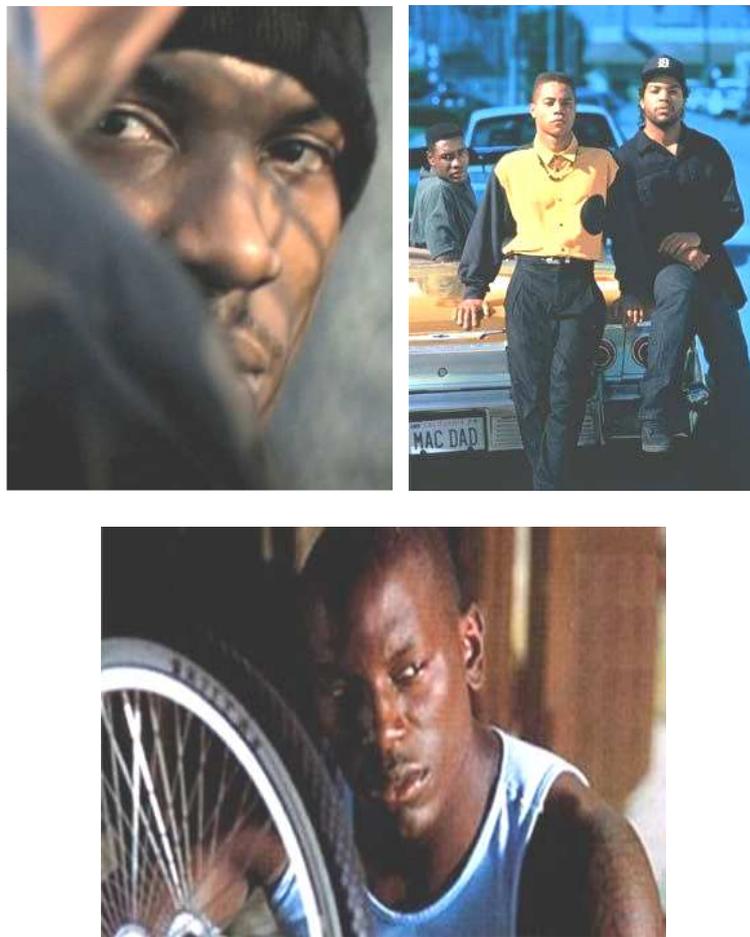


Fig. 9.1: Ricky, *Bullet Boy*, 2004. Fig. 9.2: Dough Boy and Tre, *Boys 'n' the Hood*, 1991.

Fig. 9.3: Jody, *Baby Boy*, 2001.

The absence of black gay characters within mainstream cinema mirrors the taboo nature of black homosexuality, unless of course it is presented within the highly caricatured and oftentimes ridiculed figure of the ‘snap queen’, an archetype described on the internet Gay and Black Glossary as “a young effeminate male with exaggerated effeminate traits whose typical mannerism is to punctuate and accentuate communication with finger snaps”.¹⁸⁴ While the young white fatherless son and his lone mother articulate concerns

¹⁸⁴ ‘Snap Queen’. Gay and Black Glossary. <http://www.mindprod.com> (sourced 05.07.09)

about the feminization of white masculinity, the black post-pubescent fatherless male child figure speaks to concerns about black male violence. As such, the paradigm of the black lone mother and her son embody racist discursive practices which are predicated on the historical construction of black masculinity as bestial and pathological and on historically constructed bodies of stories about black lone motherhood as wholly ineffective in the containment of their son's proclivity towards violence.

Of course, much like Obama's speech cited earlier, cinematic narratives such as the British *Bullet Boy*, or Singleton's *Baby Boy* do not explicitly castigate black lone motherhood. Indeed, it would be limiting to say that black lone mothers are always portrayed in a negative light. Beverley (Claire Perkins) the lone mother of *Bullet Boy* is coded as utterly desperate to save her eldest son Ricky (Ashley Walters) from the criminal path he is set upon and to reduce the threat of delinquency for her teenage son Curtis (Luke Frazer). In her quest to rescue Ricky from London's gun and gang culture, and to prevent him from returning to prison (our initial introduction to Ricky is as he leaves prison where he has been detained after being found guilty for stabbing a man), Beverley turns to her extended family and friends for support, helps Ricky to look for work and takes a keen interest in his life.¹⁸⁵ But at the heart of this story is a black lone mother who is coded as wholly inept. The film accords her so little agency (or energy) that she is often seen as too exhausted to hold her head up. *Bullet Boy* closes in a scenario where Beverley rejects her eldest son so she might concentrate on her younger male child, Curtis. With very little emotion Beverley says her goodbyes and drives away from Ricky leaving him to fend for himself. Given that Curtis has already 'accidentally' shot his best friend (in scenes using bleached lighting effects to evoke

¹⁸⁵ That Claire is seen in the presence of friends and family is an unusual treatment of cinematic lone motherhood which tends to be contained and isolated. In foregrounding her extended familial support network director Saul Dibbs' film recognizes what most research tends to ignore, that lone mothers seldom raise their children without an extended support network.

an atmosphere of the Wild West; somewhat disavowing Dibbs' claim that the film does not glamorize gun crime) we are left with the sense that Curtis has the odds stacked against him.

(See Fig. 10)



Fig. 10: Luke and friend play gangsters, *Bullet Boy*, 2004

Bullet Boy might want us to feel that Beverley is ‘trying her best’, yet underlying this narrative is a subtext which suggests that no matter how much a black lone mother tries to succeed, she must be resigned to the fact that, without the help of a man, she lacks the skills to raise her fatherless male child successfully. *Bullet Boy* succinctly articulates the views of men like Tony Sewell, education consultant, columnist for the *Voice* newspaper and listed as one of the top 100 Blacks in Britain who, in his article ‘Scandal of the Absent Fathers’ writes that the prevalence of gun culture in London “is a matter of un-channelled masculinity”.¹⁸⁶ *Bullet Boy* also reflects the uncharacteristically politically incorrect rhetoric of ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair who, commenting on the increase of gun crime in London stated that the “problem is endemic to a black community that creates ‘no rules, no paternal discipline, no proper framework’ for its’ children”.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Tony Sewell. ‘Scandal of the Absent Fathers’. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-436527/Scandal-absent-fathers.html 16.02.07

¹⁸⁷ ‘Blair Blames Crime Wave on Black Culture’. (Un-authored piece). www.newser.com 12.04.07. For similar discourses about African American masculinity see ‘America Has Lost a Generation of Black Boys’ by Phillip Jackson. <http://www.chattanooga.com>, Erik Eckholm’s ‘Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn. The New York Times. 20.03.2006 as just two examples among many.

While *Bullet Boy* repeats the social anxieties of politicians and cultural observers and the thematic concerns of its Hollywood predecessor *Boyz 'n' the Hood* (making an explicit correlation between fatherlessness, black lone motherhood and failed and violent black masculinity) Singleton's last film in his South Central LA trilogy *Baby Boy* (*Poetic Justice*: 1993 followed *Boyz 'n' the Hood*) promises a more measured presentation of the film's black lone mothered family. Indeed Singleton is quoted as saying that black lone mothers should have a life independent of their role as mother and that "family is not necessarily the traditional nuclear family".¹⁸⁸ However, even as *Baby Boy* sees Singleton divert his critical analysis away from black fathers and their errant sons to focus more specifically on the mother figure, the film is still described as a "further exploration in the crisis of black masculinity".¹⁸⁹ Indeed, *Baby Boy* offers yet another criticism of young black men by focusing on black males who refuse to grow up, do not actively seek employment and who father numbers of babies by different 'babymamas'. The film also offers a critique of a society that positions black men in this situation and is at pains to present a film solely from an Afro-centric view point (no white characters appear in the film).

Baby Boy makes clear its thematic concerns from the film's outset, where, in the opening scenes, we see the fatherless adult black male protagonist, Jody (Tyrese Gibson) curled up in a foetal position inside a womb. (See Fig.11) The accompanying opening narration quotes psychoanalytic theory correlating the infantilization of African American masculinity as a response to racism; "They call their women mama, their closest acquaintances 'boys' and their neighbourhood, 'the crib'" (we might add to this Jody's reference to his penis as 'daddy'). Jody is a twenty-something young man living at home with his lone mother Juanita (Adrienne Joi-Johnson). He does not have a job nor does he

¹⁸⁸ Interview with John Singleton. Samantha Spencer. Gescia Magazine: The Urban Entertainment Magazine. 2007 http://cookindiva.com/film_illegaltender_jsingleton.htm (sourced 10.04.09)

¹⁸⁹ 'John Singleton: A Change of Gears'. Ryan Gibley. 13th June 2003 www.independent.co.uk

shoulder any responsibility for the children he has fathered with two 'babymamas'. Jody's biggest fear in life is that he will have to leave his mother's home. While Singleton emphasizes the under-development of black masculinity as a problem of the individual male, that he opens his film with a scene from the womb immediately locates the female body as a site of tension.



Fig. 11: Jody assumes the foetal position

Notwithstanding the film's immediate codification of the womb as the locale of crisis for black masculinity, Singleton's film attempts to mediate some of the criticism of black lone motherhood he so explicitly foregrounded in *Boyz 'n' the Hood*. Juanita is portrayed as a strong woman (as opposed to stereotype of the bitter, righteous and angry black woman) who endeavours to guide her son to take responsibility for his children and encourages him to look for work. She is presented as a loving mother, supportive of her grandchildren, and of their mothers too. In fact Singleton is clear to articulate his concerns about women who have been left holding the babies of men who have rejected their role and responsibility as father and as husband.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Although it is worth noting that while Singleton attempts to depict the lone mother in a more respectful manner than in *Boyz'n'the Hood* and accord the films' lone mother with agency it is notable that Singleton does not include a narrative of a black lone mother who chooses to be so. As women who have been abandoned, the lone mothers in *Baby Boy* remain in the role of victim and their lone motherhood as a result of circumstance rather than of free choice. I would tentatively suggest that Singleton's characterization of Peanut might just qualify as more active but that she disappears from the screen all together before the close of the film surely renders her as a much more troublesome figure to contain.

By transferring the blame squarely onto the man's shoulders *Baby Boy* refuses to cast the lone mother as solely to blame for the crisis in black masculinity. The film's 'babymama's', Yvette (Taraji P. Henson) and Peanut (Tamara LeSeon Bass) are committed to their children; they work hard and want nothing more than for Jody to take seriously his role as their child's father. Singleton unusually accords the film's lone mothers their own desires, especially in the case of Yvette, is presented as an active agent in her life and the life of her child. More especially, *Baby Boy* celebrates Juanita's beauty and sexuality in a way which is respectful and somewhat liberating. Indeed, Juanita's sexual relationship with her new love interest is a celebration of sexual desire between two older black adults; a paradigm rarely, if ever seen in mainstream cinema. Singleton also treats the lone mother/son relationship with respect and tenderness particularly in the closing scenes wherein Juanita and Jody, who, having experienced fracture and discontent in their relationship come together in an intimate moment of mutual love and respect—again this scenario is seldom seen in films which prioritize this dyad.¹⁹¹ (See Fig. 12)



Fig. 12: Jody and Juanita sharing a moment of reconciliation.

And yet, even as Singleton claims his desire to give the “mama a life”, he still manages to code Juanita as inept and her decision making as troubling, especially since

¹⁹¹ The closing scenes in films in which the lone mother and son play a part (whether black or white) tend to focus on the image of a newly formed nuclear family. In *Jerry Maguire* we watch Jerry, Dorothy and Ray walk through a park together; and when the child is absent as in the case of *Pay It Forward*, the film still ends on a scene of the recently formed heterosexual couple. See also the close of *About a Boy*.

Jody's fears about leaving home are realised by the murder of his eldest brother who left his mother's house after she began a relationship with an unsuitable man. Juanita's choice of men—an alcoholic, an abuser and a murderer—surely serve to code her as a problematic figure who does not know what is best for herself and more importantly for her adolescent sons. Such codification reiterates the articulation of blame levelled at black woman for not making good choices in their love life; for not being able to distinguish between a 'nigga' and the omnipresent 'good black men'. More specifically the responsibility for her eldest son's death is put squarely on the shoulders of Juanita; she made the wrong choice for which her sons paid a high price. Moreover, even though the sexual relationship between Juanita and Mel is interesting in not wholly fetishizing the black female body, Singleton still incorporates black female sexuality in ways which problematize the characters and motives of these women, framing black female sexuality as a highly significant aspect in the representation of black women and more especially in the case of *Baby Boy*, as inherently significant in the presentation of black lone motherhood.

My argument about the 'distinct' way in which black female sexuality is performed as a mediation of the agency of the film's lone mother is illustrated in the scenario wherein Jody physically assaults Yvette. After punching her in the face, Jody picks Yvette from the floor and carries her to the bed. Yvette is in pain and scared by Jody's violence but Singleton has Jody carry out an act of cunnilingus on her in order to appease her pain. At first the scene works to demonstrate Jody's reliance on sex as an act of manipulation; indeed, at this point it also functions to highlight his immaturity and inappropriateness especially since we have witnessed Yvette saying no to his advances. However Jody's inappropriateness is very quickly mediated by Yvette's response which has turned from one of fear and pain to that of pleasure. In so doing *Baby Boy* disturbingly reiterates cultural messages about women who

say no to sex when they ‘really’ mean yes, but it also highlights cultural assumptions about black lone mother’s proclivity for sex as well as reinforcing anxieties about the bestial nature of fatherless black men, who as Obama earlier stated, lacking a male role model do not learn how to ‘respect’ women. While the film does not openly criticise the black lone mother, this scenario implicates Juanita as responsible for her son’s violence towards other woman and holds her to account for the attempted rape of another woman.

Despite making clear his intentions to disavow some of the myths inherent in narratives of black lone motherhood, Singleton’s film is still concerned with the presence of the father figure in re-educating the fatherless son to become a ‘good black man’. Jody’s inner emotional turmoil does not result from the ultimatums given by his mother nor by the mothers of his children but, and significantly, it surfaces with the arrival of his mothers’ new boyfriend. In this film the father figure comes in the guise of Melvin (Ving Rhames), a former ‘bad’ man whose incarceration in Folsom prison for murder has had a supposed redemptive effect. Interestingly the initial introduction of Melvin as the symbolic patriarch is highly ambivalent. In fact, I suggest we are invited to read Mel’s presence as deeply menacing; not least since he is a perpetrator of domestic violence and has abandoned his own children. In choosing Ving Rhames to play this paternal figure, Singleton utilizes Rhames’ body as a visual threat; his muscular hard-bodied frame always threatens violence and serves as a visual warning to Jody not to challenge Mel’s authority. (See Fig. 13) The animosity and threat of violence between the two men complicates the presentation of this surrogate father figure and Singleton seems at this point to be urging caution in accepting discourses about the primacy of fatherhood.



Fig. 13: Mel and Jody: Note how the 'father and son' fill the frame while the lone mother is relegated to the background.

The film's unease with Mel is especially pertinent in an early scene in which he is standing, completely naked in Juanita's kitchen cooking eggs for breakfast; Jody is clearly uncomfortable in Mel's presence because his own masculinity is being called to account. (See Fig. 14) As the two men make small talk, Cliff Richard's 1980's hit song *Daddy's Home* plays in the background. The inclusion of this song in a scene which seems ill at ease about Mel's suitability as a good, paternal role model seems to function as an ironic response to prevailing discourse about the importance of fatherhood but as the film continues we recognise that the only real subversion in this scene is that a man is cooking the breakfast.



Fig. 14: "Daddy's home to stay"

Mel functions as the mirror opposite to Jody whose delayed psychological and emotional development has cast him as a pampered, irresponsible, promiscuous, boy-man. Mel is the man that Singleton offers Jody as a template to fashion himself from; a man who has been redeemed by violence and re-habilitated by a lone mother. Throughout the film Jody has tried to reassure the audience and himself that he will stay away from violence (or at least gun crime since the film allows Jody to assault his ‘babymama’). However, after Yvette is almost raped by Rodney (Snoop Dog), Jody hunts him down and shoots him dead. In the following scene we see Jody return to his teenage bedroom in his mother’s house. As he sits on the floor, shocked by the events of the night, Mel appears in the room, takes the gun out of Jody’s hand, wipes off the fingerprints and holds Jody’s hand in his own to help his ‘reborn’ son to erase evidence of the crime that he has committed. (See Fig. 15)



Fig. 15: Jody and Mel bond.

Although the scene is without dialogue the message is clear that Mel has symbolically assumed the role of father—and Jody has allowed him to do so. What is troubling about this scenario is that the men bond over an act of violence; an act which is ineluctably tied to race for which the film never holds Jody to account. It is only after shooting Rodney that Jody recognises he must ‘grow up’ and become a father to his children (albeit only one of his children since Peanut and her daughter do not feature in the film’s conclusion). Yet again,

Yvette, the film's lone mother provides the rehabilitative space for the transformation of troubled masculinity.

Integral to Singleton's presentation of the black fatherless son is a narrative of 'black father as saviour' which is played out to its full in the highly racialized narrative of gun violence. It is the overtly muscled body of this surrogate father who is privileged to contain the errant masculinity of this black lone mothered son. Indeed, the moment of bonding between the two men can only take place at a distance from the lone mother (she is not visible in this scene) because it is the shared experience of male violence which has become the symbolic glue in sealing their relationship. Even as Singleton has argued that *Baby Boy* is about motherhood he has produced a film which is fundamentally about fatherhood; a film which maintains the pathologization of the black lone mother/son dyad through a highly masculinist approach.

Often denied a back story and more often than not denied her own voice too, the black lone mother figure in *Bullet Boy*, *Boyz 'n' The Hood* and *Baby Boy* is utilized as a peripheral but vitally important symbolic figure of threat to the efficiency of black masculinity. Reva Devereaux, lone mother of *Boyz 'n' the Hood* recognizes her inadequacy in raising her son without a father, and seemingly interpolated by western psychoanalysis, hands her teenage male child to his estranged father to enable the child to become a 'proper' man.¹⁹² Juanita is

¹⁹² This point reflects an issue raised by Sharon Wallace about the failure to take race into account in psychoanalysis as well as a particular reluctance from black academics to draw from psychoanalysis as a critical approach. Wallace notes that psychoanalysis is unrelated to the black experience and exists only as a scholarly practice for whiteness, a point reiterated upon and expanded by Hortense J. Spiller in her essay 'All The Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race', where she writes there has been "little or nothing in the intellectual history of African American's within the social and political content of the US that suggests the effectiveness of a psychoanalytic discourse". However Spiller suggests that while psychoanalysis has not always been relevant to black people-especially since ideas of interiority, self and desire centralized in psychoanalytic theory have been denied to the black population-a revised psychoanalytic framework which took into account such denials would be beneficial not only as a 'healing' process for blacks but as a way of legitimating black interiority, notions of the self and desires.

unable to contain her son's inherent drive for violence without the help of the hugely muscled symbolic patriarch and Beverley does not have the physical and emotional strength to restrain and re-train her black son. Reva, Juanita and Beverley are not only alike in their inadequacy but also in their resignation of their damaging effect on the inner well-being of their male fatherless children. Indeed, Reva's enforced estrangement from her son also estranges her from the rest of the film's narrative; once he is under the guidance of his father Singleton's film has no more purpose for the lone mother and she is rendered invisible for the remainder of the film. (See Fig. 16)



Fig. 16: Reva calls her estranged husband to arrange the hand over of her son to his care.

Reva's only function has been to move the narrative to the point of relinquishing her motherhood in favour of the primacy of fatherhood. Thus, even as Singleton 'changes gear' and shifts his emphasis to motherhood, the theme in this film and *Boyz 'n' The Hood* as well as the British text *Bullet Boy* remain the same; what happens to young black males without the steadying influence of a father figure. More specifically the lone mother characters featured in these films function "not as real women" but examples of what happens when women do not submit to the will of God and more poignantly, of man.¹⁹³

Elizabeth Abel, [Eds] Barbara Christian and Helen Moglen. *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. University of California Press: 1997). Sharon Wallace. *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005)

¹⁹³ Pough. Pg 97

One of the difficulties faced when critiquing the films of male African-American filmmakers is the rhetoric of authenticity used in marketing and publicity. For Singleton, *Baby Boy* and *Boyz 'n' the Hood* reflect his own experience of black urban life wherein the 'cultural shame' about black lone motherhood reinforced Black Nationalist and masculinist ideologies. The regular casting of black women as lone mothers might well reflect the social world wherein black lone motherhood is highly visible, but the black lone mother character type also functions as a cipher of a specific set of ideologies which maintain the hegemony of black masculinity and patriarchy within African-American cinema. As such the marginalized and oppressed figure of the black lone mother in films such as *Boyz 'n' the Hood* and *Baby Boy* serve as Spiller might argue, a critical role in the construction of "American national culture as well as.... its rhetoric of race and identity".¹⁹⁴ And yet, if Spiller's assertion is correct and the black lone mother figure does play such a crucial role in constructing national identity, it is remarkable how absent she is within more recent mainstream films. The final section of this chapter looks at Marc Foster's film, *Monster's Ball*, to argue alongside Sarah Banet-Weiser that this postfeminist, postracial environment produces particular tensions and ambivalences in the cultural presentation of black woman which "render irrelevant and repudiate those earlier concerns about racist imagery".¹⁹⁵ In a film which suggests that all motherhood is psychically damaging to men *Monster's Ball* employs the figure of the black lone mother to hide the film's disturbingly racist and misogynist discourse. Furthermore, with Projanksy's earlier observation about the distancing of African American women's racialization in order to maintain postfeminist whiteness in mind, I close this chapter with a brief analysis of some of exclusionary aspects of postfeminism in the cultural presentation of black lone motherhood.

¹⁹⁴ Hortense Spiller cited in Sharon Willis. *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997). Pg 185

¹⁹⁵ Sarah Banet-Weiser. 'What's Your Flava?: Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture'? in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and The Politics of Popular Culture*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Pg 204

‘Splitting Dark Wood’: Monsters, Lone Mothers and Masculinity.

In her highly emotional speech upon receiving best actress for her role as lone mother in Marc Foster’s film *Monster’s Ball*, Halle Berry challenged Hollywood to look beyond colour while also calling to mind all “the other faceless women of colour” whose struggle to be acknowledged by the film industry might now be improved after her win. Berry’s short speech illustrates the very complex nature of speaking to contemporary presentations of race. On the one hand Berry draws attention to racist practices within the industry, acknowledging that her win might empower other black actresses even as she challenges the industry to see beyond colour and race which she paradoxically claims, has made her win so much more distinctive. As the camera panned over the stellar audience, images of other acclaimed actors, (Dame Judi Dench—bastion of British cinema, Sidney Poitier—first African American to be awarded an Oscar in 1964 and Denzel Washington—winner of the Best Actor Award, 2002), showed them wiping tears from their eyes as a testament to the emotionality of the moment, one which Berry claimed was “so much bigger than the usual Oscar win”. Indeed, after 74 years of being consigned to the margins of Hollywood, the Academy had at last bestowed an Oscar for Best Actress to a black woman whose performance, according to media pundits and film critics alike, was breathless, intoxicating, demanding and almost perfect in its execution.

Best known for its explicit and raw display of inter-racial sex, *Monster’s Ball* is set in the racially tense and deeply claustrophobic Deep South; a geographical location embedded within the national conscience as a site of racial tension. The film tells the story of Leticia Musgrove, a black mother whose husband, cop killer Lawrence Musgrove (Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Combs), is awaiting execution in the State Penitentiary. It is the state enforced death of

Lawrence which is the catalyst for the film's central narrative; the love story between the disenfranchised and destitute Leticia and Hank Grotowski, a staunchly racist white man who, unbeknownst to Leticia, is charged with overseeing Lawrence's death. After the accidental death of Leticia's son Tyrell (Coronji Calhoun) and the suicide of Hank's son, Sonny Grotowski (Heath Ledger), Leticia and Hank begin to find solace in each others company. As Hank falls in love with Leticia we witness him shedding his more overt racist tendencies (illustrated by his tentative, but friendlier interactions with the estate's black hired help). Significantly, Hank resigns from his job—a decision much maligned by his father who receives news of the resignation as a rejection of the family's masculine credentials—and deposits his highly abusive, misogynist, racist father into a nursing home. Freed from the constraints of a form of tyrannical patriarchy and armed with a tin of white paint, Hank transforms the oppressive, dark and dingy house he had shared with two generations of Grotowski men into a light airy space to house the newly homeless Leticia. As the film draws to a close Leticia discovers what we have known all along, that Grotowski played a role in the execution of her husband. Penniless, vulnerable and utterly disenfranchised, Leticia chooses not to confront Grotowski. Rather, with one eye on the family plot of graves, Leticia allows Grotowski to spoon-feed her, his favourite flavour ice-cream—chocolate. (See Fig. 17)



Fig. 17: Hank feeds Leticia chocolate ice-cream. This scene also demonstrates the 'whitening' of Leticia.

Whether *Monster's Ball* is a critique of systemic racism or a racist film is never entirely clear. P. T. Holland argues that without any hard "evidence of racial bias it is always difficult to see racism".¹⁹⁶ Indeed, the obfuscation of racism in the celebratory rhetoric of multi-culturalism and post-civil-rights discourse makes Holland's argument even more salient. Nonetheless for many critics Hank's constant references to sugar and chocolate ice-cream functioned as a poignant manifestation of his racism. The film's imbrications of chocolate and sugar certainly worked to remind us of their "embeddedness in the economics driven by slaves" as well as referencing Leticia's skin colour, but the debates which focused on these issues are too easy and too limited.¹⁹⁷ I would argue that the film's references to chocolate and sugar, and the debates that followed veiled some of the more insidious presentations of race which were channelled through the body of the film's black lone mother whose social identity, while referenced by most film critics, academic and cultural observers is wholly absent from their analyses. In fact, the regularity with which film critics acknowledge Leticia's lone mother status is fascinating given that she only exists as such within the narrative for a very short period of time. Leticia begins the film as a married mother (it is the state execution of her husband that renders her a lone mother) and ends the film entirely devoid of her maternal role. I suggest that the cognitive link made by critics about Leticia's social identity as a lone mother is wholly reflexive of the cultural representation of black maternalism in the social world. Put more simply, we expect a black mother to be a lone mother because this is the image we are accustomed to.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ P. J. Holland. 'Death in Black and White: A Reading of Marc Fosters' *Monster's Ball*'. *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Spring 2006, Vol 31, No.3 Pg 1

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ It is interesting to note that the female partners of incarcerated black men in the US are referred to as lone mothers within the nation's statistics. While evidence of such labelling is absent in relation to black lone mother's white counterparts (that's not to say that the wives/partners of incarcerated white men are not labelled in the same way) it is noticeable that the inclusion of this demographic of black mothers in the nation's statistics of black lone motherhood is wholly disingenuous.

The critical emphasis of the film's presentation of white and black masculinity and the lack of cultural disquiet about the film's presentation of the black lone mother is indicative of the cultural ambivalence towards black women in general and black lone mothers especially. In some ways the lack of critical attention towards Leticia and the critical emphasis on masculinity can be explained by the way in which the film denies her a subject position. Leticia acts primarily as an 'interpretive filter' for anxieties about masculinity and these debates were fully realized in the films' critical reception. While Hollywood bathed in the glory of their public gesture of political progression and inclusivity, film critic Roger Ebert waxed lyrical (along with most of his white counterparts) about true love existing beyond race, and Halle Berry beamed with pride for being the first black actress to be recognised by the Academy, black activist groups were beginning to voice their discontent about the film's representation and mediation of race.¹⁹⁹ The devaluation of black masculinity through the film's appropriation of themes of black male violence, inept and absentee fatherhood, the inevitable image of the incarcerated black man and his subsequent death emerged as the main reason that says Esther Iverem, editor and film critic for the online magazine *SeeingBlack*, "led scores of men to boycott" Foster's film.²⁰⁰

Concerns levelled at *Monster's Ball* were threefold. Firstly, that the film prioritizes a narrative in which a poor black woman turns to a white racist man for companionship, security and sexual satisfaction. Although the film initially codes Leticia as uncertain of Hank, the film's narrative drive to conclude with an inter-racial coupling means that regardless of her initial caution the outcome was already certain. The inevitability of their

¹⁹⁹ Esther Iverem notes the discrepancy in the film's reception by white film critics who noted their approval of Marc Foster's 'masterpiece' in contrast to those from the black community who, as Iverem writes, have little access to voice their own disquiet and are hesitant to do so fearful of putting future 'positive' representations of African Americans in jeopardy. Esther Iverem. 'Not All of Us Are Oscar Happy'. www.seeingblack.com 27th March 2002

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

coupling is most recognisable in Hank's relaxed but purposeful attitude—the painting of the house to make ready for Leticia's arrival, purchasing a petrol station and naming it 'Leticia' etc— indicates his own assurance that Leticia would acquiesce to his desires even as she had earlier rejected them. The film's paradigmatic choice of a white man as rescuer/master of a disenfranchised black woman resonated for many black viewers as a re-telling of the slave narrative. But it also echoed more contemporary concerns of black men about the emasculation of black masculinity as well as the threat of racial suicide by black women who choose to have relationships with white men.

Such rhetoric has earned significant currency in the popular media and is illustrated in a 2007 NBC news report which 'exposed the phenomena' of the increase in numbers of black women dating white men.²⁰¹ According to NBC the rise in numbers of marriages of black women/white men has increased from 95,000 in 2000 to 117,000 in 2006 (certainly the numbers have grown but one cannot help but wonder why a 20,000 increase should garner such scrutiny). While the report was clear to point out that most black women look to black men for relationships and marriage, the report detailed better educational achievements for black women (64% of black university/college students are women), more access to employment (9.7% of African American men are unemployed) and increased admittance to wider social circles as the 'reason' why black women are turning away from black men to mate with white men. Popular media investment in these discursive practices betrays a deeper, more troubling racial agenda which foregrounds white patriarchal propaganda as divisive among African Americans. Telling black women that no matter how attractive they are, they will still be hurt and abandoned and ultimately left alone and unloved when they choose to be with black men ratifies ideological practices which continue to code black

²⁰¹ NBC News. 'Why Black Women are Dating White Men'. 26th November 2007.

masculinity as unstable. Or as *SgtWilliePete*, self proclaimed guru on all matters to do with African American gender relations, so eloquently explains, “black women dating white men always tells us that all black men are fucked up and all niggers are in jail”.²⁰² According to the film’s detractors, Leticia’s choice to turn her back on black men is illustrative of all black women’s treachery towards their female ancestors and their refusal to acknowledge “the crucifixion of black men”.²⁰³ That *Monster’s Ball* should kill off its black male protagonist in favour of a white man who is enabled to re-enact a colonial master narrative over the body of a submissive black woman surely reinforces the concerns of black men’s groups who continue to blame white men and black women, and more poignantly, the black lone mother, for their perceived emasculation.

Foster’s choice to code Lawrence Musgrove as a violent man not only functions as a narrative device to render him silent through death, it also reinforces ideologies about black men’s proclivity for violence and as such emerged as another central concern of those challenging the racial politics of *Monster’s Ball*.²⁰⁴ By denying Lawrence a back story to contextualize the crime he is alleged to have committed, *Monster’s Ball* suggests a certain predictability about his incarceration and promotes, as Norman K. Denzin in his book *Reading Race* might argue, “an ethnically specific visual, racist performance vocabulary” that

²⁰² SgtWilliePete. www.youtube.com. Although *SgtWilliePete* is quick to recognise the media’s role in propagating these discursive practices, he also accuses black women of betraying their race. This is an argument reiterated many times in postings on YouTube and none more vociferous than those voiced by the American black men’s group *blacktownnation* who claim that black women have purposefully deceived black men. Drawing from historical accounts of the system of peonage, *blacktownnation* reminds black women of their ontological narrative of “400 years of being white man’s slut, mammy and slave” and their social position as the property and territory of the white man.

²⁰³ Ibid

²⁰⁴ Note too that *Monster’s Ball* codes Lawrence Musgrove as an absentee father, drawing from cultural discourse which has recently begun to highlight the ‘problem’ of the black absentee father, the film reinforces the link between blackness and social decay through the trope of criminality and inept black masculinity. It is also worth mentioning that the American government label black women who are raising children whose fathers are in state prisons as ‘lone mothers’. In so doing governmental figures about the percentage of African American lone mothered households are often highly misleading. That film critics and cultural observers talk about Leticia Musgrove from the outset as a single mother betrays an underlying assumption about black women but also highlights how the social construction of the identity of lone motherhood is influenced by government policy.

supports national (British and American) moral panics which equate black masculine culture with a “culture of criminality”.²⁰⁵ In maintaining the criminalization of race, *Monster’s Ball* rehearses, to borrow a phrase from the Comaroff’s as quoted in Giroux, “the banal theatrics of the mass media” which nourishes the anxieties of a nation ever afraid of being denied white privilege.²⁰⁶

The hegemonic negotiation of black masculinity not only marginalizes the subjectivity and agency of the black man, but more importantly it inscribes, as Toni Morrison writes, that which is “really on the national mind—the architecture of the new white man”.²⁰⁷ In stark contrast to Ebert’s earlier musings about the ‘irrelevancy’ of a racial subtext in Foster’s film, Iverem argues that *Monster’s Ball* pathologizes black masculinity in the service of the transformation of white, colonial, racist masculinity and uses the narrative of inter-racial sex as the ‘hook’. While Iverem’s account of the film’s mediation of racism in its ideological agenda of rescuing and redeeming white masculinity became the catalyst for black men’s protestations about *Monster’s Ball*, the focus of her own concerns was the film’s representation of black femininity. More specifically Iverem highlighted the film’s presentation of black female sexuality, raised issues about the degree of Halle Berry/Leticia Musgrove’s ‘blackness’ and questioned the level to which “acceptance and recognition by white people seems to be the paramount symbol of success with people like Halle Berry and other blacks that get all ‘giddy’ about being ‘firsts’”.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Norman K. Denzin. *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*. (London: Sage, 2002). Pg 22

²⁰⁶ John and Jean Comaroff cited Giroux. Pp 54-55

²⁰⁷ Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (London: Picador, 1993). Pg 14

²⁰⁸ Iverem. ‘Not All of Us Are Oscar Happy’. www.seeingblack.com 27th March 2002.

The growing disquiet about Halle Berry, her representation of black femininity and her role within the film's narrative were realised in a petition to Lions Gate Films and The Academy Award's Body which called for a public boycott against Berry for "starring in the most degrading and offensive film ever made on the subject of African Americans", which it was argued had "taken African Americans back two hundred years to a time of oppression".²⁰⁹ Beginning her argument with an acknowledgement of the paucity of black women within mainstream cinema and the long held tradition of over-looking the talents of black female actresses, Iverem argues that *Monster's Ball* disavows the legacy of white patriarchal colonialism through the tired and well rehearsed utilization of cinematic black female archetypes of the Jezebel, the Tragic Mulatto and The Magic Negro. (See Fig. 18)



Fig. 18: Leticia is simultaneously poor, black, trailer trash and a lone mother. Significantly she is smoking; and as such is the very antithesis of good maternalism.

Although Iverem's argument about the casting of black actresses in stereotypically racial roles is highly salient (and I would argue that Leticia embodies all three archetypes), she neglects to add to her list the typology of lone mother even as she refers to Leticia as

²⁰⁹ Ibid

such. While I have pointed to the film's use of black masculinity as a cinematic device to elevate the position of white masculinity, the film's lone mother maintains the conventions of mainstream cinema in coding the black character as someone who, while clearly disenfranchised, is employed as the primary enabler of whiteness. It is only through his relationship with Leticia that Hank rids himself of the constraints of a particular type of masculinity learnt under the tutelage of his misogynist, racist, bigoted father. That the film posits Hanks' 'troubles' as emerging from the very same issues that the black women is constrained by— gender oppression and racism—speaks to the perverse nature of employing the archetype of the film's disenfranchised black lone mother to assuage white man's guilt. Simply put, the body of this black lone mother serves as a space, a location as hooks might argue, "where white men work out their conflicts around freedom, their longing for transcendence".²¹⁰

Hank is enabled to assert his sexual agency with Leticia and to transform his social position from a blue collar worker to businessman. In so doing, Grotowski rejects the legacy of his Polish ethnicity which has traditionally cast him in the role of a blue collar worker; a shift in his social status which allows him to embrace a more sensitive approach to issues of race than is sanctioned for working class men. That *Monster's Ball* employs the black lone mother to mediate Grotowski's ethnicity and social status while simultaneously deconstructing Leticia's maternal identity speaks to the film's inherent racist practices. In losing her husband and her son, Leticia exists within the film only as a filter for the articulation of a set of particular racialized and gendered characteristics which are predicated on the historical construction of black lone motherhood.

²¹⁰ hooks. Pg 59

Embedded in Leticia's lone mother narrative is evidence of discursive practices which casts the paradigm of black lone mother/son as always pathological. Earlier in the chapter I pointed to the differentials in the presentation of the white lone mother/ son paradigm and her black counterpart noting how age variance allows for certain racialized concerns to be articulated. Significantly Tyrell is younger than his *Boys 'n' the Hood*, *Bullet Boy* and *Baby Boy* counterparts. I suggest that in casting Tyrell as a young boy the film alludes to cultural concerns about the feminization of *all* forms of masculinity for *all* boys when raised solely by a mother. Tyrell is significantly overweight because food has become his substitute for love. (See Fig. 19) But more notably, Tyrell's comfort eating and his overweight body are more traditionally positioned as female traits, as are his artistic tendencies. Such traits code Tyrell as distant from preferred ideals of black masculinity. Indeed, his father reminds Tyrell that although his artistic traits are inherited from him, his son is nothing like him. Although Lawrence is commenting on his own failed masculinity (a violent, criminal and failed father) his comments also work to separate Tyrell's masculinity as distinct and different from his father's more masculine performance of manhood. The film's casting of Tyrell as younger is indicative of the intensity with which the discourse of the feminization of masculinity is being emphasized even within the African American population where effeminophobia is so well established.



Fig. 19: Tyrell's obese body distances him from his mother. There is no emotional connection between mother and son.

Tyrell's obese body not only serves as a warning of the effects of feminization on the black male body, it is also an indicator of Leticia's failed maternalism; he is the visual reminder that she is incapable of raising him to be a 'proper' black man. Indeed, her disgust at his body and her inability to monitor his diet introduces one of the more disturbing scenes in the film wherein Leticia repeatedly hits Tyrell whilst reminding him that America does not accept black men like him. Holland describes this image of child abuse as an "act of violence and condemnation" which come together to highlight the constraints placed on black masculinity.²¹¹ While her argument is certainly astute, that it is a black lone mother acting in such a way has resonance beyond a critique of the cultural prescripts of and restraints on black masculinity. Leticia is at once articulating recognition of her own maternal inadequacies at the same time as reinforcing historical and socio-political rhetoric established by Thomas Pettigrew in 1964 which cast the black lone mother as treating her son in a much more punitive manner than her daughter. In his book, *A Profile of The American Negro*, Pettigrew claimed that "matriarchs make no bones about their preference for little girls, while they often manifest real affection for their boy children, they are clearly convinced that all little boys must inexorably and deplorably become men with all the pathologies of that sex. The matriarchal mother not infrequently attempts to counteract such influences with harsh if erratic punishments".²¹² By presenting Leticia as harshly punitive towards her son, *Monster's Ball* codes Leticia's as normative behaviour for black lone mothers towards their fatherless sons.

Leticia's lack of maternal feeling towards her son is compounded further in the film's treatment of his sudden death. The film's first 45 minutes we see the deaths of three male protagonists. The loss of Hank's son and of his father provides the narrative device for

²¹¹ Holland. Pg 2

²¹²Thomas Pettigrew. *A Profile of the American Negro*. (Princeton : Van Nostrand, 1964) cited in Franklin, Pg 156

Hank's transformation, but the deaths also serve to reinforce highly racist tendencies. The film's implementation of Lawrence's execution speaks to hooks' assertion that the treatment of the deaths of black characters within mainstream cinema is indicative of Hollywood's racialized agenda wherein 'black death' is seldom presented as serious. Although Holland has argued that Foster intended Lawrence's death to be understood as a critique of the American penal system there is opportunity to see the 'black death' narrative as a means of positioning Hank as an intrinsically good man which serves to cast further doubt on Leticia. Hank's attitude towards Lawrence codes him as a highly professional man but also as a 'not-so-bad' racist. Leticia, on the other hand, is presented as emotionally detached from her husband's death.

The juxtaposition of a white, professional who accords a black prisoner respect even as his personal politics code him as a racist with the emotional 'coldness' of Leticia positions Hank as more humane than Lawrence's wife. While the film might encourage us to question Leticia's reaction towards her husband's death, it also denies its black character opportunity to grieve. We do not witness Lawrence's funeral, neither do we see Leticia or her son at his graveside. In sharp contrast, the death of Sonny Grotowski is treated in a very different manner. We are present at his funeral, and while we are privy to Hank's ambivalence towards his son we see the burial ritual being maintained by the two remaining Grotowski men. Indeed that Sonny's grandfather dresses in his prison officer's uniform and stands unaided for the first and only time in the film is illustrative of the racial distinctions within these death narratives.

More problematic is Tyrell's tragic death narrative which is mediated by the hysterical and helpless behaviour of his mother who cannot lift his morbidly obese body from

the roadside after being killed in a hit and run accident. Only when Hank appears on the scene can Tyrell's death be acknowledged as tragic but by then the film is more concerned with the 'serendipitous' meeting of Hank and Leticia. Tyrell's death scene serves only as a narratological device to re-unite the two adults. Even as the event of Tyrell's death is not as narratologically privileged as his father's death, his obese black body is rendered as a spectacle just like his father and the absence of any burial ritual codes Leticia's loss as less significant than the loss of Hank's son. In stark contrast to Sonny's funeral scenes *Monster's Ball* does not include any visual references to Leticia's loss, indeed there are no images of his gravestone and no real sense of remembrance other than the fact that it serves as a lead to the film's famous scene wherein Leticia asks Hank to make her "feel good". By focusing on Leticia's sexual desire, *Monster's Ball* codes this lone mother's behaviour as deeply inappropriate.

In much the same way that Singleton foregrounds black female sexuality as a central identifying feature of black lone motherhood in *Baby Boy*, Foster reiterates this highly racist and misogynist construction of black lone motherhood as well as reinforcing historical discourses of black women's heightened propensity for sex. Moreover Foster continues the cinematic tradition of spectacularizing and fetishizing the female black body. In fact, the most revolutionary message *Monster's Ball* offers has absolutely nothing to do with anti-racist and anti-misogynist perceptions about black lone mothers and black women in general but instead has everything to do with what hooks describes as "the construction of white males as desiring subjects who can freely assert their sexual agency".²¹³ As the film claims, "You ain't a man 'til you split dark wood". Furthermore, that *Monster's Ball* should offer an inter-racial coupling as the transformative space for the manifestation of Hank's newly

²¹³ hooks. Pg 61.

formed personal politics reinforces discursive practices which posit that “ending racism is really only about issues of inter-sexual access”.²¹⁴

By killing off the child of the black lone mother, Leticia emerges as a safe image for Hollywood. The loss of her child renders her no longer an aberrant and threatening figure; instead the inter-racial relationship of Leticia and Hank can be celebrated as the iconic image of a post-racial society which no longer views race as a barrier to love. While Holland argues that Foster mediates the celebration of inter-racial coupling at the close of the film by positioning Leticia as the key holder of power (she has discovered Hank’s role in her husband’s death and has chosen not to challenge him) I argue her silence is the result of the film’s wholesale destruction of her ‘self’ and her identity. Leticia is not the key holder of power, rather she is entirely disenfranchised and wholly dependent on Hank whose closing dialogue “I think we are going to be ok” disavows Leticia’s experiences just as the film has done. Indeed, in stating that everything is going to work out fine for them both, Hank is implying that his experience of racism (in other word his own racist tendencies), the social constraints placed on him as a result of his ethnicity and the oppression inflicted on him by his racist and bigoted father cast him as a victim just as much as Leticia’s experience of racism and misogyny has impacted her life.

Closing *Monster’s Ball* with neo-liberal sentiments which suggest we are all victims of racism and oppression (in a scene in which Leticia looks almost white) epitomizes the dynamics of a postmodern, postfeminist and post-race cultural landscape. It is within the neo-liberal ‘politics of difference’ rhetoric that the voices of the displaced, exploited and vilified are mediated. Claiming that oppression is no longer specifically experienced by

²¹⁴ Ibid

people marked by race but rather is a salient issue which affects whiteness systematically disavows the importance of continued challenges to systemic racism that is experienced by African American peoples. That *Monster's Ball* still directs and contains the 'abject' female into a 'safer' cinematic image of black femininity, alone, dependent on a white man, devoid of agency and more specifically, no longer matriarchal, speaks to the threat that the black lone mother poses to the success of postfeminist and neo-liberal post-race ideologies.

In conclusion, differences in the ways in which the white lone mother and her black counterpart are culturally presented are highly significant since they demonstrate the exclusions that the success of postfeminism relies upon. Specifically, the high cultural prioritization of the white lone mother within the cinematic world of postfeminist romance where she has become a central figure in the repatriation of the traditional nuclear family and an agent in the reconfiguration of masculinity and fatherhood offering her incomplete family as the space for his transformation. The same process is seldom relevant for the black lone mother. Despite the fact that the close of *Baby Boy* sees Juanita and Mel settled in a relationship, there is little evidence to suggest that their relationship will last (indeed, given Mel's back story the risk that he will become violent in the future problematizes any suggestion this is a solid relationship). Certainly for Glo (Loretta Devine) the older black lone mother in *Waiting To Exhale*, the promise of a secure coupling rings in the air but the relationship between Glo and Marvin (Gregory Hines) has never been cast within the film's narrative as the space for his redemption in the same way that say, Jerry has in *Jerry Maguire*, or Will Freeman in *About A Boy*. Indeed, the romance narrative between Marvin and Glo is one which challenges her mistrust of men (and more specifically of black men). As such, the black lone mother figure of this romance narrative serves to illustrate the irrelevance of cultural discourse (presented as black female speak) about the lack of 'good

black men'. What is more, it would be difficult to argue that the close of *Monster's Ball* is one which warms the heart.

One of the more noticeable differences between the narratives of the white lone mother and the black lone mother is that the latter representation is of a much older woman. Given that the troubled son of the black lone mother is also older than his white counterpart the differentiation in ages between the two sets of woman is understandable. But I suggest that the maturity of the black lone mother also serves to distance her from the possibility of future reproduction—the central ideological component in the construction of family. The casting of a more aged, gendered black body also articulates another postfeminist aspect as exclusive to whiteness. Even as Glo, Leticia and Juanita's stories conclude with a romance narrative, the promise of marriage for these women is absent from the text. Unlike the older white lone mother figure Daphne in *Because I Said So*, Glo, Leticia and Juanita are excluded from the world and spectacle of cinematic weddings.²¹⁵ While older white women can be incorporated into the world of postfeminist femininity by masking their aging bodies through a process of 'girling', older black women are denied the same form of postfeminist 'make-

²¹⁵ An example of a younger black lone mother actually marrying can be found in *Independence Day* (1996), where Capt Stephen Hillier (Will Smith) and Jasmine Dubrow (Vivica A Fox) pledge their commitment to each other. That this black lone mother is marrying is in itself worth noting but that she is marrying a black man is highly unusual within mainstream films. However I suggest that this uniting of a black lone mother and her black husband-to-be is still presented in a way that codes their union as un-seeable. Indeed the fact that the wedding takes place under ground in a government bunker points to the un-see-able nature of their union. While the narrative of an impending alien threat hastens wedding plans for the couple, Jasmine is not wed in a bride-gown. Unlike her white counterpart, Jasmine's black body does not 'fit' with the spectacle of the wedding. See also *Something New* in which Kenya (Sana Lathan) a single black woman (who is cast as a racist) is also denied her dream wedding. *Something New* opens with a rare cinematic image of a black couple getting married. In the presence of a group of African Americans, Kenya, dressed in a traditional white wedding gown turns to her black husband-to-be as he prepares to place the wedding ring on her finger. However, just as the union is about to become official a loud noise interrupts the proceedings. Alarmed by its intensity, the wedding party runs away leaving the bride standing alone at the altar. This dream sequence, for that is what it is, broken by the actual sound of an alarm clock serves to render the images of a black man and woman marrying as un-see-able while at the same time highlighting the impossibility of this cinematic paradigm.

over'.²¹⁶ Indeed, the masking of Daphne's girlishness casts her once again as a figure for romance and a body which can look spectacular in a wedding dress.

The denial of a postfeminist make-over of the older black lone mother exemplifies one of the ways in which race mediates the presentation of lone mothers Daphne, Juanita, Leticia and Glo and demonstrates a conspicuously limited vision of race and femininity within a postfeminist, postracial framework. Such conceptualization reinforces the racialized hierarchy of femininity and highlights the cultural exclusion of black women within the cultural imagination. This form of discrimination –that is the exclusion of black women from the world of romance, girlishness and weddings—is, as Norma Manatu might argue, “insidious” because it is in film imagery that “the ‘feminine’ is invisibly but securely housed”.²¹⁷ The absence of the black lone mother from such genres demonstrates the continued resonance of the historical construction of all black women as somehow devoid of femininity. Simply put, white skin is akin to romance, dependency, warmth and gentleness as black skin is akin to the profane, promiscuous and dominance. Such notions of what constitutes femininity are still bound up in racist ideologies about black women which have become especially pronounced in a cultural, political and social environment that places so much emphasis on white middle-class notions of ‘yummy-mummy’ hood as the epitome of true femininity. Indeed, in a culture where motherhood is the epitome of femininity it is surely telling how race functions in the hierarchy of motherhood when black mothers are seldom foreground as examples of ‘yummy-mummy’ hood whether married or not. That Halle Berry, the child of black and white parents and lone mother to her own bi-racial child has become the ‘token’ example of chic black lone motherhood (although her engagement to her father’s child has been recently announced) in the celebrity world attests to the

²¹⁶ See Sadie Wearing’s insightful chapter ‘Subjects of Rejuvenation: Aging in Postfeminist Culture’ in Tasker and Negra. Pp 277-310

²¹⁷ Manatu. Pg 52

importance of the inter-racial relationship as prioritized in *Monster's Ball* as iconic of this postfeminist, post-race environment where mixed race relationships are perceived as wholly symbolic of the success of the 'politics of difference'.

Chapter Three

The Lone Mother and Her Son, or Ray Kisses a Man the Right Way.

“A woman simply is, but a man must become. Masculinity is tricky and elusive. It is achieved only by a revolt from woman and is confirmed by other men. Manhood coerced into sensitivity is no manhood at all.”²¹⁸

Debates about the sociology of childhood, or the ways in which children are raised frame questions about how we as adults perceive the future. As Malcolm Hill and Kay Tisdall note: “When worries are expressed about the faulty socialization of children—that families, that education, that society is failing to socialize children into worthy citizens—what is most revealed are adults’ worries for society and its future, about losing control”.²¹⁹ Over the last decade we have witnessed a much more rigorous policing of parenting skills with the introduction of mandatory parenting classes for those deemed inept and the imposition of punitive measures meted out by local and governmental authorities to parents who ‘fail’ their children. A central tenet of governmental dogmas about parenting and childhood is that if we can correct the way that children are raised then we can eliminate all social ills. To this effect, the narrative of the dysfunctional family has become centrally embedded in our daily lexicon to serve as a reminder of the duty of care that parents have in raising the next generation of competent citizens.

This chapter explores cinematic representations of the lone mother/son dyad to ascertain what worries are being expressed about this traditionally pathologized

²¹⁸ Camille Paglia. www.masculinevirtues.com (Sourced 15.8.2007).

²¹⁹ Malcolm Hill and Kay Tisdall. *Children and Society*. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1997). Pg 247

representational paradigm. It draws from psychoanalysis, philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, history, film and popular media in order to argue that the recent cultural prioritization of the lone mother/son paradigm reflects a pernicious framing of the lone mothered son as displaying the symptoms of ‘gender identity disorder’—a term employed in the world of psychoanalysis to describe homosexuality. Kathy Merlock Jackson argues that analysis of cinematic representations of children have tended to ignore the socio-cultural resonance of children on the screen, only really focusing on historical and autobiographical accounts told in retrospective accounts. For Jackson, the lack of critical attention to cinema’s children means a negation of the important role children have in highlighting what she terms “unacknowledged and hidden cultural tensions and dilemmas”.²²⁰ She writes: “If a particular image of childhood appears in several successful American films, as well as influence an entire trend of subsequent films, there must be an underlying reason that cannot be ignored”.²²¹ In light of Merlock’s arguments about the importance of exploring how images of children act as ciphers for cultural anxieties this chapter also includes an analysis of cultural and social discourses surrounding the actor Haley Joel Osment. However my study begins with a discussion the 1999 cult film, *Fight Club* as an apposite text for my purposes since the film offers a highly relevant cultural lens from which to view broader contemporary social and cultural paradigms of masculinity and lone motherhood.

A Strange Phase: Fatherless Masculinity and the Double Bind Paradox.

In a derelict bathroom of a rundown house, two young men—one naked in the bath, the other sitting upon the toilet—discuss their childhoods and the subsequent effects on the

²²⁰ Kathy Merlock Jackson. *Images of Children in American Film: A Socio-Cultural Analysis* (New Jersey, London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1986) Pg 3

²²¹ Ibid 4

psychology of their masculinity. (See Fig. 20) Jack/The Narrator (Ed Norton) asks Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who, if given the opportunity, he would choose to have a fight with. “My dad”, replies Tyler. Jack’s question allows for these two young men to exchange experiences of paternal absence and criticize social and cultural expectations that would have them follow a pre-determined trajectory for the formation and certification of mature, heterosexual masculine identity: college, career, marriage and fatherhood. Although both men view this paradigm with contempt, it is conceptualized as utterly unattainable for them because their process of masculine maturation has been disturbed. Suggesting that marriage might be the answer to their melancholia, Tyler replies “Another woman is not what we need right now”. To which Jack nods his agreement and adds, “We are thirty year old boys belonging to a generation of men raised by women”.



Fig. 20: Jack and Tyler discussing their childhoods.

Fight Club attempts, says Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman, a critique of the “broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated with non-liberal conservatism”, yet hidden amidst this social critique is, as Giroux and Szeman lament, really only another “tired narrative about the crisis in masculinity”.²²² Opening with a montage of images that showcase the material delights of a very particular type of

²²² Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman. ‘Ikea Boy Fights Back: Fight Club, Consumerism and the Political Limits of Nineties Cinema’. Jon Lewis (Ed). *The End of Cinema As We Know It*. (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Pg 96.

consumerism (middle class, hip, metro-sexual), *Fight Club* functions as a backlash narrative, regurgitating—albeit with art-house aesthetics—cultural discursive practices concerned with the feminization of masculinity through a complex matrix of capitalism, consumerism and feminism.²²³ If one were to take seriously the film’s alleged disparagement of capitalism as a tool of social disaffection *Fight Club* would surely be obliged to foreground challenges to the oppression of women, racial and ethnic minority groups, the poor, gay and lesbian community and other marginalized and disenfranchised groups existing on the periphery of a culture that equates cultural worth with moral worth. Rather, as Nicola Rheling points out, *Fight Club*’s insistence on prioritizing the contemporary crisis in masculinity is one that sees “white heterosexual masculinity desperately trying to reconstruct itself within a web of social differences where its opposing terms include not only femininity, but black masculinity, and homosexuality”.²²⁴ Although Rheling quite rightly points to black masculinity as fundamental to the construction and re-construction of white masculinity (an argument I made in Chapter Two), the absence of black masculinity within *Fight Club* speaks volumes to its ideological schema.

²²³ By placing his central protagonists in a narrative of consumerism and consumption, Fincher immediately locates Jack in a cinematic space normally ascribed to the female. The theme of the feminization of Jack’s masculinity continues when Jack becomes addicted to self-help groups, an environment associated with female emotionality (a trope that became highly conspicuous in romantic comedies of the late 1990’s). That Bob (Meat Loaf) has developed breasts (as a result of medication) functions as a pernicious visual clue to the feminization of masculinity. These initial scenes invite us to acknowledge the incongruity of the film’s representation of masculinity and allow us to understand Jack’s sense of dislocation from his correct gender performance. See also *Mr Woodcock* (Craig Gillespie, 2007) a comedy which employs the same thematic concerns in correlating male engagement with self-help therapy with effeminate masculinity (or at least a sense of failed masculinity). John Farley (Seann Scott Williams), son of lone mother Beverley Farley (Susan Sarandon) is presented as on the periphery of ‘true’ masculinity because he does not display any aptitude towards playing sports, a lack that Beverley’s lover Mr Woodcock (Billy Bob Thornton) uses to deride and bully the film’s lone mothered son. The adult John becomes a professional self-help therapist, an occupation that causes much derision from Mr Woodcock (it is not difficult to see the double entendre explicit in the name Woodcock). Of course, the film’s main concern is to rescue and redeem John’s masculine credentials, so under the military styled tutelage of Mr Woodcock’s tough love regime, John eventually learns how to be a man and throw a pitch.

²²⁴ Nicola Rheling. ‘Fight Club Takes a Beating: Masculinity, Masochism and The Politics of Disavowal’. <http://genesis.ee.auth.gr/dimakis/Grammar/9/11.html> (Sourced 16/05/07)

Although the film is not an explicitly homosexual text,²²⁵ *Fight Club* certainly foregrounds a homoerotic narrative (especially evident in the relationship between the two central protagonists and within the fight scenes where half naked, oiled, male bodies engage in physical violence in what can only be read as a choreographed display of homoerotic desire) which functions as the specific performance of a particular type of masculinity that Jack must distance himself from in order to reconstruct his own masculine credentials.²²⁶ As well as utilizing a homoerotic narrative in the process of re-casting white masculinity, *Fight Club* also employs the female body to rehabilitate and re-frame white masculinity and in so doing makes clear its distrust and distaste for women (and feminism). *Fight Club*'s unease with women is made explicit in the scene where Jack laments about the loss of his material belongings after his flat has exploded to which Tyler retorts, "It could have been worse. A woman could have cut off your penis and tossed it out of the window of a moving car".²²⁷

The figure of the castrating woman, embodied in the character of Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) is highly conspicuous within the film's narrative. It is Marla who is discredited as a fraud by Jack (the film does not do the same to Jack) when she turns up at the

²²⁵ Clearly that Chuck Palahniuk, author of the novel *Fight Club* publicly 'came out' as a gay man after the publication of the book, will have some bearing on how the film and novel are read as homosexual texts. Interestingly, the public announcement of his homosexuality did nothing to damage the 'cult' status of both texts in fact reading the book and watching the film have almost become 'rites of passage' for young men. I suggest this has occurred specifically because the film so adamantly renounces homosexuality. It is also of interest to note that after receiving the script, Palahniuk is quoted saying he wished he had never written the book. Perhaps Fincher's imagining of the film did not sit comfortably with Palahniuk's sexual identification. It's interesting to note too that the commentary on the DVD copy of *Fight Club* works hard to persuade the audience that the film is not about homosexuality.

²²⁶ On the internet website YouTube, Brad Pitt and Ed Norton star in a small video in which they sing, to the tune of Frankie Avalon's 'Venus', their ode to the penis. Flagged up as the trailer to the film that was never used, the video attests to the central project of the film, that is to ensure that the power of the phallus remains in the hands (excuse the pun) of heterosexual masculinity.

²²⁷ Tyler's comments mirror the sentiments found in *About A Boy* which as I discussed in Chapter One, are incorporated into the narrative as a method of coding the women in the support group SPAT as feminists or at least informed by popular cultural feminism. Loretta Bobbitt's act of revenge on her cheating husband (she cut his penis off after discovering his infidelity) has become a cultural symbol of 'feminism gone too far'. It is worth noting that Bobbitt never made any explicit reference to her actions as symbolic of feminist activism, but the fact that it has been ascribed as such reflects a culturally characteristic mis-reading and misrepresentation of feminist politics. The incorporation of Bobbitt's so-called proactive feminism as a trope within mainstream cinematic texts functions as a warning to men and a whole-sale watering down of feminist politics into a moment of female hysteria.

very same self-help groups he attends, making him feel so dislocated from the secure environment he has falsely appropriated for himself that he has to initiate a rota system to ensure their paths do not cross. In fact, Marla becomes one of the central disempowering elements in the film, especially evident when she appears in Jack's 'inner cave', and when we witness her interfering in and fracturing the blossoming relationship between the two male protagonists. (See Fig. 21)



Fig. 21: Marla intrudes in Jack's inner cave.

However, while Fincher certainly codes Marla as the film's vagina dentate, it is, I argue, the lone mother, who although absent from the main narrative is consistently alluded to in a discussion of paternal absence and the development of the male psyche of a generation of men raised by women. Her destructive presence hovers over the narrative providing, albeit spectrally, a culturally recognisable and commonsensical figure to explain Jack and Tyler's masculine angst.

Since its release *Fight Club* has garnered a substantial amount of attention in film studies, but for all the academic deliberation and theorizing of the film's thematic concerns, no study has focused on the film's explicit distrust of lone motherhood. In foregrounding tropes of homosexuality through explicit displays of hyper-masculinity, the film quite consciously reflects and reiterates psychoanalytic, cultural, social and political discursive

practices that problematize the masculinity of the lone mothered son. *Fight Club* speaks directly to social concerns about the risk of lone mothers raising their sons as ‘sissies’. In order to help navigate the journey from troubled masculinity to one that is more akin to the requirements of heterosexual masculinity, Fincher, in keeping with the tenets of psychoanalysis, provides Jack with what is ostensibly a surrogate father figure in the character of Tyler Durden. Thus Tyler represents the paternal (troubling thought that might be, although Brad Pitt’s new status as adoptive father of multi-national children and biological father to Angelina Jolie’s child and their twins may further validate his cinematic fatherhood in *Fight Club*). Tyler becomes Jack’s surrogate father, providing him with a model of unfettered masculinity made more explicit in his speech to Jack when he states, “I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am capable, smart and most importantly, free in ways you are not”.

Whilst *Fight Club*, in its concluding revelation of Tyler’s ‘real’ status, mourns the loss of a certain idealized masculinity (whether real or mythical), it is at pains to prove the ideological work of re-inscribing heterosexuality remains in process, by, as Rheling observes, “displacing homoerotic masculinity as narrative closure”.²²⁸ In his closing speech, Jack reassures the audience that he is back on the path of hetero-normative masculinity by insisting that his previous actions (homosexual desire, ultra-violence and the destruction of corporate buildings) were manifestations of a “very strange phase” in his life. *Fight Club* proposes the ‘phase’ Jack refers to is his difficult and fractured journey into mature masculinity resulting from his childhood experiences of paternal absence and being raised in a lone mothered household. It is no accident then that Jack should refer to this episode in his life as a phase; he uses the very same rhetorical formulation used to disavow homosexual

²²⁸ Rheling. Pg 4

desire in young men. Furthermore, *Fight Club* speaks to the double bind lone mothers find themselves in when they are accused of being so ineffectual and so damaging that their sons run the risk of displaying homosexual tendencies or performing a type of hyper-masculinity that manifests itself in anti-social and/or violent behaviour—or sometimes both.

The issues raised by *Fight Club* speak to the paradoxes (hyper-masculinity and homosexuality) implicit within cultural narratives about the relationship between the lone mother and her son which begin to be re-voiced with a concentrated insistence from the late 1990's to the mid 2000's. With a 'double bind' paradox in mind, this chapter responds to the prevalence of mainstream cinematic texts evident especially at the beginning of the 2000's that foreground the lone mother/son paradigm. Films such as *About A Boy*, *Maid in Manhattan*, *The Gift*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Dear Frankie*, *Pay It Forward*, *Monster's Ball*, *Riding in Cars With Boys*, *All About My Mother* and *Jerry Maguire* raise questions about the significance of this cinematic family configuration. That the lone mother/son dyad is highly significant is evident in the every-day language and terms employed to describe divergent forms of masculinity (mummy's boy and sissy for example) the following section offers an ontology of the lone mother/son dyad to ascertain why it has become such a presumptively problematic relationship.

Shifting the Blame

Fight Club's implicit criticism of and concern about the effects of being raised by a lone mother on the psychology of masculinity finds its origins in eighteenth century Kantian distinctions of the requisites of masculinity and femininity expressed in the period of

Enlightenment . It is here that the transference of paternal authority normally associated with the Church and State was bestowed upon the father who was given, “authority over his children” and where the rhetoric of the ‘toxic mother’ was invoked and installed in Western cultures.²²⁹ The ideological shift from institutional patriarchy to familial paternity elevated and secured the status of fatherhood, and in so doing dictated gendered parenting roles which functioned to situate the mother only ever in relation to the father, who, as the “source of reason” and “lover of freedom” is obligated to discipline his male child in order to avoid him falling prey to “every caprice” (note how Tyler speaks of his ‘freedom’ as that which distinguishes his masculinity from Jack’s).²³⁰ Such training, that of valuing freedom and reason over supposed female traits of emotionality, feeling and desire, allows the male child to distinguish himself from his mother. In so doing the male child is freed to pass successfully into patriarchal society as a fully fledged heterosexual man.

One only needs to call to mind Freud’s psychoanalytic displacement theory that posits the separation of the boy from the mother as vital to the successful transition of boy to man to note the continued tradition of Kantian philosophy within contemporary thought. Both discourses assume the importance of distancing the male self from the mother and invest authority in the father as the model from which the male child will learn correct gender performance. Seidler observes that by positioning the father as in possession of “something distinctive to offer as role models” many women who were left alone with children felt “incapable of bringing up those children on their own, fearing that without the influence of a father to model themselves on, boys would be less likely to develop heterosexual relationships”.²³¹

²²⁹ Victor Seidler. Pg 273

²³⁰ Ibid. Pg 274.

²³¹ Ibid. Pg 274

It is no coincidence then that Fincher's film turns up just at a cultural moment when the dada-ist movement—a term coined by Judith Stacey describing the proliferation of father's rights groups and political investment in fatherhood that she claims functions as “proxy rhetoric for anti-feminist, anti-gay, xenophobic and anti-welfare sentiments”—has become so vociferous within American and British society.²³² With postmodernism's insistence on the death of the meta-narrative, the supposed decline of institutional authority, the alleged erosion of patriarchal dominance, the cultural celebration of post-feminism and the rise of a commodity culture that Christopher Lasch blames for “moral decline”, *Fight Club*'s avowal of phallic paternal authority as necessary to successful male citizenship harks back to mythical claims as though they were proof of some certain truths about masculinity and fatherhood.²³³ The rhetoric of father's rights campaigns and the ongoing political acclaim of fatherhood secure such rhetoric as immutable. Certainly the novel *Fight Club* makes clear the connection between a perceived ‘truth’ about masculinity and fatherhood in Tyler's personal manifesto where he states: “If you are male and Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never knew your father, or if your father bails out or died, what do you believe about God?”²³⁴

With *Fight Club*'s double bind paradox in mind, the remainder of this chapter is structured to respond to both sets of discourses that form the double bind narrative as separate but mutually reinforcing elements of the pernicious codification of the lone mother/son paradigm as presumptively problematic and pathological. The first section will briefly look at discourses concerned with the ‘problem’ of the lone mother and her unruly, and often times violent son while the second, more developed section focuses on cinema's reinvestment in

²³² Judith Stacey. ‘Dada-ism in the 1990's’. Cynthia R. Daniels and Robert L. Griswald. *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998) Pp 51-84

²³³ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978). Pg 141

²³⁴ Chuck Palahnuik. *Fight Club*. (London: Vintage, 1996). Pg 114

the lone mother and her effeminized male child. I spend more time exploring the latter because I contend that these films' grounding in disturbing homophobic rhetoric (that Judith Stacy insists is ubiquitous within the philosophies of the contemporary dada-ism movement and post-feminism) is telling of new ways in which the trope of the lone mother is being appropriated again to do ideological work.

Illustrative of the ever-present and growing homophobia within contemporary culture is the Christmas 2007 edition of the American men's magazine *Details* which rated the word 'faggot', a derogatory term used to undermine homosexual men, as the 9th most influential word of the year. In a magazine that voted Kevin Federline (father to Britney Spears' children) and Larry Birkenhead (biological father of the baby of the deceased Anna Nicole Smith) as 'Fathers of The Year', *Details* declared 2007 as the year of the F-Word; "The word faggot", they write, is on the tip of a lot of men's tongues".²³⁵ The inclusion of "fag, faggot, gay" into the lexicon of teenage comedies such as *Superbad* (Greg Mottola: 2007), *Zac and Miri Make a Porno* (Kevin Smith: 2008) and *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow: 2007) demonstrate the way in which the use of homophobic rhetoric is once again culturally acceptable. What is more, the public renunciation of gay men (and feminists, pagans, and abortionists) post 9/11, writes Susan Faludi allowed for accusations of treachery to be levelled at the feet of the homosexual community which was lambasted for the 'sissification' of American masculinity.²³⁶ Whilst Faludi references the traumatic events of 9/11 as the primary reason for the recent vilification of homosexuality I would argue that post-feminism's insistence on heterosexual marriage as forming the cornerstone of western society initiated the backlash against homosexuality evident in the popular press and contemporary popular culture prior to the events of 9/11.

²³⁵ *Details*. Conde Nast Publications. December 2007.

²³⁶ Susan Faludi. *The*

What is evident is that the focus of attention on the ‘treacherous’ attitude of the homosexual community brought the image of the dysfunctional lone mother and ruined and ruining male child into the fore once again. According to media pundits, it was the fault of feminists who encouraged women to raise sons without fathers that resulted in the sissification of American men who were too afraid to stand forth to protect the nation’s frontiers against the threat of international terrorism. As such, I suggest that the persistent coupling of the cinematic lone mother and her son functions to maintain the backlash against homosexuality in the ongoing project of shoring up more traditional and hegemonic images of masculinity that are defined through the figure of the heterosexual father. That the celluloid lone mothered son should act as a cipher for the ‘unacknowledged’ concerns of a post-feminist society which is constantly harking back to a more traditional notion of family, femininity and masculinity should not come as a surprise. According to Carolyn Steedman in the search for a past that is lost, “the lost object has come to assume the shape and form of a child.”²³⁷ The following section offers an overview of some of the ways in which the lone mothered son is presumed to be lost.

Losing the Boy: Father Hunger and Toxic Maternalism

On June 18th 2004, the British tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* (the newspaper of choice for most British women) ran with the headline, ‘One in Five Babies Grow Up With No Father’. Steve Doughty, author of the article, qualified this apparent newsflash by stating that by the beginning of the “new millennium, 18 per cent of first born children are born to a

²³⁷ Carolyn Steedman. *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*. 1780-1930. (London: Virago Press Limited, 1995). Pg 174

mother not living with a father”.²³⁸ Quoting Professor Kathleen Kiernan of The London School of Economics and co-author of *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, Doughty details the dire consequences that lie ahead for the “alarming number” of children living in lone mothered households. These ‘fragile’ children he notes, “Are unlikely to do well at school, suffer worse health, are the cause of anti-social behaviour and face a more difficult start to adult life”.²³⁹ Of course, there is nothing new or revelatory about these headlines, nor is this article a ‘one-off expose’, these kinds of statistics are regularly quoted in media created moral panics in Britain. The significance of Doughty’s article lies in a further look at the remainder of the newspaper for that day. It is worth noting though that Doughty’s article does not make specific reference to gender (likewise Kiernan refrains from coding her ‘fragile children’ as either male or female) all too quickly it is made clear that it is the sons of lone mothers who are the main cause of the *Daily Mail*’s anxiety.

Continuing in the same vein as the lead story, the *Daily Comment* correlates the rise of anti-social behaviour (New Labour rhetoric for unruly but non-criminal behaviour) with the breakdown of the traditional family unit. The *Daily Comment* makes it plain that the only solution to the alleged increase in anti-social behaviour is for women to recognise that “boys need the father figure to provide the vital role model” to learn socially acceptable male behaviour.²⁴⁰ “If there is no mould, there is no man” so the *Daily Comment* philosophizes.²⁴¹ The sentiments of the lead article and those of the *Daily Comment* are further reiterated in the following article’s response to the problem of crowd violence at the 2004 European Football Championships in Portugal. Reporting on the thuggish and violent behaviour of some of the British football supporters, Simon Heffers’ article, ‘Why Does

²³⁸ Steve Doughty. ‘One in Five Babies Grow Up With No Father’. *The Daily Mail*. 18th June 2004.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ ‘Daily Comment’. *The Daily Mail*. Pg 6 18th June 2004

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Britain Produce Such Violent Louts?’ concludes, “whilst we have always had a culture of aggression, we did until recently, have the social structures to control these urges”.²⁴² And according to Heffer, these structures were traditionally “provided by a boy’s father who would give him a hiding the minute he stepped out of line and sought to teach him how to behave in public and private spheres”.²⁴³ That Heffer draws a distinction between public and private male behaviour is deeply disturbing; Home Office statistics state that at least one in four women experience some form of domestic violence (most often beginning at the time of the first pregnancy) within the private, domestic sphere. The aim of highlighting Heffer’s article is to demonstrate that the juxtaposition of articles lamenting the increase in incidences of anti-social behaviour and the rise of lone mothered households reinforce the claims of Robert Wheelan of the right wing think-tank Civi-Tas (quoted in all three articles) who surmises that the fault rests with women; “those women who have never bothered bringing a man into the house”.²⁴⁴

The absence of the family man, an absence that Wheelan clearly blames women for, has, he asserts, created a generation of emasculated young men, who experiencing the demise in their “traditional roles of fathers and husbands, assert their masculinity in less helpful ways”.²⁴⁵ Wheelan’s neo-conservative rhetoric suggests that the prevalence of lone mothered households has not only affected ideas of what constitutes ‘family’ but has replaced a secure definition of man as the only source of authority and as sole provider, with a more troubling sense of masculine obsolescence. The sentiments voiced by, in this instance, Wheelan and *The Daily Mail* are certainly not exclusive to the British context. American academics, politicians, social scientists, religious leaders and so on regularly spew forth

²⁴² Simon Heffer. ‘Why Does Britain Produce Such Violent Louts?’ *The Daily Mail*. 18/06/04. Pg 11

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

similar rhetoric which is emphatically coded as authoritative research findings. Such discursive practices maintain a process of demonizing those people who are, as Stuart C. Aitken describes as “out of sync with notions of citizenship” in a process that preserves the “normalization of particular kinds of families and communities”.²⁴⁶ Take for example the work of David Blankenhorn, Founder and President of The Institute for American Values, an organisation dedicated to ‘contributing intellectually’ to the renewal of marriage, family life and citizenship in the United States. Described as a “consensus builder and leading light in the fatherhood movement” Blankenhorn advises: “If we want to learn the identity of rapists, the hater of women, the occupants of jail cells, we do not look first to boys with masculine fathers. We look first to boys with no fathers.”²⁴⁷ Blankenhorn’s sentiments function as a repudiation of second wave feminist challenges to the formulation of macho masculinity which feminists warned caused problems for men to fit into this very essentialized and restrictive paradigm of masculinity. Nevertheless, the sentiments of Blankenhorn rang true for many; indeed William Galston, one time policy advisor to the Clinton administration responded to questions about the relationship between race and crime and lone motherhood by asserting that “the correlation is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime”.²⁴⁸ Galston

²⁴⁶ Stuart C. Aitken. ‘Schoolyard Shootings: Racism, Sexism and Moral Panics over Teen Violence’. *Antipode*. Vol 33, Issue 4, 2002. Pp 953-600. Sourced from <http://antipode-online.net/abstract.asp?vid=33iid=4&aid=1&s=0>.

²⁴⁷ David Blankenhorn. ‘Fatherless America’. www.americanvalues.com (24/10/2007). Blankenhorn regularly publishes on the internet but he has written and co-edited the following books. David Blakenhorn. *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Problems*. (New York: Institute for American Values Publishing Ltd, 1995), David Blakenhorn, Steven Bayme and Jean Bethke Elshain (Eds). *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to The American Family*. (New York: Institute for American Values Publishing Ltd, 1990), David Blankenhorn and Mary Ann Glendon (Eds). *Seedbeds of Virtue: Sources of Competence, Character and Citizenship in America*. (New York: Institute for American Values Publishing Ltd, 1995), David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshain and David Blankenhorn (Eds). *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*. (New York: Institute for American Values Publishing Ltd, 1996), Wade F.Horn, David Blakenhorn and Mitchell B. Pearlstein. *The Fatherhood Movement*. (Maryland, Oxford: Lexington Books, 1999), David Blankenhorn. *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions*. (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

²⁴⁸ Christina Hoff Sommers. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Pg 130.

confidently concluded these claims are wholly reliable because as he notes, the “findings show up time and again in the literature”.²⁴⁹

The depth of investment in establishing fatherhood as the vital component in the raising of civilized male children undermines the many millions of mothers successfully raising their sons to mature masculinity. For Gillis Triplett, founder of Mastering Manhood, member of the Atlanta Fatherhood Resource Consortium and The National Fatherhood Initiative, the notion of a lone mother successfully raising her fatherless son is unconscionable. In his checklist of the ‘10 Harmful Things Single Mothers Do To Ruin Their Son’s Lives’ Triplett admonishes lone mothers to be always aware of the many obstacles they place in the way of their son’s journey to manhood. The most essential point for lone mothers is to always remember never “to poison your son’s mind against his biological father otherwise he will become rebellious, join gangs, commit crimes, engage in other self-destructive behaviour such as domestic violence and homosexuality”.²⁵⁰ “Don’t instil in your son ‘all men are dogs mentality’”, or, as he warns, “your son will become one of the dogs who are trained that way by their mothers”.²⁵¹ Playing the mating game, or as Triplett so nicely phrases it, “becoming a revolving door for hordes of males” will, also cause the male child to thoroughly devalue and disrespect women.²⁵² Not one to hold back with his invaluable advice, Triplett continues to warn lone mothers to be cautious about making her son the head of the fatherless home. To do so, he prophesizes, will result in the son “doing the unthinkable”.²⁵³ Whilst Triplett cannot find the words to describe what constitutes the ‘unthinkable’, he does however draw from rhetoric that codes the lone mother as sexually deviant especially when he writes that ‘doing the unthinkable’ is linked to the lone mother’s

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ www.gillistriplett.com/aboutgtm/index/hotmail (sourced 11/12/07)

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid

“fanatical demands of manhood”.²⁵⁴ That the lone mother is perceived by Triplett as the victimizer of both her son, society and more importantly, as the cause of violence against other women, is I argue, indicative of a misogyny that is wholly sanctioned in the rhetoric of combating fatherlessness. Furthermore, in his warnings to lone mothers about the threat they pose to the formation of masculine identity, Triplett, once more reinforces the notion that masculinity is both fragile and elusive.

Such campaigns to combat fatherlessness, witnessed predominantly in the US and UK, feed on a fear that the rise in lone mothered households will result in an exponential increase in lawlessness, recklessness and ultimately social barbarianism. This fear is highlighted in the alarmist sentiments of leading American psychologist David Lykken’s work in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* where he too correlates absentee fatherhood with the breakdown of social citizenship. He writes: “In the US, among boys aged 12-17, the percentage arrested for violent crimes has doubled in the past fifteen years. Not coincidentally, the percentage of children being reared without a father has also doubled during this period. Nationally, 70% of incarcerated juvenile delinquents were raised without fathers”.²⁵⁵ Fatherhood campaign websites, fatherhood manuals, ‘what to do after divorce’ books, men’s self help literature and the work of anti-feminist cultural observers employ the same rhetoric to effect the elevation of fatherhood for the sake of a civil society.

Armed with the expert knowledge from Blankenhorn et al, it is not surprising that Lykken earlier discovered ‘no coincidence’ in the increase of male juvenile delinquency was correlated with experience of paternal absence because Blankenhorn had already informed us that experts look automatically ‘to boys with no fathers’ when undertaking such research. In

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Stacey in Griswald and Daniels. Pg 59

so doing Blankenhorn continues a tradition of overlooking any other socio-economic factors determining behavioural traits. It is typical of a problem that according to Judith Stacey regularly occurs within the field of social sciences which tries “to achieve a consensus concerning disproportionate risks and harms derived from fatherlessness, research would have to demonstrate that children living in all these types of families are more apt to being inadequately parented than are children in comparable conventional, heterosexual couples”.²⁵⁶ Yet, for Blankenhorn et al, the problem is clear, it is the lone mothered family that “is the most harmful demographic of this generation” and the “leading cause of declining child well-being in our society”.²⁵⁷

Blankenhorn is of course referring to the US but the same rhetoric is voiced daily within British society (see the celebrated report by Chairman of the Centre for Social Justice and former Conservative Leader Iain Duncan Smith).²⁵⁸ It is worth noting how Smith’s political career was revitalized after the publication of his report. Much like Michael Portillo, as highlighted in Chapter One, the problem of lone motherhood became a device for securing the authority of a ‘tired’ politician). Blankenhorn continues his postulating by claiming that the ‘problem’ of the lone mother is the “engine driving our most urgent social problems from adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse and domestic violence against women”.²⁵⁹ It is perhaps telling of his pathologization and victimization of women that Blankenhorn only refers to criminal activity that predominantly affects women. That he omits to mention that violence against men by men is the most common form of crime illustrates his paternalistic misogyny. Nevertheless, empirical data ‘proved’ without doubt that the task of raising a son without a father is a highly perilous one. A lone mothered son, so research would warn us,

²⁵⁶ Ibid. Pp 65-66

²⁵⁷ David Blankenhorn cited in Stacey, Griswald and Daniels.. Pg 59

²⁵⁸ ‘Breakthrough Britain’. The Centre for Social Justice Green Paper on the Family. (London: 20th January 2007).

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

will almost certainly become a pervert, a rapist, a hater of women, a criminal, a thug, illiterate, a school drop-out, and a barbarian.

Thus in America and Britain we are treated to a daily barrage of anxieties about the falling levels of boy's academic achievements, the rise in violent crime, gun crime, the rise in unemployment amongst young men, and so on, which function to compound the ideology of the loathsome lone mother. Of course, the underlying message is really about class and race. The discursive practices that correlate the lone mother with male juvenile delinquency focus on the fears about the reproduction of an underclass (particularly the socially undesirable and derided 'chav' culture in Britain and the 'trailer trash' in the US) and the threat to white superiority that is implicit in discourse about the overwhelming numbers of African American lone mothers and the political rhetoric emerging in the UK about the problems of the Afro-Caribbean community.

The escalation in gun crime that has occurred in London over the last five years has propelled the 'problem' of black British male youths into the media spotlight. Whilst young black British males have always been the focus of political and criminal investigation (whether legitimate or not), the black lone mother has not garnered much attention from the British media (a point I raise in Chapter Two). Ironically, (or not) just as the figure of the black lone mother has become a visible within the popular media; the actual lone mother has been silenced by the black fatherhood movement which really burst onto the scene in the last two years. Black community leaders (belonging to campaign groups such as 'Boy To Man' based in South London) regularly coalesce with white conservative politicians calling for more importance to be placed on fatherhood in rhetoric that not only silences the black lone mother but infantilizes her through discourses that point to her lack of physical strength when

faced with her angry black son. Even more problematic is the use of racist imagery that posits the uncontrollable bestial violent black male as a threat to black lone mothers. Whilst this might be indicative of the lengths the black male community have to go in order for its voice to be heard, the espousal of racist language confirms the argument that the importance of fatherhood as a social status ‘whitewashes’ issues of race. Both sets of discourses function to reassert the moral authority of the white middle classes. But I also argue that issues of race and class are conflated onto the body of the lone mother in such a way that challenges of race and class discrimination are mediated through the female body—in other words the problem is made to be seen to have nothing to do with race or class but everything to do with lone motherhood.

Still, the alarmist question always raised by the media, “What Has Gone Wrong with British Boys?” is followed by the usual set of mantras such as “the mother of these boys is normally single or divorced” or, “Hatred, hatred, hatred by middle class feminists”, or “the damage caused by family breakdown is felt more astutely by boys”.²⁶⁰ Add to the toxic mix the poetic musings of academics such as Maggie Gallagher in her essay ‘Father Hunger’ where she describes what she sees as a collective emotional reaction to fatherlessness as “an ache in the heart, a gnawing anxiety in the gut. It is a longing for a man, not just a woman, who will care for you, protect you and show you how to survive the world. For a boy, it is the raw persistent, desperate hunger for dependable male love and for an image of maleness that is not at odds with love.”²⁶¹

It is difficult to fail to recognise the political, cultural and social investment in the rhetoric of ‘father hunger’. Indeed, the following anecdote surely raises questions of what

²⁶⁰ ‘What has gone wrong with British boys?’ *In Your View* (Un-authored) www.telegraph.co.uk (Sourced 11/08/07)

²⁶¹ Maggie Gallagher in Griswald and Daniels. Pg 165.

would be at stake if lone motherhood were no longer to be seen as being so presumptively problematic. In 2006, Peggy Drexler, fearful for the safety of herself and her family, consulted a private security company for advice on how to protect their well-being. Not unusual for a high profile woman one might think, yet Drexler was neither a household name nor terribly wealthy. Drexler is a professor of sociology at Cornell University who wrote a book; a sociological, ethnographic study that contradicted received cultural, political, scientific and historical wisdoms that claim a boy's morality and masculinity can only be properly cultivated in the presence of a live-in father.

Drexler's research question—is it really necessary for a son to have a dad?—did not arise from any personal quest to raise the social profile of lone mother. Nor was she in the business of disavowing fatherhood. Rather, as a professional woman, married for thirty years and mother of two children, Drexler began her research after questioning the validity of attitudes towards lone mothers. Working with a number of lone mothers and incorporating herself into their families' daily lives, Drexler discovered that far from being the troubled young men she had been led to believe they would be, these lone mothered sons had much to offer society. Furthermore, contrary to popular opinion, the lone mothers of these boys were in fact, more than capable of raising happy, healthy and productive young men. "Fatherlessness", she writes, "is not inherently problematic—the trouble lies in the unfortunate reality that the average single mother has to contend with socio-economic factors, namely poverty, gender discrimination and systematic racism—it's these factors that are most likely to determine a child's behaviour and performance".²⁶² Parenting, she concludes, "is not anchored to gender. Parenting is either good or bad, not male or female".²⁶³

²⁶² Sourced from an interview with Peggy Drexler. Zoe Williams. 'Let's Live Together'. www.guardian.co.uk (12/10/2006)

²⁶³ Ibid.

Drexler's book, *Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Young Men*, flew in the face of decades of empirical 'evidence' from the fields of social sciences, mental health, the judiciary, religious zealots, the new far right, and the vociferous fathers rights organizations. Her findings created such a cultural stir that Drexler found herself and her family victims of a systematic hate campaign accusing her of "giving license for men to abandon their families", referring to her as an "abomination, anti-men, a misguided liberal zealot, a fucking dunce and a Femi Nazi".²⁶⁴ Added to these charming and articulate sentiments was the warning to Drexler and her family to do "America a favour and move her [your] dyke ass to Europe".²⁶⁵

Drexler's experience reflects those of other American women who have spoken 'against the grain' post 9/11. Susan Faludi's insightful account cited earlier of the disavowal of the American female voice in the post 9/11 landscape and the vicious character attacks on those women who voiced their concerns about the war in Iraq, suggests that it is unsurprising, although nonetheless troubling that Drexler experienced such a backlash against her work. That Drexler's work touched a raw nerve cannot be doubted. The powerful testimonies from lone mothers who saw no inherent problem or disadvantage that would hinder their determination or ability to raise, in Drexler's words; 'exceptional men' is not a message that sits well in this cultural moment of heroic masculinity and cultural, political and social dada-ism.

The investment in dada-ism is made more evident in the vast amounts of governmental money going into fatherhood projects. Whilst it is perhaps necessary work to be done, it has resulted in a hegemonic ideological process which Stacey suggests "helps to

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

legitimate active withdrawal of urgently needed social responses to the needs of fatherless children and their beleaguered caretakers”.²⁶⁶ It is unfortunate that Stacey should choose to employ the word ‘beleaguered’ in her description of lone motherhood. While her argument about the withdrawal of government monies to lone mothers is astute to describe them as such unfortunately continues a process which disavows them any agency. Nonetheless, over the past two decades it is the plight of divorced fathers who are not allowed to see their children, angry and frightened men who have been ‘victims’ of fraudulent paternity claims, troubled sons and men who have ‘taken back’ their control over women’s bodies and their reproductive rights that have made headline news. It is fatherhood that politicians herald as the *only* solution to heal dysfunctional masculinity and by extension, society, and fatherhood that continues to be promoted as the only civilizing force of an essentially unruly masculinity. Thus, the cultural environment in which Drexler’s book was released is one where the rhetoric of father hunger is resolute, recurrent and heavily sentimentalized. And, it is within the narratives of mainstream cinema that the articulation of ‘father hunger’ and ‘toxic motherhood’ has been so persistently reinforced.

Framing Bad Masculinity: Cinema’s Fatherless Sons and Mother ‘Love’.

From its inception, mainstream cinema has incorporated toxic motherhood discourse as a central theme or trope, a fact not lost on Fischer who writes, “motherhood in cinema has been a site of ‘crisis’”.²⁶⁷ In many films, says Fischer, “the mother is blamed for her transgressions—birthing a bastard in *Way Down East*, raising a deviant in *White Heat* and so

²⁶⁶ Stacey. Pg 56

²⁶⁷ Fischer. Pg 31

forth”.²⁶⁸ Punishment for these ‘bad’ mothers usually came in the guise of a deviant male child whose psychology is affected by his mother’s errant sexual behaviour and non-conformist attitudes. The project of mother blaming is not confined only to those women who flout traditional conventions of acceptable female behaviour. Much screen emphasis has also been placed on the mother who ‘over parents’, the domineering, over-protective and suffocating mother too involved in her son’s life. Thus motherhood, or more precisely, the definition of toxic motherhood as either deviant and neglectful, or over-determined and suffocating results in a paradox or double bind amorphous enough to constrict female and maternal agency whenever patriarchy deems it necessary. As a result, to speak of a mother and her son is always to speak of a configuration that is fraught with certain tensions, uncertainties and dramas. This section takes a very brief look at the evocation of toxic motherhood to argue that recent films have replaced the traditional dyad of mother/son to that which prioritizes the lone mother/son paradigm.

Traditionally films dealing with lone mothered sons have tended to tell the story of a young boy fixated with the missing father (the British film *Dear Frankie* is a good example of the idealization of the father by the lone mothered son). Or indeed, the son who must, as Nicole Marie Keating proposes, “become the father replacement himself.”²⁶⁹ That the more recent films tend to foreground a lone mother with only one child reinforces the premise that the duo constitute an already failed family particularly in light of Judith Warner’s claims that many middle class American families are growing larger as women choose to have more than the average (2.4) children.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, the paradigm of a lone mother and her singular male child reflects well established cultural discourse about the over-bearing mother and the

²⁶⁸ Ibid

²⁶⁹ Nicole Marie Keating. ‘Mamma’s Boys: Counting on Ghosts, Sending Smoke Signals and Finding Surrogate Fathers’ in Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward. *Where The Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005). Pp 246-263.

²⁷⁰ Judith Warner. *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. (London: Vermillion, 2006)

mama's boy. If the films included another child into the family formation the narrative of threat posed to the inner well-being of the singular male child would not be as intense. The fact that films such as *E.T* (Steven Spielberg: 1982) and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Lasse Hallstrom: 1993), whilst focusing on the narrative of one male child, include their siblings within the body of the text surely raises questions as to their absence within more contemporary films. What is more, that the majority of contemporary cinematic texts utilizing the lone mother/son paradigm should choose to code the male child as pre-pubescent (12 years and under) rather than the unruly male teenagers of lone mothers who attract the attention of the popular press raises further questions about the ideological purpose of this paradigm.

Whilst public cultures in Britain and America are growing increasingly uneasy about the rise in male juvenile delinquency expressed and furthered in moral panic narratives espoused by the media (especially conspicuous after the murder of Jamie Bulger in Britain and the Columbine High School Massacre in the States) mainstream films have been intent on coding the young sons of these celluloid lone mothers as proto-homosexual or at least in dire need of being de-feminized.²⁷¹ Take for example the 1996 romantic comedy, *Jerry*

²⁷¹ After the murder of Jamie Bulger and the massacre at Columbine High, child psychologists endeavored to unravel the boys' narratives looking for clues to explain why John Venables and Robert Thompson (Bulger case) and Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris (Columbine) committed the crimes. The media latched onto well rehearsed arguments about the effects of violent films, computer games and heavy metal music as the cause célèbre, but only after extensive scrutiny of the boys' families had taken place. Close attention was paid to the only lone mother in the group of parents, that of Robert Thompson. Without any evidence that this child's lone mother was neglectful and abusive etc, the media had to turn to the only other set of variables on offer. The same happened with the families of Klebold and Harris, who, as it turned out, came from strong, solid, two parented American family units. Whilst the media moved on from its investigation into the boys' family life once the dysfunctional lone mother narrative could not be established, in Britain, John Major, the then Conservative Prime Minister, in his response to the Bulger case made it clear that blame for the rise in violent crime must be accorded to someone rather than the more 'liberal' excuses of poverty, housing etc. "We must", he admonished, "condemn a little more and understand a little less". Major's sentiments were later reiterated by President Bush in his response to the Santana shootings where he argued that private actions were more important than any governmental initiatives to prevent such tragedies. Bush stated "Of course there's going to be a reaction-pass a law? The big law is the universal law- how do mothers and fathers do their job?" (T. Hunt, 'School Violence Stuns Nation'. *Denver Post*, 1999)
<http://people.stu.ca/~mccormic/3263/articles/panics%5B1%5D.pdf>

Maguire; a film that ostensibly supports its lone mother in the speech made by Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding) Jerry's (Tom Cruise) African American football client when he says, "You've gotta be fair to her, a single mother is a sacred thing. Real men don't shoplift pottie from a single mother". Whilst it is vital to recognise the narrative techniques used in the film to depoliticize the male black body of Rod Tidwell, my concern is with the use of the lone mother and her son as the catalyst of change for the privileged but troubled white man. In what is ultimately a redemption narrative, demonstrated when Dorothy (Renee Zellwegger) claims to love Jerry "for the man he's about to become", *Jerry Maguire* constantly references the lone mother as vulnerable and powerless. The film makes it clear its ideological purpose through the blossoming relationship between Ray and Jerry which is presented as both distinct and more acceptable than those he has with other men (particularly Chad, the gay babysitter). Indeed, when Dorothy sees her son kiss Jerry she makes the distinction clear when she says, "It is the first time I have seen him kiss a man like a dad". Within Dorothy's narrative is a clear distinction being made about fatherhood and about unacceptable masculine influences. Dorothy upholds cultural notions of heterosexual masculinity as the preferable paradigm, for young boys to aspire to. Whilst she claims to be falling in love with the man Jerry is about to become, she is in fact falling in love with the father he is about to become; a man who will provide her son with "a proper family" in which, as she states "to raise a man". (See Fig. 22)



Fig. 22: Ray loves Jerry the 'right' way.

While *Jerry Maguire* is primarily concerned with renegotiating the masculine credentials of its central male protagonist, it is also all too aware to address the 'needs' of the young lone mothered son who, living with his mother and aunt Laurel (Bonnie Hunt) and cared for by a gay childminder, runs the risk of being demasculinized. It is critical to the political agenda of this film to have the two women living together because it allows for a backlash narrative that wholly disparages and disavows feminism. By pairing the two women the film draws on feminist philosophy that emphasizes female bonding and sisterly solidarity. This concept is further reinforced through the incorporation of the women's group (surely an iconic symbol of the women's movement) who regularly meet at the house to offer support to one another. Yet the narrative explicitly undermines the political resonance of this all female group scenario in an insidious process that, played for comedy, sees these women openly repeal their political beliefs. Even though the film initially invites us to agree with Laurel's concerns about Jerry's suitability, the narrative displaces her authority by suggesting that she is also attracted to him. As such that we are encouraged to read Laurel as a woman who, once coerced by feminism, is now envious of her sister's new

relationship and fearful that she will remain left ‘on the shelf’. Once her warnings are proved wrong, Laurel becomes less visible in the film because her tasks to repudiate feminism and elevate the position of Jerry have been accomplished.

The re-negotiation and repudiation of feminism is repeated more poignantly with the paradigm of the women’s group which acts as a device to highlight concerns about the effects an all female environment will have on the maturation process of a lone mothered male child. Described by Dorothy as ‘10 angry women’—a term popular culture employs to describe feminists—the film questions whether Dorothy is acting responsibly allowing her son to be raised in such a milieu. More worryingly still is the way in which the ‘10 angry women’ become silent, wistful and supportive of Jerry when, in their company, he declares his love for Dorothy. (See Fig. 23)



Fig. 23: Ten angry women become wistful.

Overwhelmed by this sensitive ‘new man’, the women swoon as Jerry confirms the ideological schema of the film stating, “My whole life is this family and it doesn’t work without them”. Applauded by the women for his display of emotional vulnerability Jerry’s process of redemption is completed as he takes his place as surrogate father and husband. In so doing the film rescues Dorothy from her status as lone mother and provides a ‘safe’ environment for her son’s successful heterosexual maturation. Taking its place in the cultural post-feminist movement, *Jerry Maguire* ensures that Dorothy does not have to step out of her

gender designated role and avoids what Fred Pfiel describes as instituting “an age of terrible misrule”.²⁷² Thanks to the help of this lone mother and her effeminate young son, Jerry continues to hold on to the Phallus and emerge from his “temporary tonic power shortage as someone more deserving of its possession and more compassionate in its exercise”.²⁷³

As the film closes we watch Jerry and Dorothy walking hand in hand across a city park with young Ray in tow. In the distance young boys are playing baseball—the very icon of American masculinity. The ball is thrown over the fence and falls at Ray’s feet. Picking it up, Ray throws the ball back to the boys. Much to the surprise of ‘mom and dad’, his throw is exceptionally strong. (See Fig. 24)



Fig. 24: Ray with ‘mom and dad’.

Although employed as a heart warming light comedy moment, this scene acts to assure us, that with the support of his new father, this young lone mothered son has avoided the trap of homosexuality. Under the tutelage of Jerry, the marginalization of Dorothy and the disavowal of Chad, *Jerry Maguire* reassures us that Ray’s heterosexual identity is now secured.

²⁷²Fred Pfiel. *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*. (New York:Verso,1995) Pg 47

²⁷³Ibid. Pg 49

In recent years academics have challenged the accepted wisdoms about the lone mother/son dynamic. Despite such interventions, the hegemonic nature of the lone mother/son 'separation of the male self' narrative within mainstream cinema remains dominant. To imagine a film in which the lone mother and male child are seen as positive representations devoid of any form of pathologization is, as Nicole Marie Keating writes, "a theoretical dance.....that has yet to be produced".²⁷⁴ Keating offers an insightful exploration of mainstream cinema's quest to find a father figure for the fatherless son, never mind that he might be deadbeat, or even dead as in the case of *The Sixth Sense*. While Keating argues that media presentations of the lone mother son dyad reinforce ideologies which tend to denigrate lone mother son relationships, they have not, she asserts, coded these boys as homosexual.

This chapter builds on Keating's claims, to argue that the recent incarnations of the lone mothered son, whilst perhaps not openly coded as proto-homosexual (by that I mean no one character explicitly exposes the child as proto-homosexual, to do so would accord the child with sexual desire-a taboo in the Western world), do not require any sort of camp reading to extrapolate a homosexual subtext. The following section offers an overview of the celluloid lone mother, going on to argue that more recent presentations of this representational paradigm coalesce with disturbingly homophobic discursive practices in their ongoing negotiation of lone motherhood.

²⁷⁴ Keating. in Pomerance and Gateward. Pg 248

Cinema's Bad Boys and Toxic Mothers

Contemporary cinema's emphasis on exclusive married relationships, wholly dependent on male patronage—whether explicit in the proliferation of chick flicks where marriage is once again heralded as the ultimate female goal or implicit in the coding of lone mothers as deviant and dangerous women— sees the lone mother as the paradigm of failure in achieving true post-feminist femininity. Postfeminist emphasis on marital and maternal modes of femininity, whilst still maintaining a tradition of mother blaming has displaced critical attention away from the married mother/son paradigm on to the body of the lone mother and her fatherless male child. In so doing the authority accorded to, and celebration of western family values ideology explicit within the tenets of post-feminist rhetoric are maintained.

Thus in this environment, one that that relies so heavily on heterosexual marriage and extreme maternalism to do the ideological work of neo-conservative family values, the lone mother has replaced the over-bearing married mother because, to put it simply, post-feminist culture cannot be seen to be criticizing that which it wishes women to be—married mothers. That is not to say that the ideological framework of these films veers away from, what Fischer terms a “classical diegesis fuelled by an oedipal narrative”²⁷⁵ because at the core of contemporary lone mother/son stories is a narrative that requires the separation of the son from the mother which is enabled by the film's surrogate father figure.²⁷⁶ As such, these

²⁷⁵ Fischer. Pg 8

²⁷⁶ The most widely acknowledged film to use the oedipal trajectory to explain teenage male angst was the 1955 iconic troubled teenager narrative, *Rebel Without A Cause*. Reflecting the deeply misogynist opinions of Philip Wylie, the man who coined the phrase ‘momism’ in his highly contentious but best selling book, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1942 reprint, 1955), *Rebel Without A Cause* expresses a deep distrust of motherhood and its effect on the masculine identity of teenage boys. *Rebel Without A Cause* is concerned to elicit empathy for Jim (James Dean) and his hen-pecked father and to agree with his sentiments that to escape the gynaecocracy that has emasculated his father, he must prove his masculinity by finding the strength to “knock Mom out cold and then she'd be happy and stop picking on him”.

films function to maintain the hegemony of masculinity through the trope of fatherhood and ensure that the lone mother is a passive observer in the critique of her own post-feminist inadequacy.²⁷⁷

The paradigm of the psychologically disturbed male child/lone mother is a fixed motif across the generic board. That the 2002 indie film, *Igby Goes Down* (Burr Steers) attempts a darkly comic critique of Freudian dogma and the psychotherapy movement but actually produces as film which reinforces the oedipal narrative surely speaks to the assumed commonsense nature of such psychoanalytic discourse: which is perhaps why the horror genre has long exploited the motif. Of course there have been a number of films which characterize the lone mothered daughter as dysfunctional too. Brian De Palma's 1976 horror classic, *Carrie* and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) both employ the troubled daughter of a lone mother as catalysts for horror. Or the recent, wholly incoherent narrative *The Reaping* (Stephen Hopkins: 2007) in which a small town, Haven, set in the Deep South is beset by a series of events that mimic the ten biblical plagues that hit Egypt.²⁷⁸ The townsfolk believe that the plagues were brought upon them by the town's widowed lone mother and her daughter who are both accused of carrying out satanic rituals. Allegations of child abuse, murder and welfare dependency are also levelled at the film's lone mother who

²⁷⁷ The oedipal narrative is not confined only to cinema screens. The thematic concerns of recent sitcoms make it clear that the dominant mother/beleaguered father paradigm has become highly conspicuous again. Jennifer Reed, in her essay 'Beleaguered Husbands and Demanding Wives: The New Domestic Sitcom'. *Television in American Popular Culture*. www.americanpopularculture.com. (08/11/2006). Pg 2), illustrates the propensity of producers and writers to invest in this scenario. She writes, "The new domestic sitcom is constituted by a nuclear family centered on the man of the house". For Reed, the recent investment in the 1940s-1950s trope of beleaguered husband/domineering wife within sitcom is "symptomatic of a cultural moment defined in part by the panic mixed with resentment over advances in feminist politics over the last thirty years". These sitcoms sit comfortably in a post-feminist era that at once says patriarchy has all but disappeared and been replaced with freedom of choice for women, while representing female 'choice' in the form of aggressive, demanding and domineering behavior that has a detrimental effect on masculinity. Thus the purpose of these sitcoms says Reed, is to re-define the wisdom of patriarchy by ensuring the male protagonist is allotted all the best jokes, is in charge of the language and assures us that men, or father figure is head of the household again. In so doing masculinity is once again defined as 'all-wise' whilst women and mothers remain, in the kitchen.

²⁷⁸ Specifically Louisiana, which, in light of Giroux's exploration of the ways in which the disenfranchised, poor and African American communities of Louisiana were treated in the wake of hurricane Katrina is particularly pertinent.

is consigned to live on the periphery of the town and, although found innocent of all charges, articulates her maternal inadequacy and shoots herself in the head.²⁷⁹

While *Carrie*, *The Exorcist* and *The Reaping* code the lone mother's ineffectiveness as monstrous, scenarios in which the lone mother and her son are the central protagonists are more often than not the actual catalyst for horror. Take for example *Psycho* (Hitchcock: 1960) where Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is trapped in a co-dependent relationship with his dead mother. In bouts of psychosis, Bates hears the voice of his mother who continues to dictate his life with famously devastating consequences for both Norman and his murder victim, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh). Or the late 1980s horror film, *Henry: A Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John MacNaughton: 1986) in which Henry's (Michael Rooker) murderous behaviour is attributed to his upbringing by an intensely cruel lone mother who forced him to wear a dress to school and to watch as his mother had sex with other men. It is interesting to note the consistency with which the male child of a lone mother is forced into wearing girls clothes as indicative of his lone mother's toxic behaviour. (See Fig. 25) Asia Argento's film, *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, clearly depicts the film's teenage lone mother, Sarah (Asia Argento) as horrifying.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ *The Reaping* does attempt to challenge our assumptions about the film's lone mother and her children, however it is such a ham fisted attempt that almost goes unnoticed. Furthermore, the film negotiates this challenge in such a spectacular and definitive way that the argument is wholly undermined.

²⁸⁰ As the daughter of famous horror director Dario Argento, and child actor in his films, it is not surprising that her oeuvre should be resonant with the conventions of horror.



Fig. 25: Jeremiah from *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*

At the heart of this deeply disturbing film (written by the enigmatic J.T. LeRoy) is the story of Jeremiah (Jimmy Bennett) who is abducted from his foster home and taken back to his troubled mother (a prostitute and drug addict). Jeremiah, just like Henry in *Portrait of a Serial Killer*, is coerced, in moments of bonding with his mother into wearing girls' clothes and is also forced to watch his mother engage in sexual activity with numerous men. Although J.T. LeRoy speaks of this film as autobiographical, it is difficult to ascertain the truth of the assertion given the identity and gender of the writer was so elusive at the time of the film's production and exhibition. Nevertheless, the use of maternal prostitution and childhood experiences of cross dressing flagged up in both films as horrifying reiterates psychoanalytical research that details both events as precursors to homosexuality in a male adult (a point I take up again in more detail later in this chapter).

Jason Vorhees, (Steve Miner), the 'monster' of the *Friday the 13th* franchise is also the product of a lone, abject, toxic mother who, as with *Fight Club*'s mother figure is spectral but remains a dominant and domineering force in Jason's life, encouraging him to commit the

many murders he perpetrates over the span of the franchise. Horror's reliance on the lone mother and son paradigm as the location for psychological dysfunction is not especially surprising given its dependency on the family as a site of horror.²⁸¹ However, it is the horror genres consistent coding of the lone mother as the *only* factor in the making of these monstrous men that is highly problematic since it perpetuates the oedipal trajectory—a concept which has been central in the persistent pathologization of the lone mother/male child relationship.

The horrifying lone mother and her monstrous male child loom large within the horror genre, but filmmakers have also drawn from another tension that surrounds the lone mother/son dyad. Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) who kissed his mother (Leah Thompson) in the reverse oedipal narrative *Back To The Future* (Robert Zemeckis: 1985) to re-channel his mother's obsessive love back to his father and avoid sleeping with her is illustrative of the trans-generic centralizing of the incest taboo (although mediated through a narrative of time travel and comedy) explicit within mainstream cinema. David O'Russell's controversial indie film, *Spanking the Monkey* (1995) is an exploration of a sexual relationship between an invalid mother, Susan (Alberta Watson) and her son Ray (Jeremy Davis) that begins whilst the father is away on business.

While *Spanking the Monkey* and *Back To The Future* illustrate the use of the incest taboo as a repeated motif within mainstream cinema's mother and son narratives, it would seem that the lone mother/son paradigm legitimates a much more explicit centralizing of the incest taboo to the thematic concerns of this family formulation. Take for instance Stephen Frear's film *The Grifters* in which lone mother Lilly Dillon (Angelica Houston) attempts to

²⁸¹ See Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986)

seduce her adult son Roy (John Cusack) resulting in dreadful and fatal consequences. The trope of the predatory, sexually aggressive, lone mother is not consigned to U.S cinematic experience. French filmmaker Christopher Honore utilizes the lone mother/son paradigm to produce a soft-core porn (art-house) film in which lone mother Helene (Isabelle Huppert) seduces her grown son in a hedonistic and explicit display of sexual activity in his film *Ma Mere* (2004). Australian film *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf De Heer: 1993) depicts a deeply disturbing abuse narrative in which Bubby (Nicholas Hope), a man with learning difficulties is regularly raped by the film's lone mother (Claire Benito). Shot inside a small dark house in the Australian outback where Bubby has been imprisoned by his mother for 35 years, the film concentrates on images of dirt, and greasy flesh in stomach churning seduction and rape scenes (cued by his mother calling him 'bad boy') and codes the estranged, alcoholic father as a hero after he 'frees' Bubby from the abuse.

Spanish filmmaker, Pedro Almodovar, darling of the international art-house cinema audiences also reinforces cultural discourses that eroticize the relationship between a lone mother and her male child in his film *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* (*All About My Mother*). The film opens introducing us to Manuela (Cecilia Roth) working in a hospital as a senior transplant nurse. Through Almodovar's use of mise-en-scene and cinematography we are invited to make a visual and theoretical connection between Manuela and the Madonna. As Manuela takes care of the patient, the camera moves slowly up her body, resting on her serene, contemplative, softly lit face. Manuela gives of herself completely to the care of her patient, presenting at once an ideal image of femininity and motherhood in the service of others. However Manuela's identity is not of her own making; she is borne out of the creative mind of her teenage son, Esteban (Eloy Azorin) who, as a writer, scripts his own maternal fantasy. Depicting Manuela as the epitome of female servitude and sacred

motherhood through reference to the Madonna, and according Esteban the authority to ‘imagine’ and speak for Manuela denies this lone mother any agency or subjectivity. Rather, the film transfers her authority to the young central protagonist, a process that continues even after his death.

As the story continues we witness Esteban and his mother at home on the eve of his seventeenth birthday. Entering his bedroom, Manuela sits on his bed and hands a birthday present to Esteban. Esteban asks his mother to read aloud from the book she has given to him as a gift. It is an uncomfortable scene which functions to allow us to recall our subconscious concerns about a teenage boy and his mother sharing a close intimate space. These fears are compounded when, after a moment of silence, Esteban asks his mother if she would ever prostitute herself for him. (See Fig. 26)



Fig. 26: Esteban asks his mother to prostitute herself for him.

Ostensibly Almodovar seems to be challenging perceived wisdoms concerning the incest taboo (grotesquely realised in *Bad Boy Bobby*) by having the son initiate an inappropriate conversation rather than coding the mother as behaving in a sexually predatory manner. Indeed Esteban’s narrative strengthens the authority and power the film invests in the young male protagonist—he is not the victim as is usually the case. Furthermore, *Todo*

Sobre Mi Madre, gives the impression that it is posing some challenging questions to our cultural understanding of essentialized gender traits. By coding Esteban's father as a transsexual, Almodovar invites us to question the 'fixed' nature of gender and its requisites. What makes a father? What makes a mother? Do we still refer to a man as a father when he has made the choice to live as a woman? Similar questions cannot be legitimately asked of Manuela because the film firmly fixes her female identity by depicting her as the epitome of femininity, healing and caring for the sick and dispossessed throughout the narrative.

There is no doubt that *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* raises some very important questions about the construction of gender and parenting roles. However the film chooses to negotiate the political resonance of these issues when Esteban, on the verge of finding out the true identity of his father, is killed in a car accident. The death of Esteban means that the film does not have to respond to any of the issues it so forcefully raises and ensures that Manuela is duly punished, firstly for having a child with a man who could not teach him the cultural requirements of heterosexual masculinity, and ultimately for her inability to raise and initiate her son into 'normal' masculinity. That Almodovar resorts to utilizing a reverse incest taboo narrative to highlight and negotiate the ineptitude of the film's lone mother speaks to the power of this thematic motif to continue to undermine and pathologize lone motherhood.

Chapter Two argued that the black lone mothered son is pathologized in ways which frame his masculinity as hyper- violent, always needing to be contained, controlled and managed by the film's father figure whose narrative purpose is to take the black male fatherless son and mould him into a 'good' black man. As I discussed these narratives are seldom found outside the boundaries of new black cinema. However toxic black lone motherhood is a regular feature of films that come under the rubric of black cinema because

she is a vital player in shoring up ideologies about black fatherhood which has been centralized as the key factor in rescuing black men from the precipice of the so-called crisis in black masculinity. It is worth noting however that in films employing the black lone mother/son dyad the incest taboo narrative is never invoked. Given the regularity with which the incest taboo is invoked I would suggest that her absence has more to do with ideologically constructed notions about black female sexuality than any indication of a more liberal politics.

Nonetheless, the premise that mother love has the potential to be at best contaminating, at worse, sexually predatory is a powerful discourse that functions to ensure that mothers, and in particular, lone mothers, always remain alert to the potential they pose to their son's psychological well-being. A point that Silverstein and Rashbaum, reiterate when they note that since the worst accusation that can be directed at a mother is that she is seductive, "evidence of her son's burgeoning sexuality may cause her to be equally wary of any physical demonstration of affection lest she should arouse his sexual feelings" and turn him into the deviant she is always warned he is likely to become.²⁸² Undoubtedly the narrative of the toxic lone mother is being invoked within mainstream cinema with some persistency. The remainder of this chapter explores more recent iterations of toxic lone motherhood in films which implicitly and explicitly code the male child as effeminate and on the path to homosexuality.

²⁸² Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum. *The Courage To Raise Good Men: A Call for Change*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) Pg 108.

Cinematic Sissies.

The culture of mother blaming that has occurred at least since Freud, correlated homosexuality with flawed materialism continues with a dogged determination but with the emphasis shifting from the over-protective mother to the lone mother. One consequence of this is that the increase in the number of lone mothered households is perceived as the *only* reason (as if a 'reason' is required) for the rise in numbers of homosexual men in western culture. A sentiment that rings true for self-confessed 'feminist' Camille Paglia who quite un-problematically asserts "From long observation I conclude that blurred boundaries between mother and son are the primary factor in male homosexuality which every honest observer should admit is slowly on the increase in the western world".²⁸³ It is no wonder then that the lone mother son relationship continues to be under such scrutiny. Logic would have us believe that with the increase in numbers of homosexual men comes a decrease in heterosexual men. Thus, it would seem that the lone mother and her son pose a real threat to the future hegemony of white hetero-normative masculinity. It follows then that a supposed fall in the numbers of heterosexual men will compromise the very existence of the nuclear family; the central space in which post-feminist masculinity is rescued and redeemed, and where women, in accordance with post-feminist ideology, can realise their 'true' potential as both wife, and more to the point, as mother.

The correlation between homosexuality and lone motherhood, inferred in Kant's advice to fathers to protect their sons from falling prey to every 'caprice', has been systematically enforced and established in psychoanalytic and social science research over almost three centuries. Take for example the work of sociologists Thompson et al, who in

²⁸³ Camille Paglia. 'Guns and Penises' at www.freerepublic.com 05/12/1999

1973, published their research project which aimed to ascertain the ‘definitive’ cause of ‘Chronic Juvenile Masculinity’, (that is the manifestation of female traits in young boys now termed ‘gender identity disorder). Basing his (empirical and qualitative) study on responses from a questionnaire collected from 123 heterosexual men and 127 homosexual men, the study discovered that of the 46 questions posed, 32 were answered “significantly differently by the homosexual men”.²⁸⁴ According to Thompson et al, the shared experience of the homosexual cohort—lack of time spent with father and too much time spent in the company of “mothers who insisted on being the child’s centre of attention, often or always” robbed these men of their ‘rightful’ gender identity, hetero-normative masculinity.²⁸⁵

Less than a decade later, A.P Bell, M.S Weinberg and S.K Hammersmith, in their study of “Sexual Preferences: Its Development in Boys and Girls” insisted that ‘Childhood Gender Non-Conformity’ turned out to be “more strongly connected to adult homosexuality than was any other variable in the study”.²⁸⁶ The link was clear then (especially for the Father’s for Life Group who utilized both studies in their campaign materials), a male child, not initiated into manhood from early infancy will, according to ‘authoritative’ scientific research, most certainly become a homosexual man. In light of the vast amount of critical work that has been undertaken over the last twenty years that challenges the ideas of gender essentialism, it is surely important to ask why psychoanalytic discourse that decries the relationship between mother and son, and, more pertinently, lone mother and son, should still be given credence. What ideological purpose is served in the shoring up of these discursive practices?

²⁸⁴ Thompson et al. ‘Chronic Juvenile Masculinity’ in Andrew Samuels. ‘You Be Daddy, Mummy’. www.fathersforlife.org (sourced 05/07/07).

²⁸⁵ Ibid. Pg 2

²⁸⁶ Ibid. Pg 5

Significantly Thompson's early seventies research was more recently highlighted in an on-line article written by Andrew Samuels, author of 'The Political Psyche' for the Fathers4Life campaign group. 'You Be Daddy Mummy' pays lip service to the constructed nature of gender and criticizes hierarchical patriarchal structures that continue to oppress women and children. Although Daniels depicts himself as a man who is highly cognisant of gender inequities, he nonetheless repudiates feminism in terms which wholly undermines the agency of lone mothers. Claiming to respect lone mothers for the hard work they do (reminiscent of George W. Bush's sentiments about heroic lone mothers) Samuels displaces her authority by emphasizing the mutually exclusive nature of the male child/father relationship which he claims, not only provides the child with the necessary role model but offers the father as the site for learning about, and the construction of, his male identity.

Drawing from Thompson's socio-scientific research as the reference point for examples of hetero-sexual masculinity gone awry, Samuels' sentiments purposefully reinforce cultural assumptions and discursive practices that explicitly correlate homosexuality with a dominant female presence. Indeed, fellow contributor to Father's For Life, Adam Bush (who incorporates the work of Camille Paglia as an example of a woman whose former feminist beliefs have been rejected in light of the crisis in masculinity that has resulted from female empowerment) compounds the observations proffered by Samuel's when he writes, "Children growing up in father absent households are at a greater risk for experiencing a variety of behavioural and educational problems including difficulty in deferring gratification, frequent sexual experience and more disturbingly, homosexuality."²⁸⁷ At the centre of these well rehearsed and highly homophobic and misogynist discourses is a wholesale disavowal of a boy's agency in the formation of his own sexual identity.

²⁸⁷ Adam Bush. www.fathersforlife.org (Sourced 27/05/07). Visit the Fathers4Life website to see how a rhetorical investment in new scientific research which is being undertaken to challenge the argument that homosexuality has a genetic cause is being utilized in the campaigns for fatherhood.

Still, the cultural messages about what may befall an inadequately masculinised boy within western cultures are so acute that it leads mothers to conspire in the cultural project of toughening up the male child. It is an enterprise that Silverstein and Rashbaum claim, has damaging consequences on the psychology of the mother who is required to disavow her own feelings and relinquish her authority in a process that acquiesces with the requirements of patriarchy. Recalling a case where an expectant mother was displaying signs of severe emotional distress, Silverstein and Rash Baum succinctly illustrate their argument. After four years of trying to conceive, and only two months away from delivery, the mother became severely depressed by the news she was having a boy precisely because she ‘knew’ that after a few years she would have to turn him over to her husband to teach him how to be a ‘proper’ boy. “Well”, she elucidates, “I wouldn’t want him to turn into a mama’s boy, tied to my apron strings”.²⁸⁸

While this anecdote is an extreme example, it does highlight the pernicious nature of toxic mother rhetoric and begins to explain the ‘anxiety’ explicit in the words of feminist writer Adrienne Rich, in her book *Of Woman Born* where she argues that mothers fear that “sons will accuse us of making them misfits or an outsider”.²⁸⁹ It is a fear made all the more pertinent for lone mothers claim Silverstein and Rashbaum who note “single mothers in particular are haunted by the dread of producing a sissy”,²⁹⁰ and reiterated by Juffer who claims that even now, when the supposed “valorization of the single mother”, is in process, “the deeply entrenched fears of a mama’s boy, the sissy, the potential homosexual have not been redefined”.²⁹¹ Rather, the dominant message is that if women do not need a father/man to help them raise a boy, boys still need masculine role models, preferably ‘real men’ to

²⁸⁸ Silverstein and Rashbaum. Pg 8

²⁸⁹ Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood, experience and institution*. ((Norton: New York, 1986). Pg 205

²⁹⁰ Silverstein and Rashbaum. Pg 8

²⁹¹ Juffer. Pg 174

become ‘normal’ men. No other contravention of social norms, we are continually warned, is more upsetting nor more avoidable than homosexuality in a boy.

The persistent pathologization of homosexuality as a social phenomenon and subject for systematic study, occurring in tandem with the rise of psychoanalysis has for the most part based its pseudo-scientific explanations squarely within the nature/nurture debate.

Beiber et al’s 1962 research findings ‘Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytical Study of Male Homosexuality’ proved “ that a constructive, supportive, warmly related father precludes the possibility of a homosexual son; he acts as a naturalizing protective agent should the mother make seductive or closed binding attempts”.²⁹²

Implicit in this work is the premise that there is a ‘cure’ for homosexuality. According to Charles W. Socaridies, M.D, author of *How America Went Gay*, and president for the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, proposes that the cause of the homosexual ‘problem’ is clear. He writes:

My long experience and sizeable body of psychoanalysis research dating all the way back to Freud tells me that most men caught up in same-sex sex are reacting, at an unconscious level, to something amiss with their earlier upbringing, over-controlling mothers and abdicating fathers. In his multiple same sex adventures, even the most effeminate guy was looking to incorporate the manhood of other, because he was in a never ending search for masculinity he was never allowed to build and grow early in his childhood.²⁹³

In his attempt to rid the American nation of homosexuality—and be sure, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, “the scope of institutions whose pragmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large”—the early 1980s saw Socaridies develop

²⁹² Bieber et al. ‘Homosexuality: A psychoanalytical study of male homosexuality’. Found at www.fathersforlife.com. Sourced 17.04.08.

²⁹³ Charles Socaridies, ‘How America Went Gay’. www.leaderu.com (Sourced 06/08/07).

his reparative therapy programme which assumed same sex desire as an illness arising from conflict between the id and the ego.²⁹⁴ Not one for original thought, Socaridies concluded that this conflict (already well documented by Freud, Kraft-Ebbing and their disciples) unsurprisingly resulted from abuse at an early age, “in a female dominated environment wherein the father was absent”.²⁹⁵

The notion that the male child may be contaminated by his close relationship with his mother is so entrenched in our cultural psyche that, as Sedgwick says, “The presiding asymmetry of value assignment between hetero and homo goes unchallenged everywhere”.²⁹⁶ The need then to protect a male child from any obstacle that might get in his way of his ‘natural’ progression into hetero-normative masculinity must be contained, if not entirely eradicated. The explicit ‘effeminophobia’ present within this discourse not only highlights the homophobic nature of contemporary culture that Giroux claims is ever more present in American culture since the inauguration of President George W. Bush, but also foregrounds an underlying misogyny about women, motherhood and female reproductive rights.

With these issues in mind, the remainder of this chapter references media text, psychoanalysis, medical literature, the deliberations of policy makers and the work of cultural observers to argue that the social presentation of the lone mother and her son is further bound in a pernicious homophobic narrative. To this end I draw attention to two films, *Are We There Yet?* (Brian Levan: 2005), and *Monster’s Ball* since both prioritize African American lone mother and son relationships. Interestingly, *Are We There Yet?* breaks with the tradition of singular male child/lone mother paradigm with the inclusion of a daughter. More importantly it presents the African American lone mothered son in distinctly different ways

²⁹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Tendencies*. (Routledge: London, 1994). Pg 161

²⁹⁵ Socaridies. Pg 4

²⁹⁶ Sedgwick. Pg 162

than traditionally adopted within mainstream cinema narratives which focus on the ‘troubled’ teenage African American fatherless boy. As I argued in Chapter Two, filmmakers such as John Singleton and Spike Lee, coalesce with white family values by promoting fatherhood as the palliative to troubled African American male identity.

These films unambiguously code the black lone mothered son as always in danger of becoming a barbarian without the support and guidance from a father who will show him how to be a ‘proper’ man. *Monster’s Ball* and *Are We There Yet* move away from these representations of aggressive teenage African American masculinity to one which is younger and more effeminate. Kevin (Philip Bolden) lone mothered son of Suzanne Kingston (Mia Long) is afraid of everything. He has asthma; is allergic to a number of foods and is coded as a ‘mummy’s boy’ (in stark contrast to his older sister Lindsay (Alisha Allen), a brash and confident little girl). It is only in the company of surrogate father figure, Nick Persons (Ice Cube) that Kevin learns not to cry, not to be as fearful, to eat the foods that he is supposedly allergic to and to survive an asthma attack without his inhaler (Nick misplaces the inhaler but his restorative fatherly powers enable Kevin to breath more easily).²⁹⁷ As discussed in Chapter Two *Monster’s Ball* utilizes the figure of the African American lone mother and her son as the catalysts for failing white masculinity. This film’s young black male is overweight and comfort eats; an activity normally associative with the female psyche and body. Although the film does not code him as proto-homosexual, it certainly demarcates his body and mind as significantly de-masculinized. For the ‘sin’ of not performing masculinity correctly, the young black son is renounced by the film and killed off in a car accident. His

²⁹⁷ The rise in food allergies and asthma has been attributed to over-invested middle class motherhood at the same time that it has been attributed to inadequate maternalism.

death certainly confirms Vito Russo's assertion that once it has been decided that one "cannot become a man, you have to die".²⁹⁸

As argued previously, by representing the African American lone mothered son as proto-homosexual, (or at least displaying female characteristics) demonstrates a highly conspicuous move on the part of mainstream cinema because the coding of African American homosexuality is so uncommon. The paucity of narratives which include an African American homosexual reflects the problematic nature of homosexuality within the African American community as well as betraying a racialized taboo within the film industry.²⁹⁹ The coding of the African American lone mothered son as effeminate speaks to the intensity of western family values ideology, which is so potent it now makes reference to that which it once deemed invisible and perceived as the 'greatest taboo' within the African American community.

With all these issues in mind, and through close textual analysis of *The Sixth Sense* I explore how the figure of the lone mother is utilized in the construction and production of a 'cinematic sissy'. I choose this film specifically because it was the most commercially successful film in which Haley Joel Osment played the lone mothered son. Osment has been cast as the son of a lone mother in a number of films (*The Sixth Sense*, *Pay It Forward*, *Second Hand Lions*), as well as playing the son of the fictional lone mother in the final series in the US television show, *Murphy Brown*.³⁰⁰ A common discourse surrounding Osment is

²⁹⁸ Vito Russo. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the movies*. (New York : Harper and Row, 1987). Pg

²⁹⁹ For further reading see Delroy Constantine Simm's *The Greatest Taboo* Delroy, Sharon Willis' *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Films*, Ed Guerro's *Framing Blackness* and Neville Hoad's *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality and Globalization*.

³⁰⁰ In both *Pay It Forward* and *Second Hand Lions* Osment's characters are complicated through extra-textual references to homosexual iconography. In *Pay It Forward* the son of the lone mother is murdered by young boys who stab him in his ribs with a knife. I am not suggesting that the penetration of male flesh by another

the extent of his acting abilities which are framed as ‘far beyond his age’. A fact that Kevin Spacey, surrogate patriarch of *Pay It Forward* highlighted when he referred to Osment as a “forty year old man in a boy’s body”.³⁰¹ Tom Brooks, correspondent for the BBC News Online Entertainment website also notes the peculiarity of Osment describing him as “possessing a peculiar maturity—he is like a man-child giving you the impression there is an adult trapped inside the body of a boy”.³⁰² Implicit in Spacey’s and Brooks’ sentiments is the articulation of a distinctly different referential framework that codes Osment as a highly unusual child.

My aim then is to demonstrate that it is not just the lone mother’s inadequacy which renders her as monstrous and horrifying but that the film is explicit in underscoring the monstrous effects of lone motherhood on the body of the fatherless son. Paying particular attention to narrative techniques which are in dialogue with and negotiate within dominant cultural narratives about the construction and definition of hetero-normative gender performance that surround this seemingly controversial relationship, I argue that whilst mainstream cinema does not explicitly code the celluloid sons of lone mothers as proto-gay, it certainly employs narrative and visual techniques to signal, what, Vito Russo describes as, “what is or what is not masculine”.³⁰³ Russo’s seemingly simplistic description of how mainstream cinema characterizes homosexuality, ‘what is or what is not masculinity’ demonstrates the ease with which we connect male weakness and effeminacy. It is that ‘weakness in masculinity’, the connection with the female, which Russo states, “has been

male is symptomatic of a homosexual subtext but that the scenario mirrors the martyring of St Sebastian,(who has become a gay icon), who was pierced in the side with arrows.

³⁰¹ <http://www.kidactors.com/haley> (Sourced 15/05/09)

³⁰² Tom Brook. ‘Natural Talent of Artificial’s Osment’. www.news.bbc.co.uk 04/07/01 (Sourced 29/06/09)

³⁰³ Russo. Pg 4

seen as the connection between sex role behaviour and deviant sexuality” even at an early age.³⁰⁴

Mainstream cinema’s explicit effeminophobic treatment of the lone mothered son functions to provide a narrative space for the return of the father whose role it is to negate any negative aspects of male development that challenges the reign of the phallus. At this juncture I want to return to my earlier claim that the aim of this chapter is not to provide a ‘queer’ reading of the texts in questions. To do so would undermine the extent to which the rhetoric about the effeminate nature of the lone mothered son is so embedded in our collective conscience and so readily appropriated on to the bodies of the celluloid lone mothered son. Rather, I will highlight the ease at which effeminophobia is incorporated into these films as commonsense and utilized to signify the ‘freakish’ nature of the cinematic sissy. By way of conclusion this chapter will explore how the narrative and images of the cinematic sissy impacts the ways in which Haley Joel Osment’s sexual identity outside the film world is perceived. I begin this final section with an analysis of the lone mother character Lynn Sear (Toni Collette) in *The Sixth Sense* to illustrate the ways in which her maternalism is constructed as an obstacle in the psychological development of her young male child.

“I See Ghosts”: The Spectral Father Figure and the Ghoulish “Single Mother Family”.

Vincent Gray (Donnie Whalberg) stands naked only for his off white Y-fronts and a silver hooped ring through his left nipple, in the pristine bathroom of Dr Malcolm Crowe

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

(Bruce Willis), eminent child psychologist and newly acknowledged ‘son of the city’. (See Fig. 27) With a gun in hand, Gray accuses Crowe of failing him, leaving him always afraid of being alone in the dark. Crowe, having just received an award from the city for “teaching children to be strong where most adults would piss on themselves”, attempts to pacify the young man who he has recognised as one of his former patients. “Look at me”, screams Gray, “I don’t want to be a freak no more—some people call me a freak, I am a freak, I am a freak”. “I do remember you”, replies Crowe, “Quiet, very smart, compassionate, unusually compassionate. Single mother family”, he whispers.



Fig. 27: Vincent’s thin and bruised body makes him appear more like a child than an adult man.

M. Night Shyamalan’s 1999 *The Sixth Sense* is widely noted for its original narrative twist, the extraordinary acting skills of its child star Haley Joel Osment and the revival of Bruce Willis’s acting career (significantly, Willis is best known in his role of hyper-masculine hero of the Reaganite blockbuster franchise *Die Hard*). Telling the story of Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), the son of lone mother Lynne Sear, *The Sixth Sense*, at once described as a modern day ghost story and a horror narrative, is a nightmare scenario wherein Cole is being ‘acted upon’ by ghostly figures haunting his daily life. It is also one of the many films of the late 1990s-2000s which foregrounds fatherhood as redemptive for central male protagonist and essential for the film’s fatherless child—‘fatherless fatherhood’ films.

The supernatural events are having disturbing effects on the young boy whose bizarre behaviour is made manifest in bouts of extreme anxiety, depression, and isolation from his peers who bully him.³⁰⁵ However the link between Cole's emotional problems and the supernatural are not made explicit from the outset of the film, rather Cole's problems are, it is alleged, due to his parents' recent divorce.

Indeed the film quite clearly invites us to make this connection when we are introduced to the eminent Dr Crowe, who is sitting on a bench outside the house observing Cole as he makes his way to a church (a supposed place of sanctuary for people marginalized and victimized by society). As we watch Dr Crowe reading Cole's medical notes and making notes as he watches the boy, the camera momentarily rests on a page where he underscores the words 'single parent family'. This is the second time within the opening few minutes of the film that the structure of the family has been emphasised and while this section of the chapter is concerned with the ways in which the celluloid lone mothered son embodies contemporary debates correlating fatherlessness with homosexuality, I suggest it is worth taking some time to explore the significance of the lone mother trope within this film.

Although the film foregrounds the lone mother family as a significant feature for scrutiny in the study of two disturbed male protagonists, neither Cole nor Vincent Gray makes this inference. Rather it is the male 'expert' who draws our attention to the fact. Dr Crowe explicitly invites us to draw from our collective knowledge about lone motherhood as a destructive influence. And yet, even as the film prioritizes the lone mother family as *the* contributing factor in the pathologization of the two male protagonists, it does seem, at least at first, to be almost reluctant to portray its lone mother as explicitly dysfunctional. Lynn is

³⁰⁵ In one scene Cole is locked inside an upstairs closet by his peers until he is rescued by his mother. The film is somewhat clumsily drawing from the cultural catch-phrase 'coming out of the closet' which refers to the revelation of one's homosexual identity.

presented as a loving and caring mother deeply concerned by her son's plight. Her house is clean and the walls are covered with photographs of her son and of his 'art-work' (symbolic of a middle-class expression of good maternalism). *The Sixth Sense* makes clear that Lynn and Cole are seen as a family unit. The pair talk together, hug and share their concerns as much as they share their domestic space. But the house is also quite dark; there is very little furniture and what furniture there is, is dull and old. However the kitchen cupboards loom large over the very small kitchen table creating a sense of containment and danger and the house is silent (no music, no radio, no noise from the outside and no noise from neighbours). (See Fig. 28) As such, the film presents this home of a lone mother as a sterile, and often-times as a nightmarish environment for a young boy.



Fig. 28: The kitchen cupboards loom over Cole rendering him almost invisible.

Even as the film does little in the way of demonizing its lone mother it still regards her as lacking. Indeed, Lynn's rising panic about Cole's behaviour, "Cole you are scaring me", and her inability to make the situation better for Cole mark her as inadequate and powerless. When confronted with Cole's behaviour she screams, holds her head and tells Cole that he is scaring her. In fact her agency within the narrative is progressively diminished as her screen time becomes more and more intermittent. Not only is her presence

in the film overshadowed by the arrival of Dr Crowe, the film betrays its support of the lone mother character in a number of ways which function to code her as ineffective, and more troublingly it posits the idea that she is responsible for the physical abuse of her young son. The suspicion that Lynn is violent to Cole is presented in the scenario after we have seen Cole's body covered in bruises.

Lynn rushes Cole to the hospital after discovering the bruising on his body and as she waits to discover the cause of her son's injuries, the hospital doctor (played by Shyalaman) voices his fears that she is the perpetrator of the abuse. Although we are aware that Lynn is not guilty of the charges the accusation is mediated by Dr Crowe (because clearly she can't speak for herself) who then takes on the role of Cole's care-giver. And, even while the film rejects the idea that Lynn is abusive it still maintains a sense of suspicion denying her access to her son by decreasing her screen and narrative presence. Lynn's absence from her son's hospital bed, her nonappearance at Cole's school performance and the fact that she is asleep when Cole is facing the bloodied and grotesque ghosts that haunt him, symbolize her failings and compound the terror Cole endures.

While Lynn's absence marks her as the embodiment of horrifying inadequacy, it is particularly heightened by the highly conspicuous presence of Dr Crowe.³⁰⁶ It is Dr Crowe who accompanies Cole to the school play (a trope repeated again in *About A Boy*, although taken a step further when Will joins Marcus on stage in a musical performance that saves Marcus from being ridiculed as a sissy), tells him a story whilst Cole is in hospital and understands the relevance of Cole's attachment to his father's glasses. Thus Crowe adopts

³⁰⁶ I would argue that Shyalaman makes his distrust and dislike of motherhood, whether married or not explicit in the scenario when Dr Crowe accompanies Cole to the home of a recently deceased young girl who has been haunting him. The young girl asks Cole to take a message to her father. In front of everyone present for her funeral, Cole presents the grieving father with a video in which she proves that her mother killed her by poisoning her food. As such, *The Sixth Sense* makes it plain that mothers are not only inept but toxic too.

the father role, and what is more, Lynn allows him to do so, offering him her family as the space in which he can enter as a figure of authority, and effective paternalism even though his involvement with children has only been on a professional level. The fact that Crowe has not sired his own children (although we are supposed to assume that he is the 'eternal father' to the city's children) is a bone of contention for his wife who sees the award bestowed upon him as recognition of all her sacrifices, including motherhood, that she had to make to further his career. As a consequence of the inadequacy of the film's lone mother, *The Sixth Sense* loans the Sear family to Crowe in order for him to play out his own fatherhood fantasies and the lone mother is coerced into offering her son to Crowe to help him act out fatherhood. Put more crudely, the lone mother of *Sixth Sense* prostitutes her young son to a man who uses Cole for his own purposes. Thus Cole appears again as a child being 'acted upon', an action that is sanctioned by the film's lone mother to service masculinity.

While I could certainly be accused of mis-reading or over-reading *The Sixth Sense*, the very adult nature of the dialogue given to the film's young male child and the sense that he is being 'acted upon' without agency and recourse further complicates our perception of him. Reflecting on his own career as a child actor, Jackie Cooper claims that the power dynamic between child actor and adult director, screen writer and producer is seldom seen as equal. "Children have no say regarding their own portrayal", he writes, "it is always from an adult perception".³⁰⁷ Of course, it would not be wise to leave decisions about plot and character development solely to a young child; however according a child with adult-like language, behavior and a more mature sense of perception creates tension and conflict in the way we understand the relationships between on-screen adults and children. Characterizing the child as more adult mediates the symbolic prostitution of this lone mothered son to an

³⁰⁷ Kathy Merlock Johnson. Pg 188

older man looking to qualify his own masculinity. An earlier example of the ‘adult-ing’ of child actors can be seen in Scorsese’s 1976 film *Taxi Driver* in which Jodie Foster famously plays the part of Iris, a child prostitute. (See Fig. 29)



Fig. 29: ‘Adult-ing’ Iris in *Taxi Driver*.

It is only through the appropriation of adult language and a more mature attitude that the audience is enabled to mediate their unease about the coding of her as a sexualized object. Just as in the case of Iris, any unease about the way in which Cole Sear is being used by an adult male is negotiated through the process of ‘adult-ing’ him. This might somewhat confirm (and perhaps making more complex) co-star Kevin Spacey’s earlier remarks about Haley Joel Osment appearing as a ‘40 year old man in a child’s body’

Whilst Cole’s role in *The Sixth Sense* is not, on the surface, as contentious as Iris’s in *Taxi Driver*, he is employed by the film to redeem masculinity, allowing Crowe to make posthumous amends to Vincent Gray and to prove his professional worth. Furthermore it is only with the help of the film’s lone mothered son that Crowe can acknowledge his own death and make amends to his wife.³⁰⁸ Crowe’s dependency on Cole and Cole’s dependency

³⁰⁸ Clearly that Crowe is dead creates some ambiguity about the rhetoric of father hunger. However I would argue that by employing the trope of the dead father figure *The Sixth Sense* is making amends to the abandoned fatherless son by allowing him the opportunity to say goodbye to a paternal figure. *The Sixth Sense* allows Cole

on Crowe, at once distanced and separated from the film's lone mother serves to rescue both protagonists' masculine credentials. Although Crowe is empowered to become the successful paternal figure that the film had initially denied him, more significantly, Cole is rescued from the possibility of becoming the future embodiment of Vincent Gray, a man, whose narrative and image serves as a reminder of the threat lone mothers pose to their young male child's sexual identity.

Framing The Freak

The narrative function of Vincent Gray is two-fold; he serves to remind Dr Crowe of the mistakes he made in his diagnosis of Gray and acts as a warning to Dr Crowe to perform his symbolic paternalism with greater care when dealing with Cole. More importantly though, Gray functions as Cole's doppelganger; he is the man, or more precisely, the 'freak' that Cole is likely to become if the 'help' he needs is not provided. At the moment we meet Gray we are, as I earlier noted, not aware of the supernatural nature of his problems, only that he is a very disturbed young man who Dr Crowe has informed us is smart, unusually compassionate and the son of a lone mother. The language used by Dr Crowe to describe the psychological characteristics of Vincent Gray do nothing to challenge assumptions about the effects of lone motherhood on the maturation of masculinity but rather it reinforces Gray's own description of himself as freakish.

Reams of psychoanalytic literature informs us that traits such as shyness, nervousness, creativity, and a heightened emotional nature, or uncommonly sensitive, are the

to reconcile himself with the loss of his father and in some ways employs Crowe to pardon the mistakes of his real father. As such the film draws from pseudo-psychoanalysis that claims not only do boys feel the loss of their father more astutely than girls but that any father figure will be better than none at all. In similar ways to *E.T.*, Cole knows that his ghostly father (and his surrogate father figure) will be always present and always watching over him.

initial indicators of homosexuality in men. Dale O’Leary, author of an on-line journal written for the Father’s For Justice website points to the manifestation of such characteristics as ‘symptoms of homosexuality’ warning lone mothers to always be aware if their sons exhibit a “fear of rough and tumble play, lack of same sex playmates, dislike of team sports, doll-play, cross-dressing, effeminate speech or mannerisms, acting a feminine or female role”.³⁰⁹ O’Leary suggests that these ‘symptoms’ are so clearly recognisable as the antithesis of ‘natural’ characteristics of juvenile masculinity that they render homosexuality as the most “preventable developmental disorder”.³¹⁰

My purpose for drawing attention to O’Leary’s ‘how to spot a homosexual’ guide is not just to make clear how invested father’s rights campaign groups are with the idea of fatherhood as a prophylactic against homosexuality, nor to demonstrate the insidious way in which homophobia is veiled in the rhetoric of toxic motherhood but to note how these eight ‘symptoms’ are so readily and regularly ascribed to the cinematic lone mothered son. Trevor, the lone mothered son in *Pay It Forward* is seldom seen in the company of other male children. His empathy towards others renders him a freak—a term employed in reference to Trevor regularly within the film. Ray, the lone mothered son in *Jerry Maguire* becomes a ‘proper boy’ when he shows an aptitude for throwing a baseball, likewise, John Farley’s dislike of sport and his profession as a therapist serve to feminize him in *Mr Woodcock*. Marcus, the lone mothered son in *About A Boy* dresses differently from other boys and although he is not a cross-dresser like his counterpart in *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, his dress sense (or more precisely the clothes his mother chooses for him) differentiate and distance him from his male contemporaries which results in him being bullied for his ‘freakish’ nature. And, although Cole’s clothes do not explicitly code him as

³⁰⁹ Dale O’Leary. ‘How To Prevent Homosexuality in Boys’ www.fathersforjustice.com (Sourced 31/01/08)

³¹⁰ Ibid

proto-homosexual they certainly add to the sense that he is different from other boys his age. Dressed in an over-sized coat, his trousers slightly too short and his satchel slung across his shoulders, Cole's appearance is akin to that of someone from an earlier decade. His appearance at once reminds us that this lone mothered child is distinctly unusual while also inviting us to question the intention of a lone mother who chooses to dress her male child in such a manner. (See Fig. 30.1 and 30.2)

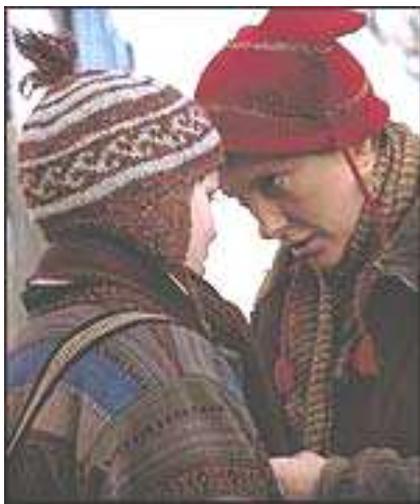


Fig. 30.1: Fiona dresses Marcus in her image.



Fig. 30.2: Cole's clothes code him as different.

The significance of clothes as indicative of 'gender identity disorder' is highlighted in *About A Boy* when the surrogate father figure buys the lone mothered son more 'masculine' clothing which serve as the catalyst for the physical and by extension, symbolic transformation of the film's highly effeminate male child protagonist to a 'normal' boy (as well as providing the opportunity to foreground the surrogate father as more in tune with the boy's psychological needs than his mother).

Gray's dysfunctional masculinity, the result of being raised by a lone mother, is further compounded by the visual cues offered by the film which marks Gray as a

homosexual man. Gray has a pierced nipple which, while for many serves as only as a fashion accessory, for gay men is perceived as a determining symbolic mark of their sexuality. Indeed, as the BMEZINE.com website (a body modification online magazine) asserts, nipple piercing is perceived as having special resonance for the gay community particularly since, as they argue, the “modern piercing emerged from the gay and BDSM subcultures”.³¹¹ What is more, Gray’s challenge to Dr Crowe takes place in a scene wherein Gray is dressed only in his Y-Fronts. While the lack of clothing does much to highlight Gray’s vulnerability as well as infantilize him, that Gray wears Y-Fronts is yet another indicator of his sexuality. Of course, we might argue that the donning of a pair of Y-fronts can be indicative of a number of character traits, but as Frank Mort points out the Y-Fronts under-pant emerged as an explicit visual sign of sexual preference during the late 1980s. Indeed, Mort points to “columns of gay press to illustrate where gay men illustrated their sexuality with reference to, amongst others, a preference for Y-Fronts”.³¹² Mort also asserts that it is these material visual signs that do much to confirm suspicions about the presentation of homosexuality, arguing that “representations of homosexuality coexist within images which reaffirm the importance of sexual separateness—it is the surfaces of the body, linked to particular styles or looks which begin to be privileged as sites of sexuality rather than one dominant focus on one dominant sexual act”.³¹³

While Mort is concerned with the consumption of visual and material signs of homosexuality, German psychiatrist and advocate for the ‘curability’ of homosexuality (as

³¹¹ Body Modification Ezine. The Haworth Press (<http://haworthpress.com/store/E-Text> (Sourced on 06/07/08). For a more informal discussion on whether nipple piercing is indicative of homosexuality go to www.loveshack.org.

³¹² Frank Mort. *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in late Twentieth Century Britain*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) Pg 179. Another more informal source to explore the visual relevance of Y-Fronts is the website <http://gaymensunderwear.blogspot.com> where you will find a link to a site called ‘Y-Front Frenzy’. (Sourced 06/05/2007).

³¹³ Ibid. Pg 179

well as the extermination of disabled people) J H. Schultz claimed that the visual indicators of homosexuality are to be found on the actual body. He writes, “a child whose adult life is ruined by its mothers’ senseless and immeasurable spoiling-these are little rabbit boys; soft, gentle, shy, big-eyed...we have before us a homosexual”.³¹⁴ (See Fig. 31) While Schultz’s highly offensive rhetoric emerged from Nazi Germany, contemporaneous debates about the toxic effects of lone motherhood on the male child foreground physiological factors as the yard-stick to measure the visual signs of hetero-normative and homosexual masculinity. Take for instance beliefs extolled by the likes of Freud and, more recently, Robert Bly, author of *Iron John: A Book About Men* and guru of the Men’s Movement who claim that the visual distinction between a male child raised by a lone mother and one raised within a conventional patriarchal family is made manifest on the face. Recounting the story of a young boy who lived with his mother after the divorce of his parents, Bly describes his interpretation of a dream the boy had recounted to him as indicative of the devastating effects of lone motherhood on the physiology of the male child. “When women”, Bly admonishes, “even when women with the best intentions, bring up a boy alone, he may in some way have no male face, or he may have no face at all”.³¹⁵



Fig. 31: Cole is the visual representation of Schultz’s ‘rabbit boy’.

³¹⁴ J H Schultz. *Geschlecht Liebe, Ehe: Die Grundtatschen des Liebes*. 5th improved edition.(Verlag, Munich and Basel; Ernst Reinhart, 1967) www.fathersforlife.com

³¹⁵ Robert Bly. *Iron John: A Book About Men*. (New York; Vintage Books, 1999). Pg17

The choice to employ a boy who looks more feminine than he does masculine to play the lone mothered son is the first choice in many of Shyamalan's film coalesces with the rhetoric of Freud, Bly and Schultz (see also the lone mothered sons in *About A Boy*, *Jerry Maguire*, *Mysterious Skin*, *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, *Dear Frankie*, and so on). Even if the choice to cast a boy who has, what Almodovar describes as a distinctly 'special face' when discussing the casting of Esteban the lone mothered son in *All About My Mother*, is not consciously foregrounding what Dyer might refer to as a particular 'social type', within the social world Osment's sexuality has often been a subject for debate. Note how one blogger on the entertainment and popular culture website, www.thesuperficial.com speaks about Osment. "I have a theory", he proclaims "that anybody who looks like a freak of nature is gay". Scott Brown, author of an article for the online website www.popwatch.com titled 'Career Advice for Haley Joel Osment' suggests that "coming out of the closet" would be a good career move, and WikiAnswers.com asks, "Is Haley Joel Osment Gay?" Furthermore an anti- Haley Joel Osment website explicitly connects the film characters Osment plays to his sexuality "he is highly homosexual and has no friends in any of his movies which is perfect for him because he has no friends in his real life".³¹⁶

Further illustrative of the ways in which Osment's sexuality is being framed as 'deviant' is his casting as the adopted gay son of a single dad in *My Three Gay Sons* conceived by Opans Barclay for www.theadvocate.com, a website which aims to provide alternative programming for a gay audience. More contentious still are the comments made by cult gay novelist Dennis Cooper who openly admits on his webpage to a game he and his boyfriend play. He writes, "I pretend to play Haley Joel Osment to his Jude Law".³¹⁷

³¹⁶ 'Is Haley Joel Osment Gay?' www.Wikianswers.com (sourced 03/12/08)

³¹⁷ www.denniscooper.blogspot.com 03/10/05

As is often the case with narratives in which a child is required to perform innocence, naivety and ‘cuteness’ the child becomes a site for sexual fantasy (discussions about the child stars Dakota Fanning, Emma Watson and Ellen Page attest to this). Film scholar Gaylyn Studlar notes how the inscription of more adult characteristics on the child star Mary Pickford function to invoke a paedophilic gaze³¹⁸, while Bram Dijkstra argues that representations of young girls “created a venue as much about and for the play of the male sexual fantasy as it was an idealization of childhood innocence”.³¹⁹ Of course, talking about a paedophilic gaze in relation to homosexuality is dangerous because of the potential conflation of the paedophilic gaze with homosexual desire. Nonetheless, quoting scholar Martha Vicinus, Dijkstra points out that the historical “symbolic function of the adolescent boy in fin de siècle culture was to absorb and reflect a variety of sexual desires”.³²⁰ As such Cooper’s earlier comments about Osment can be understood within pre-existing frameworks in which an adolescent boy functions as a site of male fantasy. Even as it is acknowledged that the male adolescent body is the vessel for sexual fantasy, I would suggest that the sexualisation of the young male body is more to do with the fantasist than the actual representation. *The Sixth Sense* does something more disturbing in that it offers the young fatherless male child as someone to be ‘acted upon’ by adult figures. Shyamalan’s film draws from psychoanalytic and social science discursive practices which explicitly position the lone mothered son as effeminate or proto-gay and prostitutes him in the service of masculinity.

In conclusion Vincent Gray’s thin, infantilized and almost ghostly body, his large eyes and his awkward nature distance him from an image of masculinity that cinema is more

³¹⁸ Gaylyn Studlar. ‘Oh Doll Divine: Mary Pickford and The Paedophilic Gaze’ *Camera Obscura*-48 (Volume 16, Number 3), 2001, Pp. 196-227.

³¹⁹ Bram Dijkstra. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of the Feminine in Fin-de-Siecle Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) Pg 360

³²⁰ Martha Vicinus cited in Dijkstra. Pg 360.

familiar with (especially when juxtaposed with the hard boiled body of Bruce Willis).³²¹ Gray is the ‘rabbit boy’ grown into a ‘rabbit man’, a man who is afraid of the dark (a fear shared by Cole) but he is also the symbol of what Cole must be prevented from becoming. According to *The Sixth Sense*, the lone mother is not only the cause of the haunting possibility that her son will manifest homosexual tendencies but she is also too ill equipped to rescue her fatherless child from the horrors that torment him. It is only with the guidance of Dr Crowe that Cole is enabled to distance himself from any suggestion of deviant sexuality. Just as Tyler Durden correlates the existence of God with fatherhood so *The Sixth Sense* offers a heavenly paternal figure to end the very strange phase in Cole’s life.

That lone motherhood and homosexuality are so often seen as ineluctably interwoven should surely be challenged, not only because the discourse is couched in homophobic rhetoric (i.e.; get rid of lone mothers and the numbers of homosexual men will decrease) but also because it creates an environment where in the actual raising of a fatherless male child becomes more complex precisely because lone mothers are forced to make a distinction between ‘normal’ male sexuality and ‘deviant’ male sexuality. Thus lone mothers are coerced into coalescing with homophobic discursive practices that see the raising of a homosexual son as indicative of their inadequate and flawed materialism.

³²¹ Gray’s fragile body is also covered in bruises which mark him as a victim of abuse. I do not highlight this fact as a visual clue to his sexuality but would suggest that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that the rhetoric of the abusive, toxic lone mother is being invoked here.

Chapter Four

'It's still the Casey and Mom Show': The Lone Mother and Her Fatherless Daughter

This thesis has noted that the terms 'child' and 'parent', and more specifically 'lone mother', have become highly powerful discursive tools in debates about social and material relations between individuals, classes, races, ideologies, societies and governments. The potency of these terms is strengthened when the adjectives male/female are placed in front of the word 'child', creating distinctions between the male child and female child which find their basis in Freudian principles of a 'genuine' gender performance. These distinctions serve to create specific discourses about male and female children, about gender power dynamics and about society as a whole. In Chapter Three I suggested that the high visibility of the distinctive lone mother and son dyad within mainstream popular cinema is marked as a register of contemporary concerns about the risk that lone mothers pose to the psychological well-being of their male children. The socio-political and cultural emphasis on the trope of the lone mother/son dyad serves as a testimonial to the primacy of fatherhood in the formation of an active performance of masculinity, as the cornerstone of the family and as the panacea to a troubled society.

This chapter is structured to explore the emergence of the lone mother/daughter paradigm to determine how mainstream cinema employs the paradigm as a filter for anxieties about young femininity. More specifically, I will be analyzing the ways in which mainstream cinema consolidates postfeminist ideologies within lone mother/daughter texts even as they seem prepared to advance a more intimate and sentimental representational agenda in contrast to the lone mother/son dyad. Indeed, films such as *Thirteen* (Catherine

Hardwicke: 2003), *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall: 2001), *A Royal Engagement: The Princess Diaries 2* (Garry Marshall: 2004), *Heartbreakers* (David Mirkin: 2001), *The Perfect Man* (Mark Rosman: 2005), *Aquamarine* (Elizabeth Allen: 2006), *Spanglish* (James L. Brooks: 2004), *Anywhere But Here* (Wayne Wang: 1999), *Where The Heart Is* (Matt Williams: 2000), *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (Amy Heckerling: 2007), *Because I Said So* (Michael Lehman: 2007), *The Upside of Anger* (Mike Binder: 2005), and *PS I Love You* (Richard LaGravenese: 2007), all cast their mother/daughter relationship as significantly different, 'special' and longer lasting than that of the lone mother/son dyad. And yet, despite the apparently sentimental treatment of the lone mother/daughter relationship, this chapter will argue that the set of generational dynamics in place in lone mother/daughter texts serve to reconfigure the relationship between feminine adolescence and feminism in deeply troubling ways which wholly negate the lone mother by casting her as immature, and her belief system as damaging to her 'self' and to her daughter.

The main focus of the chapter is the emergence of the teenage daughter and her lone mother paradigm which is becoming an established family formation in films directed towards a younger female audience. Although in Chapter Three I noted that the thematic concerns of narratives which foreground the lone mother/son paradigm cross the generic spectrum, the lone mother/daughter dyad tends to exist primarily in the domain of the chick flick and romantic comedy; this is the cultural space wherein the requisites of postfeminist femininity are being most vigorously stratified. While this thesis is a composite study of British and American cinema, the paradigm of the lone mother and her daughter is conspicuously absent from British cinema. With the possible exception of Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996) in which a young black British woman is reunited with her white working class mother, British cinema has focused more specifically on the lone mother/son

paradigm.³²² With all these issues in mind, this chapter aims to add to an already growing body of academic work concerned with the complex matrix of girlhood, popular culture, consumerism and politics. Alongside Catherine Driscoll, I suggest that it is highly significant that the adolescent daughter and the lone mother, both of whom have been represented as problematic and rebellious figures by psychoanalysis, should be employed within mainstream cinema to make reparation for their “disturbance of the psycho-social order”.³²³

The first section of this chapter, ‘Daddy’s Little Princess Gets Her Period’ will map out what experts say is ‘wrong’ with the fatherless daughter. This analysis draws from interdisciplinary sources and approaches but also lays a tentative foundation for a more informed understanding of the relationship between film and society. I do so in order to understand why certain discourses are appropriated into cinematic texts whilst others that are central in the social world are largely ignored. The second section of the chapter, ‘There’s a strange woman in your wardrobe’ begins with an analysis of *Mamma Mia*, and highlights the way that films such as *The Princess Diaries* and *Ice Princess* mirror some of the arguments about the generational fissures between women influenced by second wave feminism and their daughters who, as Mary Kehily describes, see feminism as “redundant”. Thus this section will note that established notions about female maturation requiring the daughter to distance herself from the mother are now more concerned with distancing the lone mothered daughter from a mother who is feminist (or at least coded as interpolated by feminism in life-style, career and clothing choices).

³²²The absence of lone mother/daughter narratives from British may be explained by British cinema’s emphasis on social realism which is more concerned with British working class men and masculinity.

³²³ Catherine Driscoll. *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Pg 127

The closing analysis of this chapter explores the theme of the construction of girlhood through the lens of princesshood; a make-believe identity which has been marketed in such a way to appeal to issues of child development, female empowerment and female bonding (i.e.: dressing-up in princess gowns allows girls to fashion themselves on ‘strong and positive’ female role models while princess play develops imagination and offers the mother—who can also invest in a princess dress—and her daughter the ‘unique’ opportunity to bond through their love of all things that glitter) but is in reality a perfect marriage of issues of child development and gender with capitalism. The princess motif is particularly widespread in postfeminist culture primarily because it heightens and intensifies an already expanding commodity culture through what can only be regarded as more traditional female transformation narratives. These traditional narratives offer young girls a very particular point of reference for identification which has been systematically challenged by feminism as limiting, passive and wholly in the service of patriarchy. Indeed the release of a set of films prioritizing the princess typology and the proliferation of princess paraphernalia that we have witnessed over the last two years has resurrected earlier feminist objections to another problematic female motif—the Barbie doll. These concerns are being articulated in academic texts as well as within the popular media. Thus the connection between feminism, commodity culture and princesshood has already been established. This section specifically explores the correlation of princesshood and lone motherhood—a thematic pairing seen in the highly successful *Princess Diaries* franchise and *Ice Princess* to argue that feminism is being used to figure a position of unjust authority and inappropriate maternalism. In this regard I will argue that the lone mother/daughter paradigm is emerging as a central paradigm in the ideological work of postfeminism.

While the main focus of this chapter is to explore contemporary cinematic representations of the lone mother/daughter family as a mirror of the generational conflicts between feminism and post-feminism, the next section briefly maps out what is being said about the construction of girlhood and its effects on the actual lone mothered daughter in the social world. Even as the Oedipal narrative remains central to the ways we understand the role of mother and father in the successful maturation of girl to woman (as it always has done in cinema too—feminist film theory has heavily relied on psychoanalysis in its studies of the mother/daughter relationship)³²⁴, it is worth highlighting Catherine Driscoll’s observation that “girl case studies and theories about girls are the crucial exception to an implied norm of boy-becoming-man”.³²⁵ With this in mind, the following section provides an overview of some of the social, cultural and political debates surrounding the figure of the lone mothered daughter which, while drawing from popular psychoanalysis does not prioritize the approach.

Daddy’s Little Princess Gets Her Period.

Industrial investment in the lone/mother daughter dyad surfaced at the moment when rhetorics of girlhood and girl power were aggressively incorporated into mainstream popular culture. (See Fig. 32.1, 32.2 and 32.3) US television was rife with images of sword wielding heroines slaying all number of evil spirits (*Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* are good examples), female readers were introduced to female characters who learnt to be assertive and find solace in their female friendships (Ann Brashares, *Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*

³²⁴ See also Luce Irigaray’s *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*. Translated by Alison Martin. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), Julia Kristeva. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), and *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond*. (London: Free Association Books, 1994).

³²⁵ Driscoll. Pg 120.

and Jacqueline Wilson's *Secrets* are just two examples of the literary prioritization of girl-power) and girl bands from the mainstream music industry (Spice Girls, All Saints, Atomic Kitten etc) celebrated the profitability of this new found popular political rhetoric.³²⁶



Fig. 32.1: Spice Girls, Fig. 32.2: Charmed, Fig. 32.3: Buffy are key figures in the cultural celebration of girl-power.

Much has been written on the cultural celebration of girl power and girlhood that was taking place in the mainstream; in the underground (neo-punk versions of girl power made manifest in the more politically invested Riot Grrrrl movement), and across cultural and racial borders (female R and B, Rap and Hip-Hop). Feminist scholarship became reinvigorated through its academic engagement with, and interrogation of the ideology of girl power which was simultaneously perceived as both antithetical to feminism and as a different incarnation of feminism more relevant to a younger generation. Thus the 1990s was a decade in which interest in the construction of girlhood began to emerge as a vital area of study across the academic spectrum. Angela McRobbie's seminal account of the construction of British female adolescence in her book *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen* was the vanguard of academic and feminist inflected scholarship that configured girlhood studies as "central and valued in youth studies and the popular domain, aiming to

³²⁶ While girl bands such as The Spice Girls, All Saints, and female rappers Missy Elliott etc were flying the flag for girl power in much more conspicuous and profitable ways just as these groups were waxing lyrical about girl power, the music industry was also rife with songs that included lyrics that proposed 'slapping my bitch up' was an appropriate response to women who were 'acting out'. I would also note that TV narratives extolling sisterhood were narratives which tended to exist within a supernatural/magical domain where points of identification for young women were fantastical rather than realistic.

understand the lives of girls and young women in their own terms and as located in the wider political and historical contexts”.³²⁷

The ideology of girl power signalled what Kimberley Roberts describes as the emergence of the girl as a vital player in the commercial market place where her consumption practices marked her success in ‘effect[ing] change in her universe’.³²⁸ Contemporary girlhood also proved to be an important trope within mainstream cinema where the visibility of more female oriented texts for younger female viewers completed a financially successful fusion of gender, capitalism and popular culture. Indeed, by the late 1990s and early 2000s girls were being prioritized in films which no longer solely focused on the heterosexual romance narrative as the adolescent female’s holy grail (see *The Next Karate Kid*: Christopher Cain, 1996, *The Craft*: Andrew Flemming, 1996 and *Bring It On*: Peyton Reed, 2000 as examples) and were, as Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance acknowledge, becoming “the most sought after demographic of the entertainment industry”.³²⁹ One of the key developments in the representational politics of films that are produced for the younger female audience was the appropriation and incorporation of more feminist inflected themes which, as McRobbie suggests emerged “partly [as] the result of the popularization and of the greater presence of women working within the culture industry.”³³⁰

No longer wedded to the established narrative trajectory that foregrounded the female adolescent only as a precursor to her role as wife and mother, films such as *The Next Karate*

³²⁷ Christine Griffin. ‘Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood’. In Anita Harris (ed). *All About The Girl: Culture, Power and Identity*. New York, London: Routledge, 2004). Pp 29-45

³²⁸ Kimberley Roberts. ‘Pleasures and Problems of the “Angry Girl”’ in Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward. *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002). Pg 219

³²⁹ Gateward and Pomerance. Pg 4

³³⁰ Angela McRobbie. *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000). Pg 183.

Kid or *The Craft* highlighted the need, as Mary Celeste Kearney writes, “for girls to develop confidence, assertiveness, apart from boys and through same sex relationships”.³³¹ The move to centralize girls as active agents in the formation of their own identity displaced some of the more traditional narratives about the formation of a girl’s psychological development from Freudian principles of socialization for the formation of correct gender identity. Classical psychoanalytical accounts hold that girls were only able to construct their heterosexual sexual identity through a close relationship to their father or a symbolic patriarch reinforcing the necessity of nuclear family formation and simultaneously reifying the patriarchal order. While the shift from a psycho-social framework dispelled some of the ways in which girlhood was being cast, contemporary discourses of girlhood were now “inextricably tied to and mediated through the representations of commodity consumption”.³³² This discourse is wholly bound up in notions of the ‘can-do’ and ‘at-risk’ girl—terms I borrow from Harris—gender binaries which focus more specifically on consumption practices and cultural capital while at their core still attesting to the primacy of patriarchy because the trajectory of a ‘can-do’ girl is that of her future as a ‘can-do-mother’.

Concerns about the production, construction and mediation of adolescent femininity through the social, political and cultural reliance on consumption practices have been attended to by feminist scholars who note that the reliance on consumption as a form of female empowerment is exclusionary in that it marginalizes those who do not possess capital. If indeed there has been a shift to a more liberated and empowered configuration of girlhood (and I would argue that there has not, as most of these texts still effect a rhetorical alignment with patriarchal constructions of girlhood), how has the construction of girlhood through themes and practices of consumption impacted on the lone mothered daughter’s production of

³³¹ Mary Celeste Kearney. ‘Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary US Cinema. In *Pomerance and Gateward*. Pg 128.

³³² Gayle Wald. ‘Clueless in The Neo-Colonial World Order’ in *Pomerance and Gateward*. Pg 104.

her identity given that very few lone mothers are financially viable? Kathleen Rowe Karlyn makes clear the connection between heightened consumerism in the formation of female identity and the impact this has on the lives of lone mothers and their daughter in her highly astute and rigorous essay 'Film as Cultural Antidote: *Thirteen*, and The Maternal Melodrama'. But Karlyn ignores the ways in which poverty is being invoked to negotiate the lone mother's maternalism. Indeed, I would suggest that Catherine Hardwicke's film would not have so successful had it not been located in a working class milieu. The outrageous behaviour of the lone mothered daughter Tracy (Rachel Evans Wood) can only be sanctioned in a film that codes its family as poor and the lone mother as having some form of mental health/addiction problems. With this in mind, I cannot agree with Karlyn's claim that the film "neither sentimentalizes nor demonizes" the lone mother. While the film's narrative does not emphasize lone motherhood as the 'issue' the fact that she is coded as a recovering addict and is poor immediately informs her maternalism. Despite Karlyn's analysis of the ways that girlhood and female citizenship are directly correlated with cultural capital within *Thirteen*, scant attention is being paid to the impact of this process on the lone mother and her daughter. These are serious questions to raise because media attention is beginning to attend to the 'problem' of the lone mothered daughter in highly pernicious ways which negotiate the viability of the lone mother and securely 'fix' her daughter's identification process back within a patriarchal framework .

Cultural interest in the 'problematic' female adolescent became a matter for renewed public debate after the publication of clinical psychologist Mary Pipher's bestselling book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* in which she discusses the social and

cultural pressures faced by young women in contemporary society.³³³ Pipher's work caused great cultural excitement and inspired screenwriter Tina Fey, director Mark Waters and Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees and Wannabees* to combine efforts in producing the highly successful teen movie, *Mean Girls* (2004).³³⁴ The success of the film and the status accorded to Pipher's book laid the foundation for investment in popular psychoanalytic studies of what was now being seen as a new and troubling trend of anti-social behaviour from young women.³³⁵ Pipher's observations were taken up by other cultural observers who centralized the theme of 'bad girls' central in their critiques of contemporary femininity. While these texts are not explicitly pointing to fatherlessness as the main cause of girls bad behaviour (as they would most definitely do when discussing boyhood) they do demonstrate what Meda Chesney Lind and Katherine Irwin note, as the prioritization of certain bodies within the debates—bodies which show the visual markers of race and class.³³⁶ Described by media and cultural commentators as girls who come from dysfunctional families (the default setting for lone mothered households) the studies implicitly correlate fatherlessness with the emergence of a particular type of female unruliness which is wholly predicated on notions of class and race. Issues of race and class have been raised throughout this thesis, especially in Chapter Two but it is worth reiterating the fact that while the African American lone mother and the white British working class lone mothered household are featured as the primary protagonists in political, social, and cultural debates about unruly female adolescence these 'difficult' figures are conspicuously absent from cinema's lone mother/daughter narratives. Their absence is indicative of an elision of particular forms of femininity from the cinema

³³³ Mary Pipher. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. (New York: Ballantine Books Inc, re-issue edition, 1995).

³³⁴ Rosalind Wiseman. *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence*. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).

³³⁵ James Gabarino. *See Jane Hit: Why Girls are Growing More Violent and What We Can Do About It* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006) Rachel Simmons. *Odd Girl Out: the Hidden Cult of Aggression in Girls*. (Harcourt Inc: Florida,2002), Sara Shandler. *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search For Self*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 1999)

³³⁶ Meda Chesney Lind and Katherine Irwin. *Bad Girls: gender, violence and hype*. (New York, London: Routledge, 2008).

screen—images of femininity (poor and black) which do not fit with the specificities of white middle-class postfeminist femininity and bodies which, because of poverty and skin colour, are immediately correlated with the ‘at-risk’ girl paradigm.

While it is important to note, as Lind and Irwin do, that the construction of girlhood is fluid in that the axiom girlhood is shaped and re-shaped according to the historical and the political, ‘proper’ femininity is always constructed through the binary of good and bad girls.³³⁷ These binary definitions have been based primarily on female adolescent sexuality functioning as discursive reinforcement of the primacy of patriarchy (as well as class and race based prejudices). Anita Harris argues that while these established binaries maintain a hierarchy of girlhood, she argues that discourses of ‘good’ female citizenship and the rhetoric of ‘can-do’ girls and ‘at-risk’ girls have emerged as key features in the construction of contemporary girlhood.³³⁸ ‘Can-do’ and ‘at-risk’ paradigms serve the same purpose as the good/bad paradigm by creating a divisive discursive practice which elevates and celebrates one form of adolescent female citizenship over an ‘other’. Primarily concerned with the ways in which the ‘can-do’ girl has been appropriated by politicians as symbolic of good citizenship, Harris explores how this term affects girls who do not or are unable to belong to this elite grouping. And, yet while Harris’s account is highly perceptive and important in challenging the prioritization of consumer capitalism she does not attend to the lone mother/daughter family in any detail. Is this because the lone mothered daughter is ‘naturally’ cast as an ‘at-risk’ girl because of her fatherless status? This is not to say that Harris ‘should’ incorporate analysis of the lone mother/daughter paradigm within her work; in isolating one element for critical analysis others are inevitably neglected. However, despite the absence of attention paid to the figure of the lone mothered daughter, Harris’

³³⁷ Ibid. Pg 87

³³⁸ Anita Harris. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*. (New York, London: Routledge, 2004). Pg 29

analysis is useful in considering cultural conceptualizations of the lone mother and her daughter even though she does not make that connection explicit.

In light of the documented shift towards the production of selfhood through the lens of consumerism, and the displacement of the primacy of psychoanalysis and paternalism in the construction of femininity, it comes as some surprise that in 2007 a report from the highly regarded academic journal *The New Scientist* garnered attention as it did. Jay Belsky's article posed the question "Why are girls growing up so fast?" and offered scientific proof that early menstruation in girls (early in comparison to previous generations by approximately 5-6 months) is directly correlated to family structure.³³⁹ Put more simply, a daughter raised without a father is, as Belsky asserts, more likely to begin her periods at a younger age than her contemporaries from intact families. Belsky's research into the 'problem' of girls' maturing earlier takes its place among many other studies which have attempted to explain why girls are experiencing the onset of their periods from an earlier age.³⁴⁰

That the earlier onset of menstruation is a cause for concern and area for academic study should tell us something about contemporary anxieties about the construction of girlhood and about the perception of female reproductive capability—issues I return to later in this section. Nonetheless, at first glance Belsky's 'empirical' study might bear some credence; most women are aware that pheromones play a role in changes to women's menstrual cycles often synchronizing them with other women who spend extended periods of time together. As such I suggest it would not take too much of a leap of imagination to concur that similar hormonally induced changes might take place in the bodies of young girls

³³⁹ Jay Belsky. "Why Are Girls Growing Up So Fast?" www.newscientist.com 14/02/07

³⁴⁰ Studies that have considered how the food industry's use of hormones in the production of cheap foods has impacted on female physical development to studies arguing that the wider availability of nutritious foods has been the primary cause of early menarche.

who are raised in female headed households. Yet for Belsky, this logic is that leap too far. In fact any mention of a hormonal causation of the early onset of menarche being linked to a biological and physiological bond between women, and more specifically between mothers and daughters in father absent households, is entirely absent from his research. Instead, and perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, Belsky's 'psycho-social acceleration theory' suggests that girls who experience family stress physically mature at an earlier age. And according to Belsky the lone mothered family is *the* environment where stress is at its most heightened.

Belsky reasons that when a girl grows up in "a socially harsh environment" she will fare better if she "adopts an accelerated reproductive strategy".³⁴¹ Belsky seems to be suggesting that the psychological evolution of early reproduction can function as a 'positive escape route' from the unsuitable environment of a lone mothered home—an argument that would surely be resisted by politicians, social scientists, and religious organizations who perceive early female maturation and reproduction as symbolic of the downfall of contemporary society. But Belsky's account is actually nothing more than a wholehearted endorsement of these discursive practices. In noting that 'accelerated reproductive strategies' result in the early onset of puberty and menarche and correlating these to early pregnancy and short term relationships, Belsky reasserts discourses which always see the fatherless daughter as a risk of being enmeshed in a detrimental life cycle which has been fully instigated by her lone mother.

But the early maturation of the lone mothered daughter has deeper repercussions still. Belsky asserts that the earlier onset of menarche for the fatherless daughter results in an increased likelihood that "she will suffer depression and breast cancer, indulge in substance

³⁴¹ Ibid

abuse or risky sexual behaviour and dissatisfaction with her body image”.³⁴² The risks inherent in raising a daughter without a father as Belsky highlights focus on the actual female body as the site of crisis. Belsky imagines early menarche as the destiny of the detrimental life cycle that has been instigated by the lone mother as he also does with notions of adolescent female desire, discontent and disease. In so doing he disavows any acknowledgment of the agency of the female adolescent; she is only ever the result of her fatherlessness, never as an active agent in forming her own identity. Furthermore by blaming the lone mother as the primary reason for early puberty, for breast cancer, for body image problems, alcoholism, drug abuse and so on, Belsky denies the actual social and political realities of young women’s lives in a period of time where as Harris observes, “education, employment, health and safety are all precarious experiences of girls who bear the full impact of economic rationalism, new security concerns and the dismantling of welfare”.³⁴³ More troubling though is the shift of emphasis from the role of the father as the teacher and guarantor of the correct performance of femininity, to a discourse in which the father has been accorded some form of omnipotent power in regulating biological and physiological changes in the body of his young daughter.

The relevancy of Belsky’s work to this chapter as a whole is made clear in the ways in which the rhetoric he employs wholly articulates cultural, medical, social, and political discursive practices that surround the image of the lone mothered daughter. As is the case with much critical engagement with the subject of the fatherless daughter, Belsky’s article pathologizes the lone mothered daughter in discourses which position her reproductive capacity as central to her identity. But the immediate correlation and persistent articulation

³⁴² Ibid

³⁴³ Anita Harris. Pg xvii. See also Lind and Irwin’s for an account of the way in which new security matters have impacted on girlhood. Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America*. (London: Atlantic, 2008) also foregrounds analysis of the consequences of 9/11 on girls and women.

of issues of sexuality and female reproduction also underscores why it is that when we imagine a lone mothered daughter we tend to conjure up images of an adolescent rather than a small female child. Indeed to speak of a lone mothered daughter almost always invokes an image of a single woman who sees herself as her daughter's best friend but also her sexual rival; a woman who carries the loss of her youth in the way she dresses herself or a woman who lacks education, moral authority and behaves recklessly. Her daughter is a teenager; a young woman who has to negotiate a landscape of sexual competition, or a young woman who has learnt to play her role in the detrimental life-cycle of promiscuity, early out-of-wedlock pregnancy, little education and petty crime because she has been denied the opportunity to be what Sophie Freud calls, her father's "admiring disciple and admiring angel".³⁴⁴

In sharp contrast to the lone mother/son formation discussed in the previous chapter, the lone mother/daughter paradigm is seldom imagined as one that features a pre-pubescent daughter.³⁴⁵ The lack of attention paid to the younger lone mothered daughter has much to do with the low social value and agency (outside the arena of consumption of course where young female-tweens are now a viable and profitable customer base) that young girls have in contemporary culture. The cultural, social and political primacy of masculinity in debates about the effects of lone motherhood on children's development is also a highly significant factor in the marginalization of pre-pubescent girls, a point reiterated by Chesney-Lind and

³⁴⁴ Sophie Freud in Rose Melino Perkins, 'The Father/Daughter Relationship: familial interactions that impact a daughter's style of life'. College Student Journal, Dec 2001. <http://findarticles.com>. Pg 1

³⁴⁵ That is of course unless she is blonde, at risk of her mother's aberrant maternalism and in dire need of being rescued (see *Sherry Baby* and *Gone Baby Gone*). Such girls are the subject of intense and unrelenting media interest when they go missing and protracted quests for justice when murdered. The cultural imagining of the angelic, blonde and significantly vulnerable young fatherless daughter is not neutral rather it reflects an historical investment in the images of innocent, fairy-like childhood (often poverty ridden or dying) found in art and literature since the Age of Enlightenment. The construction of this fragile child served to symbolize the harsh realities of industrialization and poverty—in mainstream cinema she functions to render the mother as monstrously un-maternal for neglecting such a beautiful child who will be denied the opportunity to fulfill her 'naturally given' potential.

Irwin when they note “little research exists on the daughter’s relationship with parents at this age compared with sons”.³⁴⁶

The absence of the younger fatherless daughter from our cultural, social and political imagination is indicative of the way in which she is identified as lacking a specific role. In Freud’s world she is both “difficult and conservative” and remains attached to her mother for a much longer period of time than her male counterpart; shadowing her mother and learning the prescripts of her gender through forms of role-play.³⁴⁷ As such she is rendered almost mute; a ghostly figure that is less significant than her male sibling whose identity is predicated on the importance of his relationship with his mother which he is at once dependent on, and distanced from her. While the pre-pubescent daughter resides in the shadows, her older sister plays a much more significant role, for when she begins the transition from girl to woman she also begins the transition to mother. As such her significance is not, as Driscoll would argue, that she signals progression to a “mature, coherent, independent subject”,³⁴⁸ but rather she is being re-produced and constructed as the necessary foundation for “biologically complementary heterosexual families”.³⁴⁹ The high visibility of the adolescent daughter within the political, cultural and social world is not because she is an independent subject with her own wishes and desires; rather she is affirmed only by her potential as a future mother.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Lind and Irwin. Pg 75

³⁴⁷ Freud cited in Lind and Irwin. Pg 119

³⁴⁸ Driscoll. Pg 75

³⁴⁹ Ibid. Pg 107

³⁵⁰ In saying this I am of course aware of studies noting that young women are more invested in education and career prospects than their potential role as mother. However, while evidence demonstrates such, the backdrop of post-feminism’s prioritization of motherhood creates conflicts for young women who see motherhood as the most important factor in their performance of femininity while also attempting to follow a script of financial independence and career success.

Thus concerns about young womanhood and female citizenship which have come to the centre of the political stage over the last ten years have been primarily articulated in debates about reproduction, female sexuality and maternalism. These discourses are rehearsed in newspapers and television documentaries such as *Pramface* (Channel 4:13th March 2008), *Kizzy: Mum at 14*, (BBC3: 4th July 2008), *Teen High Mum* (ITV1: 11th Dec 2008), *Help I'm a Teen Mum* (ITV 1: 30th July 2007), *18 Pregnant Schoolgirls* (BBC 3: 16th April 2009). In fact, as Lind and Irwin note, most approaches to girlhood, whether in the media or academia, politics or education, health or economic policy making “nearly exclusively focus on girls’ sexuality and out of wedlock births”.³⁵¹ In Britain we witnessed a media led panic centred on Julie Atkins, a single mother of three teenage daughters all of whom were pregnant before the age of eighteen. Reports on the Aitkin’s case were bound up in class prejudices and she quickly came to represent all that was wrong with British culture.

³⁵² In the words of Melanie Philips, journalist for British newspaper *The Daily Mail* and magazine *Spectator*, the so-called Atkins’ ‘baby-making factory’ “encapsulate[d] the moral degradation that is bringing increasing sections of our society to its knees”.³⁵³ According to media pundits, social commentators and internet respondents alike, Mrs Aitkins, a twice divorced woman who had all three of her children out of wedlock “had no concept of the idea of what the maternal role involves”.³⁵⁴ More significantly the story of this single mother whose fatherless daughters were now unmarried mothers themselves signalled to cultural observers that the “most important reason for her daughter’s plight is the values they have imbibed from their mother”.³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Compare the media coverage of Alfie Patteson who it was alleged fathered a child at the age of 13. While neither of the teenage parents came from a lone mothered home the focus on Patteson’s desire to be a good father functioned to highlight a divide between the young teenage boy and the ‘promiscuous’ and immoral behaviour of the 15 year old mother of their child.

³⁵³ Melanie Philips. ‘The Two Faces of Britain’. *The Daily Mail*. May 25th 2005

³⁵⁴ Ibid

³⁵⁵ Ibid

Media coverage of the alleged pregnancy pact made by 18 teenagers in Gloucestershire, Massachusetts similarly created international concern about the ‘intentionality’ of adolescent females to become unmarried mothers. The story raised issues, among others, about the flagship abstinence only policies of the Bush administration and the effects of poverty and lack of resources for young people of Massachusetts. The story also initiated debates about the effects of popular culture, specifically the alleged romanticization of unmarried pregnancy in films such as *Juno* (Jason Reitman: 2007) and *Knocked Up* (even as teenage pregnancy remains virtually taboo in mainstream cinema). In addition, the media’s obsession with celebrity unwed motherhood of stars such as Britney Spears younger sister Jamie Lynn Spears and later Bristol Palin, came under criticism for glamorizing teenage lone motherhood. Although these discourses were being articulated from within a broader socio-political framework than usual, internet respondents to articles covering the Massachusetts story were more concerned to find out “whether the girls’ mothers were young single mothers themselves”.³⁵⁶ This should not come as a surprise since promiscuity and pregnancy are foregrounded as classic outcomes of fatherlessness for lone mothered daughters.

Numerous studies have argued that a women’s capacity for a mutually loving and sexually fulfilling relationship is directly correlated to her relationship with her father (studies that have ‘shown’ that women raised in female headed households are less able to orgasm than those raised in the presence of a father). According to accepted wisdoms, while the mother’s task to show her daughter how to behave as a woman it is the role of the father to teach his daughter how to become a woman. Without such guidance, fatherless daughters run the risk of being masculinised, or becoming highly promiscuous because she has not formed

³⁵⁶ ‘Gloucestershire, Massachusetts Discovers Teenage Pregnancy Pact’ Feb 2009. www.massmic.org. 30/10/2009

a healthy opinion of herself as a woman.³⁵⁷ Thus one of the most significant discourses centralized in public articulations of father hunger rhetoric has been concerned with the influence of the father-figure in his daughter's psycho-sexual development. Indeed, statistics about teenage unwed pregnancy (US 52 per 1000 and 32 per 1000 in UK)³⁵⁸ regularly surface in media panics which point to unwed teenage pregnancy as the result of a decline in female morality. These statistics are also appropriated by anti-feminist cultural observers who use anti-backlash rhetoric to reinforce traditional gendered socialization processes at the same time as framing feminist theories of independence, female sexuality, and autonomy as the antithesis of "women's modes of thinking and functioning".³⁵⁹ Mindful then of the way in which the pregnant teenage lone mothered daughter is employed within popular media as a 'recruiter of young women to good-girl behaviour' I want to point out how rarely the trope of the teenage lone mother is employed within mainstream cinema while she is so visible within the social world.

Ann De Varney reasons that "The depiction of rebellion and burgeoning sexuality has been a perennial problem for Hollywood, especially when it comes to presenting female adolescents, since representing the tension between innocence and sexuality is fraught with moral overtones in US society".³⁶⁰ Of course, *Juno* has recently highlighted (and some have argued, romanticized) the 'problems' of teenage pregnancy. Interestingly the film did not locate the lone mothered family as the primary site of aberrant female sexuality, although it did mediate more middle-class sensibilities by locating the narrative within a more working

³⁵⁷ This discourse is seldom articulated within contemporary debates about fatherlessness and femininity but one which remains a subtext in discourses about the tom-girl although such labeling has become less frequently referenced since the 'tom-girl' aesthetic was appropriated by the fashion industry.

³⁵⁸ Note that the majority of unwed teenagers are over the age of consent in Britain. The average age for teen pregnancy is 18 although cultural emphasis on 14 year old unwed mothers would suggest this is not the case.

³⁵⁹ Margo Maine. *Father Hunger: Fathers, Daughters and Food*. (Carlsbad, CA: Gurze Books, 2003). Pg 56

³⁶⁰ Ann De Vaney. 'Pretty in Pink? John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy's Girl in Homes and Schools', *Pomernace and Gateward*. Pg 203

class family environment. *Juno* also strongly adhered to Christian and right-wing inflected ideologies through its rejection and criticism of abortion and cast the two central protagonists as significantly different from the stereotypical images of American youth.³⁶¹

However, for the most part, the cinematic pregnant teenager is consigned to the television screens or film archives of the 1980s. Sarah Kliff argues that Hollywood is omitting the teenage lone mother paradigm from contemporary films for fear of causing “political controversy over abstinence education”.³⁶² While Kliff argues that the choice not to present the unwed teen mother is motivated by fear of causing offence, I would argue that the reification of white middle-class sensibilities within the ideologies of postfeminism, neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and the culture industries has much to do with the invisibility of teenage pregnancy which is always coded as the ‘problem’ of the under-class and of those marked by race. Cinematic teenage pregnancy would have to tell the stories of those who are visually marked by difference, the poor and the racialized; two demographics that are persistently excluded from the social world and the cultural world through their inability to partake fully in commodity capitalism. If then, as I suggest, the most prominent discourse about lone mothered daughters is seldom articulated in the world of film, the following section is structured to explore cinema’s lone mother/daughter paradigm to explore the prominence of the coupling within recent mainstream films. In so doing, I will suggest that the lone mother and her daughter have emerged as a central partnership in the task of shoring up postfeminist ideologies.

³⁶¹ Although the non-cool, nerd, and geek are emerging as stereotypes in their own right.

³⁶² Sarah Kliff. ‘Teenage Pregnancy: Hollywood Style’. July 23rd 2008. www.newsweek.com (Sourced 26/08/08)

Just Grow Up! : The lone mother and her post-feminist daughter

As I note in Chapters Two and Three, different generational dynamics evident in lone mother/son narratives serve to foreground particular discursive practices. The pre-pubescent white lone mothered son embodies social anxieties about homosexuality while films which prioritize the black lone mothered son cast him as older, angry, irresponsible and more often than not, hyper-violent. Generational dynamics foregrounded in the lone mother/daughter dyad highlight what Rosi Bradotti might describe as the differences ‘within’ women.³⁶³ Put more simply, age serves to differentiate women from other women; a delineation which Catherine Driscoll argues has had a profound effect on the politics of feminism as exclusory for adolescent females. Arguing that feminism is both reliant upon the adolescent female, in that feminism is always looking towards what the next generation of women might become, while simultaneously separating itself from female adolescence in feminist discourses of “maturity, autonomy and individuality”, Driscoll asserts that girls have always been positioned as “embodying what must be given up in order to become feminists”.³⁶⁴ Driscoll’s book maps a historical account of the tensions between adolescent females and feminists, pointing to specific moments wherein historical challenges to patriarchy had a complex impact on the relationship between feminism and younger women at each historical juncture. Likening the debates to those which proliferate now around the ideologies of postfeminism, Driscoll argues that debates about newly emerging sexual behaviours of adolescent females as a direct gain of feminism have long been in existence and have often been contentious. Feminism she writes, was a renunciation of a hedonistic lifestyle, an ‘awakening’ to the machinations of patriarchy, and a recognition and rebuttal of sexualized gender roles, not a

³⁶³ Rosi Bradotti cited in Driscoll. Pg 131

³⁶⁴ Ibid. Pg 132

set of discourses which encouraged and celebrated young women's veiled acquiescence to the sexualization and exploitation of female subjects through the rhetoric of female liberation.³⁶⁵

Driscoll's argument is highly salient to this thesis for two reasons; firstly because she highlights contemporary debates about postfeminism and feminism as a generational conflict established within a historical trajectory, and secondly because, as I will argue, mainstream cinema has reversed the established generational dynamic she describes by implicitly casting the lone mother as a feminist whose politics have rendered her in need of rehabilitation, re-education and care from her postfeminist daughter whose own social concerns at once distance her from her mother's 'damaging' politics and liberate her mother in the process.³⁶⁶ Thus, this chapter is concerned with the ways in which mainstream cinema is currently negotiating the lone mother character in a discourse which infantilizes her in its inscription of feminism as the politics of childish and immature women—a belief system that women must relinquish in order to 'grow up' to be more like their postfeminist daughters. In *P.S I Love You* the older lone mother of a newly widowed daughter relinquishes her distrust of and anger towards men after being abandoned by her husband and finds love in the guise of the father of her daughter's new boyfriend. *The Upside of Anger* offers a bizarre narratological approach to the 'problem' of the lone mother in a film wherein the upper middle class mother of four teenage daughters, TerryAnn Wolfmeyer (Joan Allen) becomes angry and bitter after learning that her husband has abandoned his family to travel to Sweden with his secretary. TerryAnn is coded as a negligent mother (although her negligence is cast through the lens of middle-class sensibilities which means that she does not pose any real threat to her children)

³⁶⁵ Ibid. Pg 131

³⁶⁶ In noting that the ontology of tension between feminism and generational appropriation and/or repudiation of feminist politics I am in no way undermining contemporary debates as just an extension of already established discourses. I would argue that the media's highly conspicuous uptake and appropriation of postfeminism has had a significant impact on the relationship between feminism and adolescent females thus marking this particular political and cultural moment as more highly invested in highlighting the differences between generational conceptualizations of postfeminism in extremely divisive ways.

enmeshed in the horror of abandonment. Her relationship with her daughters, who have taken on the maternal role and whose own emotional pain is taking its toll is full of tension. Indeed thirteen year-old Popeye played by Rachel Evan Woods is maturing too quickly (much like her character in the infamous lone mother/daughter film *Thirteen*). By coding the fatherless teenage daughter as mature, films such as *The Upside of Anger* and *Thirteen* are in strict accordance with popular psycho-social research that laments the loss of female innocence in lone mother-headed households. TerryAnn begins to recognize that the bond between her and her daughters is dangerously conflicted and takes solace in alcohol, becoming the drinking buddy of one time baseball player Denny Davis (Kevin Costner), who having retired from sport now finds himself obsolete and lonely.

The film continues with a romance plot; Denny falls in love with Terry but she is too angry to invest in an intimate relationship with him. As her daughters graduate, leave home for college and marry they try desperately to unite Terry and Denny who, while not primarily coded as the symbolic patriarch, is cast as the 'right' person to support their mother in their absence. In what can only be described as one of the more recent 'out of the ordinary' plot twists, TerryAnn discovers that her husband did not abandon her, but rather he lay dead at the bottom of the family's very substantial garden. However uncanny the ending to this film most certainly appears to be, it is precisely the discovery of TerryAnn's dead husband's body that mediates our sympathy for the film's lone mother. *The Upside of Anger* draws the conclusion that TerryAnn all too quickly and falsely concluded that her husband's absence was due to his aberrant masculinity. In so doing, the film reiterates men's post-feminist angst about the damaging effect of angry (default for feminist) women on masculinity. While the film never codes Terry as a wholly likeable character, we could empathize with her anguish;

the twist at the end replaces empathy with scrutiny and re-positions the father as the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Both *PS I Love You* and *The Upside of Anger* are concerned to elicit sympathy for a lone mother's experience of abandonment by her husband but both films also encourage us to re-evaluate the position of the lone mother as victim of her husband's behaviour by coding the lone mother as self-obsessed as in *The Upside of Anger* and emotionally distant as in *PS I Love You*.. The task for the daughters of these lone mothers is to negotiate the minefield of their mother's psychology in order to free them from the burden of care and to enhance their own chances for intimate heterosexual relations which have been jeopardized by their lone mother's problems. In so doing the films offer the promise of a marriage and maintains contemporary cinema's reliance on the wedding as a display of family capital and completeness.

The use of the daughter to teach her lone mother to relinquish her anger and distrust of men is a thematic concern readily recognizable in Michael Lehmann's 2007 film *Because I Said So*. Drawing from, or perhaps more precisely, relying on her star persona in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* Diane Keaton plays a highly neurotic and controlling lone mother of her three grown daughters, Mae (Piper Perabo), Milly (Mandy Moore) and Mandy (Lauren Graham). (See Fig. 33)



Fig. 33: Milly and her sisters confront their mother's childish behavior.

Daphne is anxious that her youngest daughter Milly is choosing the 'wrong' sort of men to date and is determined that her daughter will not follow in her mother's footsteps. That failure pictured here as being an affluent woman with a designer wardrobe, owning a beautiful beach side home, and the mother of three healthy, beautiful and successful grown daughters is indicative of the ambivalent and pernicious nature of postfeminism which ignores the disenfranchisement of many lone mothers whose 'failure' is ineluctably tied to their lack of financial capital. Furthermore, that Daphne's very obvious successes are negotiated and rendered as invalid because of her failed relationship demonstrates the emphasis placed on romance. Despite the fact Daphne is seen 'having it all', *Because I Said So* goes to great pains to assure us that she is still inadequate and not quite complete. Nevertheless, Daphne takes it upon herself to play matchmaker for her youngest daughter and, of course, chooses a man who is wholly unsuitable. Her wrong choice speaks to the film's disavowal of the 'mother knows best, because I said so' narrative theme as well as reiterating traditional themes of maternal betrayal and over-bearance. That Daphne has to learn to relinquish her controlling behavior and embrace the advances of the father of her daughter's love interest reinforces ongoing thematic concerns that the lone mother has to be taught by her older daughters to turn away from the past and look towards a romantic future.

Because I Said So, *P.S I Love You* and *The Upside of Anger* make textual gestures to support the lone mother character; indeed the scene in which Daphne asks Milly what an orgasm feels like is one of the most sympathetic articulations of the bond between mother and daughter as well as a reference to feminist inflected discourses about female sexuality. (See Fig. 34)



Fig. 34: Milly teaches Daphne about sex (*Because I Said So*)

Furthermore, that Joe (Stephen Collins)—Daphne’s new love interest—makes clear his respect for women who raise their children alone (although one might suspect that he might not have been so respectful if his son, Johnny (Gabriel Macht)—Milly’s love interest—was not a single father himself) demonstrates a certain alignment with issues of concern to lone mothers.³⁶⁷ Notwithstanding the ways in which these films employ the typology of the lone mother character to speak to established ideologies about overbearing, emotionally distant or selfish, negligent maternalism, as well as foregrounding discourses that correlate female anger with feminism and victimhood with masculinity, these texts are distinctly different from the lone mother/son paradigm featured in Chapter Three because the daughters are older than the pre-pubescent male child of say, *Sixth Sense*, but more importantly the lone mother plays a pivotal role within the narrative. Note how lone mother Lynn Sear is rendered almost invisible in *The Sixth Sense* once the film has introduced the new father

³⁶⁷ Although, it has to be noted that *Because I Said So* mediates its empathetic position somewhat in Daphne’s response to Joe when she tells him raising children alone was not really that difficult (without adding because the money I have and house I live in made raising children as a single mother a lot easier than it is for many others).

figure; Arlene McKinney's (Helen Hunt) experience of domestic violence and poverty are depicted as less important and significant than the trauma of the abuse suffered by the surrogate father figure introduced into the lone mothered home in *Pay It Forward*, and Fiona's (Toni Collette) maternal role and agency is challenged and superseded by Will (Hugh Grant) in *About A Boy*. In fact, for the most part, films such as *Because I Said So*, and tween film *Aquamarine* seldom mention the father figure while *Ice Princess* a film which emerged on the back of the success of the *Princess Diaries* franchise omits to mention the father figure throughout the entire narrative. Given the valorization of the father figure (within and without cinema) that has functioned as a response to the alleged threat to patriarchy that Second Wave feminists posed in their demand for gender equality, the wholesale absence of the father figure in lone mother/daughter narratives is surely worth noting.

Even as films such as *PS I Love You*, *The Upside of Anger* and *The Perfect Man* are concerned with finding the 'right' man for the film's lone mother, the introduction of the love/romance interest seldom comes early in the film and is, more often featured in the closing scene. These films are not concerned with finding a father figure for the daughter and there is no urgency to do so because in the aforementioned films the daughters are adults or near adulthood. Rather, they attempt to find a partner for the lone mother so that she might be successfully paired with a man who will serve to liberate the daughters from their duty of care and more specifically, to enhance the daughter's romantic and marital prospect which are somehow diminished by their mother's problems.

That these films rely on the male figure to rescue the lone mother from the 'horror' of singlehood mirrors the political, cultural and social abhorrence of the single woman—a state of being which women are urged to relinquish for their own sake but also for the sake of

masculinity. Indeed research focusing on the ‘health’ effects of being single on men and women have correlated single manhood with depression, an increase in the risk of suicide, higher possibility of contracting cancer and falling victim to heart attacks and highlight the vulnerable financial position women might find themselves in if they remain unmarried.³⁶⁸ These narratives of poor health for single men and financial ruin for single women serve to coalesce with one of the foundations of post-feminist ideology that Diane Negra, has deemed the “pathologization of single women amidst intense neoconservative pressures to define women’s lives in terms of marriage and domesticity”.³⁶⁹ The pairing of the lone mother with a new love interest in *Because I Said So* relieves the lone mothered daughter from her duty of care that is now passed on to a man because supposedly a single woman is deemed unfit to take care of herself. The relationship between Daphne and Joe also provides the catalyst for the transformation of the daughter who must, in Freud’s mind, form her ‘self’ at a distance from and oftentimes in opposition to her mother.³⁷⁰

According to western psychoanalysis, the successful construction of mature femininity requires the daughter to position herself simultaneously in accordance with and at a distance from her mother in order to maintain a viable and healthy relationship with her ‘self’ and with her mother. This push and pull dichotomy emerges as the key conflict in texts such as *Because I Said So*, as a way of advancing the story to the point of resolution. And yet, even though the films focus on the tension between lone mother and daughter they do not position the status of the mother as a lone parent as the primary reason for conflict. In *Ice*

³⁶⁸ These studies have been challenged with other research that highlights the benefits to single women’s mental and physical health but these are seldom articulated in a post-feminist climate which thrives on the valorization of family and traditionalist female roles within family structures.

³⁶⁹ Diane Negra. ‘Quality Postfeminism? : Sex and The Single Girl on HBO’. *Genders*, Issue 39, 2004.

³⁷⁰ A well realized reality and fear that is becoming central in the lives of women who assume the role of care-taker as governments, against a neo-liberal backdrop, cut welfare, hospital and health cover becomes punitively expensive and the recent failure of the global economy threatens the pension schemes of many thousands of people and has disproportionately impacted on the economic status of lone mothers.

Princess the lone mother and teenage daughter fight about Casey's choice to relinquish her education for a chance to take part in an ice-skating competition. During a heated argument in which the lone mother is clearly threatened by and jealous of her daughter's relationship with the ice-skating coach (another lone mother played by *Sex in The City* star Kim Cattrall), Casey assures her mother that she is grateful for all her mother has done for her: - "You have given me everything—this is still the Casey and Mom show". The newly crowned Princess Mia (Ann Hathaway) lone mothered daughter from *The Princess Dairies* films makes clear in her coronation speech the respect and love she has for her mother and thanks her for raising her single-handedly (a nice gesture but one that is only voiced when the mother is not in the room to hear it), and Daphne's new love interest finds his way into her heart by endorsing her maternal skills and voicing his recognition of the difficulties faced by lone mothers. That these films make obvious the hardships and sacrifices that lone mothers make continue to render their families as somehow different and more distinctly difficult to manage than the traditional family unit.

By coding the lone mother as a sympathetic character and taking pains not to overly/ overtly scrutinize her maternalism, it could be argued that Hollywood is tentatively challenging the status quo that requires that lone motherhood be perceived as ineffective, in need of cultural management and at worst, highly dangerous. But it is also important to remember that Hollywood is not in the business of alienating its audience. As such I would suggest that some of the concessions given in the film are profit driven because these films are predominantly marketed to an audience who will variously be constituted of lone mothers and their daughters. Rather it is the behavior and personality of the lone mother; her neurosis, her life-style choices, her status as older single woman, her inability to cast away anger and bitterness and her failure to listen to men that renders her problematic. And it falls

to the lone mothered daughter to take on the responsibility of reconstructing and guiding her mother back on to the path of mature femininity and acceptable maternalism. (See Fig. 35)



Fig. 35: Holly guides her mother back to womanhood. (*P.S I Love You*)

In so doing, films such as *Because I Said So*, *The Perfect Man*, and to some degree *The Upside of Anger* reverse the roles of the mother and daughter, rendering the lone mother as childlike through the manifestations of her jealousy, neurosis, emotional immaturity, anger and hurt, and positioning her as ‘lacking’ in distinct and highly significant ways that impact the martial and romance prospects of her older fatherless daughter. While I have been keen to highlight how the authority of the lone mother is being negotiated in a process of infantilization which positions the fatherless daughter as teacher of her mother, in what follows I will argue that the lone mother/daughter dyad is emerging as a central paradigm in the articulation of postfeminist ideologies.

At Last, Cinema’s Lone Mother Rejects Feminism

In the summer of 2008 an adaptation of the hit Broadway musical *Mamma Mia* arrived on cinema screens. Incorporating the musical hits of 1970’s Swedish pop band

ABBA, *Mamma Mia* tells the story of Sophie Sheridan (Amanda Seyfried), a 20 year-old bride to be who discovers the whereabouts of the three men who could potentially be her long lost father. Drawing from Shakespearian themes of confused identities mixed with undercurrents of Greek mythology, the film follows Sophie in her quest to identify her 'real' father in order to ask him to give her away in marriage. Perhaps unsurprisingly the film quickly galvanized audiences into those who saw the film repeatedly and those who derided Pierce Brosnan's awful rendition of ABBA songs, the shrieking of three middle-aged female protagonists, the often times infantilized and racist overtones of the film's representation of the Greek characters and the threatened revival of disco standards *Waterloo* and *Dancing Queen*. However light-hearted these concerns might appear, implicit in the debate was a nasty undercurrent of female misogyny and class based prejudices that were articulated in radio and television culture shows and newspaper discussions about the demographic of the intended audience which was primarily female and the cultural value of the musical (a genre associated with femininity and the low-brow).³⁷¹

Despite the often times spiteful criticism from more high-brow cultural observers, *Mamma Mia* became a global phenomenon garnering huge financial remuneration for Universal Pictures and generating repeat viewings (a theme utilized in the advertising campaign for the DVD release).³⁷² For actress Meryl Streep who plays the film's lone

³⁷¹ Such rhetoric was particularly heightened at this moment as *Mamma Mia* was being seen as the counter film to the highly elevated 'intelligent'—read male dominated and male orientated—*Dark Knight* released a few weeks prior to the musical. Heath Ledger's death prior to the film's release did much to frame *Dark Knight* as a contender for an award at the Oscars and discussions about 'serious character actor' Christian Bales' performance as Batman and the critically acclaimed oeuvre of director Christopher Nolan and the cinematography transformed what is fundamentally a comic book adaptation to a text of great cultural and artistic merit.

³⁷² *Mamma Mia* became the highest grossing film in British history (£150 million in Britain and the UK) and the biggest selling product on Amazon UK (1.7 million copies sold on the first day of release in November 2008). See Matthew Moore, 'DVD became biggest seller' 20th March 2009 www.Telegraph.co.uk. The film made \$406 million worldwide and according to IMDB, 25% of British households own a copy of the DVD. Interviews with viewers who had seen the film on more than one occasion were included in television advertising campaigns prior to the DVD release conspicuously acknowledged that *Mamma Mia* was being

mother, the success of the film was attributed to its status as a narrative “that ‘neglected’ female-movie-goers could finally relate to”.³⁷³

The release and success of *Mamma Mia* resurrected some pertinent questions about film reception, gender, high and low culture that I hope will be addressed in future scholarship, but for my purpose, I argue that the accomplishment of *Mamma Mia* had much to do with the promise of a profoundly progressive and positive presentation of a lone mother/daughter relationship. Discourse surrounding the film has been sure to note that its female director, filmmaker and scriptwriter fought hard against the changes wanted from Universal. Publicity focused on the women’s friendship and the unusual positioning of the mother as an active agent within the narrative. Indeed, that *Mamma Mia* accorded its mother a voice resists cinematic tradition whereby the voice and image of the mother is filtered through male consciousness. Armed with the extra-textual knowledge of a more ‘feminist’ inflected coding (or at least a more celebratory and positive presentation of female friendship) *Mamma Mia* raised hopes that it might be, to borrow a phrase from Kathleen Rowe Karlyn the ‘cultural antidote’ to the cinematic tradition of constructing motherhood only in relation to patriarchy; as dangerously symbiotic and in need of strict regulation.

Despite psychoanalytic theory and cultural wisdoms that warn of the dangers posed to the lone mothered daughter (promiscuity, teen pregnancy, self esteem and commitment issues, engaging in self harm and poor academic achievement) *Mamma Mia* presents Sophie as an intelligent, well balanced and healthy daughter of a lone mother. Perhaps most noticeably, *Mamma Mia* challenges the traditional role of the father in the wedding ritual by

widely recognized as a film people returned to see. It is worth noting that *Mamma Mia* had much less of an impact in the US than it seems to have had in the UK. While this has been explained in part as a reflection of the repudiation of disco music that happened in the 1980s and their disinterest with ABBA specifically the transnational reception of the film would make for an interesting audience reception studies project.

³⁷³ Meryl Streep quoted at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0795421/news> (26th March 2009).

allowing the mother to give her daughter away in marriage. Of course the film still abides by the premise that the daughter has to be 'given away' but that the mother is sanctioned to replace the father figure suggests a challenge to the systematic undermining of the primacy of the lone mother in the prioritization of the narrative of 'father hunger' that pervades contemporary mainstream cinema. While the narrative centralizes the father figures in the guise of Sam Carmicheal (Pierce Brosnan), Harry Bright (Colin Firth) and Bill Anderson (Stellan Skarsgard), director Phyllida Lloyd and screenwriter Catherine Johnson seem all too aware of traditional narrative plots which centralize the importance and healing power of the father figure. (See Fig. 36)

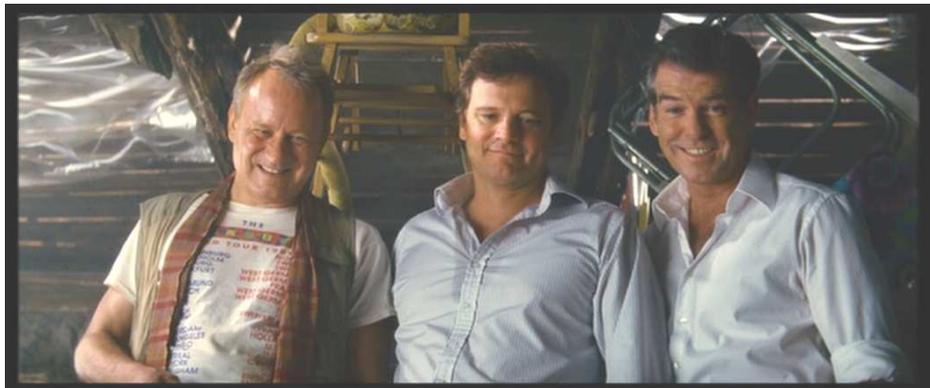


Fig. 36: Bill, Harry and Sam; Sophie's three dads. (*Mamma Mia*)

Clearly Sam, Harry and Bill are important figures for Sophie, but it is her mother that she turns to for emotional support. As such Donna remains the central agent in her daughter's life. That Sophie should choose to delay her wedding also indicates ambivalence towards the wedding culture that has become so centralized within post-feminist consumer culture.

Of course, the film does give us a wedding but it is not the lavish affair that has been celebrated in recent films such as *Because I Said So*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick: 2002), *27 Dresses* (Anne Fletcher: 2008), *Made of Honour* (Paul Weiland:2008) and *The Wedding Date* (Clare Kilner: 2005) amongst others and as such could be read as a backlash

against what Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck describe as “the spectacle and celebration of romantic consumer culture”.³⁷⁴ More importantly in deciding to travel the world and broaden her own horizons, Sophie contradicts the notion highlighted by E. Ann Kaplan that daughters who reject highly masculinized Freudian principles of socialization have “a particularly difficult time...because they inevitably modelled themselves on their mothers, only later to realize that this is not how they want to be, or how they want to live”.³⁷⁵ This is not to suggest that Sophie is the mirror image of her mother, only that her mother’s advice is given more dominance than that of the father figures. In this sense the film dispels Lacanian theories about mutual dependence of the mother and the daughter and ostensibly functions as a text that turns its back on what Lucy Fischer describes as the established filmic trope of “replicating the role of psychoanalysis in the construction of motherhood”.³⁷⁶

Perhaps one of the most comical moments of the film, the wedding scene in which Sophie, (in the presence of a vicar, and his congregation and before God) declares that she does not care how many men Donna has had sex with also provides one of the more subversive representations of the lone mother who is always castigated for her sexual promiscuity. Accounts of lone mothers who have multiple sexual partners proliferate in the social world and the cultural world. In Chapter One of this thesis I noted one of the many discourses surrounding the image of the lone mother is her lack of morality—she is perceived as a predatory woman who invites one man after another into her home.³⁷⁷ While Donna is

³⁷⁴ Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck. *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Pg 5

³⁷⁵ E. Ann. Kaplan. *Women and Film: Both Sides of The Camera*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Pg 185

³⁷⁶ Lucy Fischer. Pg 187

³⁷⁷ UK government policy announced in 2006 which allows lone mothers to enquire to the Criminal Records Bureau about the criminal background of their new ‘boyfriends’ as a protective measure against sexual abuse of their daughters serves to highlight the rhetoric of sexual promiscuity of single mothers while at the same time warning women of the dangers of predatory men. While organizations and experts see this measure as a way of protecting young children from sexual violence (and I am not arguing against the need to do so), the policy will enable a backlash against women who choose not to apply to see the records of a new partners.

embarrassed by her daughter's public renunciation of discourses of female sexual morality is it is a moment in which the lone mother can 'own' sexual agency without the fear of causing damage to her daughter's inner psychology.³⁷⁸ That being said, it is worth noting that Sophie's statement about her mother having many sexual partners is not Donna's narrative because the film has made it quite clear that she has had little to do with men since conceiving Sophie. Indeed, Donna makes quite sure that the wedding congregation also knows that her daughter's account is not accurate.

Nonetheless, the real triumph of *Mamma Mia* so it seems, is its presentation of a non-pathologized relationship between a lone mother and her daughter, epitomized in the musical number *Slipping Through My Fingers* sung by Donna and Sophie as they prepare for the wedding ceremony. (See Fig. 37.1 and 37.2) As Donna voices her love for her daughter she holds Sophie on her lap in the rocking chair—an iconic image of romanticized maternalism. Significantly this scene offers space for Donna to articulate (albeit through someone else's words) her experience of motherhood and of the process of rupture and separation that is seen as pivotal in the identification process of the daughter—a theme that, as Marianne Hirsch, notes is seldom visible because priority is always given to the daughter's perspective.³⁷⁹ Although *Mamma Mia* adheres to a traditional mother and daughter conflict narrative it has been received as the image of a loving, healthy relationship, the kind that many women aspire to have either with their daughters or their mothers.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ Although this did not stop the narrator of the recent ITV 1 documentary *The Mamma Mia Story* to persist in referring to Donna as a slapper and the 'town's bike'. *The Mamma Mia Story*. ITV 1 July 3rd 2008.

³⁷⁹ Marianne Hirsch. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998)

³⁸⁰ At the funeral of British reality star Jade Goody, friends compiled a montage video of Jade's life with her children accompanied by *Mamma Mia*'s song *Slipping Through My Fingers*. The film which was shown on a large screen inside and outside of the church and included in Living TV's programme about her death. (*Jade With Love*. April 12th 2009). According to her friends, Jade's emotional investment in the film had much to do with the presentation of the mother figure. I draw attention to the use of the song because it highlights my argument about the success of the film, but I also want to suggest that the song had a resonance for those who knew Jade both in terms of her own motherhood which elevated her position from a publicly vilified figure to a



Fig. 37.1: 'Slipping Through My Fingers'.



Fig. 37.2: *Mamma Mia* ensures us that Sophie is not her mother's mirror image.

Mamma Mia also offers a narrative in which women find solace with one another—a presentation of women seldom seen in an environment so suspicious of female camaraderie and in a medium that has recently seen older females relegated to the periphery of the screen if not disappeared from it entirely. (See Fig. 38)



Fig. 38: *Mamma Mia* celebrates female friendship

The narrative trope of the older woman and younger man relationship that has become a regular feature of mainstream popular culture (*American Pie*, *In the Land of Women*: John Kasdan, 2007 and *Prime*: Ben Younger, 2005 among others) is wholly renounced by Tanya (Christine Baranski) in her performance of *Does Your Mother Know?* This could be read as a

one which garnered more respect but also because Jade's difficult childhood and uneasy relationship with her mother is often referred to as her motivation to provide a better experience for her own children. Indeed, one of the major themes of discourse that surrounded Jade, her illness and her subsequent death was the rehabilitation of Jacky Bundy, (Jade's mother), from a toxic form of maternalism to a more loving and supportive display of motherhood. Polly Hudson 'Jade Goody's Funeral—Polly Hudson joins the mourners at the reality star's funeral in Buckhurst Hill'. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/04/06>

rejection of Hollywood's penchant for pairing abandoned, troubled or single older women with younger men as love interest (and oftentimes mentor and advisor). For these reasons and more, *Mamma Mia* is a noteworthy film because it tenders a more feminist inflected film that seems to challenge the hegemony of psychoanalysis, disrupts the primacy of fatherhood, and "offers points of refusal".³⁸¹ In so doing, *Mamma Mia* offers the potential to be read as a text which resists the established idea that the "mutuality of the mother/daughter relationship"³⁸² as a relationship which is "dangerously symbiotic".³⁸³ And yet, even as the film offers these moments of potential, *Mamma Mia* is also a film about a girl's desire to find her father, one which showcases the hysterical and girlish behaviour of mature women (a trope central to post-feminist culture) and which closes on a heterosexual marriage. The film's central tension is exactly the conflict between mother and daughter and the voice of reason is always given over to the male characters who function as the symbolic patriarchs of the narrative. And Sophie doesn't just get one father; she is 'lucky' enough to discover that all three men want to be her dad and share in her upbringing (although at 20 years of age it is questionable what they might add to).

The film's reliance on the fantasy of fatherhood reinforces the cultural over-determination of traditional power dynamics of masculinity and fatherhood—neither Sophie or the audience ever discover which man is her biological father—but that is not really significant because fatherhood is offered as a space for transformation for the men rather than the duty of care for Sophie. Sam marries Donna and in so doing redeems himself from the accusations of abandonment she articulates so powerfully in the show stopping number *The Winner Takes It All*. Bill, a man known for his impulsive nature and lack of roots gains a

³⁸¹ Rabinovitz Pg 5

³⁸² E. Ann Kaplan. 'The Case of the Missing Mother' in Patricia Erens (ed) *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Pg 133

³⁸³ Fischer. Pg 184

surrogate family; a space in which he might form some long lasting attachments now that age is beginning to compromise his adventurous nature, and Harry finally finds the strength to act on his impulses; an action which results in him 'coming out of the closet'. Donna's ideological task to rescue masculinity negotiates her subject position because she functions as a filter for white, middle class masculinity. In addition the film ridicules Donna's mother, criticizes some of the choices made by the film's lone mother, and pokes fun at its three times married fifty-something protagonist Tanya depicting her as an alcoholic, gold-digging, shallow, over-sexed materialistic woman and sees the single woman status of Rosie (Julie Walters) as less than acceptable, forcing her to 'sell herself' as suitable dating material to Bill in a humiliating rendition of *Take A Chance on Me*.

Having earlier stated that *Mamma Mia* seems to reject the replication of psychoanalytic dogmas about the construction of motherhood and daughterhood, I must note that at the heart of the text is a story in which a daughter has to renounce her mother. And even at the same time that we are presented with a text in which the central female protagonists are coded as strong and independent, the narrative contains the women in roles which are traditionally subordinate, a negotiation that Lauren Rabinovitz, in her exploration of the matrix of lone mothers, television sitcoms and feminism, notes as a regular feature of texts which she says openly "re-direct independent, assertive female characters into safely traditional female categories".³⁸⁴ In addition, that *Mamma Mia* has the potential to be a more progressive presentation of a lone mother/daughter formation can be underscored by the film's setting on a Greek island; a liminal space wherein discourse and actions not normally sanctioned in the 'real' world can be legitimated in this spatial and temporal 'nirvana'.

³⁸⁴ Rabinovitz. Pg 8

The contradictions implicit in *Mamma Mia* make for a complex analysis of the films' lone mother/daughter paradigm; on the one hand we are presented with highly sentimentalized images of a loving lone mother and her daughter and offered a more liberal feminist perspective on the social and cultural production of the lone mother. This is nowhere more perceptive than in a conversation between Sophie and her mother wherein Sophie asks if she has let her mother down. After being reassured that this is not the case, Sophie draws attention to her mother's competence in having raised a child alone while running a business. The conversation allows for some recognition and respect towards lone mothers as well as noting shifts in ideological attitudes towards lone mothers when Donna adds that when she told her mother of her pregnancy she refused to let Donna come home. On the other hand it mediates the possibility of a more progressive presentation of the lone mother through a narrative which re-places Donna into a traditional familial role as wife by the close of the film thus rescuing her from the potential threat of remaining a single woman and lone mother. However, more important for the purpose of this chapter is the way in which the body of the lone mother in *Mamma Mia* is once again inscribed within the text as being interpolated by liberal feminism.

As noted in Chapter One, and again in Chapter Three the lone mother is seen as the end product of feminism gone too far—her independence and distance from traditional notions of motherhood and femininity render her a symbol of inappropriate matriarchy. Even as the film is careful not to explicitly code Donna as a feminist mother (although wearing dungarees, iconic of second wave feminism, cannot be a wardrobe mistake) her objections to Sophie's plans to marry at such a young age challenge contemporary discourses that foreground marriage as the 'holy grail' for young women. Her fierce refusal of Sam's offer of practical help repairing the hotel and her refusal to accept financial help from Harry even

though we previously heard her speak to her female friends about the difficulties in keeping up with the repairs and the costs incurred, code Donna as an independent women who can ‘do it all’ without the help of men. Indeed the most celebrated scene in the film, when Donna is joined by an army of women who temporarily reject their traditional roles in the kitchen, homes and fields to sing and dance to *Dancing Queen* is a moment of female rebellion that is highly associative with feminism. (See Fig. 39) Even as Donna does not explicitly speak to feminism, the text inscribes her as interpolated by popular feminism and *Mamma Mia* is not a standalone text in its inscription of the feminist lone mother and daughter narrative. Indeed, I suggest the coding of the lone mother as interpolated by feminism posits feminist inflected maternalism as problematically oppressive for the mother and more especially, for her postfeminist daughter.



Fig. 39: Dancing Queens

Helen, the lone mother of *The Princess Diaries* films is a painter who creates large pieces of abstract and conceptual art. That she has been coded as such is an important character trait in emphasizing her ‘difference’. Abstract and conceptual art is widely recognized as a form that takes precedence over more traditionalist artistic aesthetics, and garners the artist a degree of independence and freedom from more established visual modes of expression. More specifically, abstract and conceptual art is normally more associated with masculinity; seldom have women been appropriated into the art world as abstract

painters and when they do, as is the case with British artist, Tracey Emmins, or Bridget Riley discussions about gender and choice of creative expression have tended to emerge within the media focusing on practitioners both as artists and as women. In casting Helen as a lone mother and an abstract/concept artist, (See Fig. 40.2) the film immediately infers her departure from a more traditional and conventional life style (reinforced again by dressing Helen in the iconic dungarees/overalls that came to symbolize popular feminism in the 1980s). What is more, while the film is kindly towards Helen and Mia's home—a converted but rundown fire station—it stands out as being distinctly different to the other houses in the street (note too that *Mamma Mia* makes clear that Donna and Sophie's home is in need of some repair work even as it celebrates the idyllic setting). (See Fig. 40.1) In imaging Helen and Mia's house as a having a previous function other than living accommodation, one which is highly associative with a very particular form of masculinity, *The Princess Diaries* reinforces the cultural imaging of the lone mothered house as not a 'proper' home, not the home of a real woman and a proper mother. (See Fig. 40.3)



Fig. 40.1: Helen's house stands out as different from surrounding homes.

Fig. 40.2: Helen and Mia creating abstract art.

Fig. 40.3: Helen's house functions as an art studio rendering domestic space as a place of work and decidedly un-homely.

Coding Helen as an eccentric, atypical and bohemian woman not only serves to foreground her as 'othered' but also functions as a way of inscribing class without being explicit. Her lifestyle choices are ones which cannot be wholly sanctioned by more conservative middle-class social and cultural mores so she has to be imagined as a woman who exists outside such middle class norms in different ways. A depiction as working class, white trash or African American would normally be the custom for lone mothers who are imagined as existing in the margins but such would not 'fit' with the resolutely middle class postfeminist values that will be reinforced in the text of both *The Princess Diaries* and *A Royal Engagement: Princess Diaries 2*. Nonetheless, Helen and Mia's relationship is fully in keeping with the representation of the lone mother/daughter dyad of *Mamma Mia*. Helen is an active agent in her daughter's life; she is supportive and loving, and it is she who insists that the opportunity to become a 'princess' is one that Mia should not be forced into. The film depicts the mother and daughter comfortably discussing intimate issues (boyfriends, dating and kissing) and Helen is fully aware of her daughter's burgeoning sexuality.

As the daughter of this distinctly different mother, Mia is rendered atypical too, not, it has to be noted, in terms of her psychological self, rather her difference is made manifest in her appearance which renders her almost invisible to her peers (unless they are teasing her) and especially to the boy she is so desperate to attract. Working much like the postfeminist protagonist of *Miss Congeniality* (Donald Petrie: 2000), Mia is depicted with a mane of unruly hair, bushy eyebrows and as being particularly clumsy. More poignantly the coding of Mia as unfeminine, or unconcerned with her performance of femininity draws from traditional, (albeit now seldom articulated), concerns about the successful development of the heterosexual lone mothered daughter who has not been taught how to 'do' femininity properly under the guidance of her father.

The inference the film makes about the viability of Mia's femininity reflects pre-existing discourse about feminism's rejection of the fetishization of female beauty and underscores cultural rhetoric about the hirsute feminist woman who refuses to groom and shave as an act of political rebellion. But it also reinforces Mia's and her friend Lilly Moscovitz (Heather Matarazzo) difference from others by casting both girls as being politically and socially aware. In Meg Cabot's books, upon which the film is based, Lilly is described as an overweight feminist who is loud and outspoken while Mia is imagined as a vegetarian and animal rights activist—it is noteworthy that Mia's politics are conspicuously diluted in the film text whereas Lilly's political voice plays a large factor in defining her identity. More specifically, the mediation of Mia's politics sets up the transformation story that is the narrative theme of *The Princess Diaries* franchise wherein Mia is transformed from invisible 'ugly duckling' lone mothered daughter to a highly visible and viable young princess. That Mia is accorded cultural and social capital in her newly acquired role as Princess and Ambassador of Genovea confirms the interdependent nature of the relationship between postfeminism, commercial capitalism and girlhood, and contemporary notions of female citizenship. This is a point reiterated by Harris where she points out that "consumption becomes a shortcut to power".³⁸⁵ Agreeing to her grandmother's desire to see Mia 'look more like a lady', Mia undergoes a dramatic make-over and is taught how to perform femininity in etiquette lessons that are managed by Queen Clarisse (the inference being that the situation is so serious it requires a member of royalty to see that it is done properly). (See Fig. 41.1)

³⁸⁵ Anita Harris. *Future Girl*. Pg 91



Fig. 41.1 and Fig. 41.2: Mia's transformation mobilizes her social status as an empowered female citizen.



The transformation narrative, in which we see the archetypal foreign, camp hairdresser Paolo (Larry Miller) straighten Mia's untamed hair, reject and contain the errant eyebrows, manicure the bitten nails and paint her face, while Queen Clarisse invests in a new wardrobe (particularly heeled shoes) represents not just a physical change but mobilizes Mia's social status as an empowered political and social citizen. (See Fig. 41.2) A point that the film both critiques and reinforces when Lilly encourages Mia to take the mantle of princess because she recognizes to do so will accord Mia power to enforce social and political change. That Lilly rejects her own political beliefs to encourage Mia to take the mantle of princess in order that she might affect social change demonstrates the currency of the postfeminist make-over as a form of female empowerment. Lilly fully recognizes the

exclusionary nature of the relationship between power and consumption and reminds Mia that even though she has her own television programme where she gets to voice her thoughts and opinions, her appearance mediates her agency.³⁸⁶

Ostensibly, the film seems to be criticizing the ways in which consumption and citizenship are tied together, challenging the marginalization and silencing of those, who like Lilly are “shut out of the consumption process” (although in this film it would seem that lack of money is not the issue that holds Lilly back but rather her Jewish ethnicity and her neurosis which is correlated to her own feminist politics that mediate her agency) thus excluding her from being identified as a ‘can-do’ girl. Looking like, and behaving like a princess allows Mia a place in the public world as an active agent—a role that would have been denied her as the daughter of a lone mother who seldom has the cultural capital to draw on as an indicator of citizenship. Even as the film raises concerns about “citizenship as a purchasable commodity”, Mia’s participation remains contained by ideas about correct femininity inasmuch as the only time we see her tackling a social issue is when she transforms part of the castle into a home for orphaned children.³⁸⁷ More significantly, Mia’s public acceptance of the role of Princess is inspired by the letter left to her by her deceased, royal father. Although the film attempts to be benevolent to its lone mother, the fact that it is the words of her dead father which inspire and motivate Mia to take on the role of Princess highlights the primacy of the patriarch even though he is dead and wholly undermines the agency of the living lone mother.

³⁸⁶ By encouraging Mia to take on the role of Princess, Lilly rejects traditional feminist debates that have argued the investment in the princess trope has a detrimental effect on gender power relations. The disavowal of these discourses in an argument about girl power and political agency is one which is being debated at present in relation to the popularity of princess culture which re-imagines the princess as strong, independent and ‘sassy’. While the shift in discourse about the princess has a positive outcome—by transforming passive femininity into a more active and dynamic form of femaleness—the transition is an explicit mediation of feminist critique of the princess precisely because this character type is now being marketed as the only viable form of commodified and prescriptive femininity for young girls (and quite disturbingly for women also).

³⁸⁷ Harris. Pg 91.

This thesis has been clear to note that the rhetoric of father hunger and the primacy of fatherhood in the developmental process of both male and female children have disavowed the authority of the lone mother. What is notable about Gary Marshall's films is the way in which the character of Queen Clarisse is employed, not only to disavow Helen's authority but to function as a type of buffer against feminism deflecting the more rebellious attitudes of the lone mother through a narrative of duty, tradition, manners and conservative values. If the narrative of the film does not call for the visual prioritization of the patriarch, it does rely on a matriarchal figure of authority that has been constructed and produced in a patriarchal regime. What is more, that Queen Clarisse, whose position enables her to act as the symbolic patriarch, is the person the film charges with the task of turning the lone mothered daughter into an active and visible citizen instead of her lone mother positions feminism as a politics of disempowerment. In fact, *The Princess Diaries* and its follow on film, *A Royal Engagement* mediate the power of the lone mother in highly significant ways which result in rendering Helen as socially and domestically problematic— "a strange woman in the wardrobe". (See Fig. 42) Despite the fact that Helen is a central figure in her daughter's life and in the narrative of *The Princess Diaries*, by the second of Marshall's films she has all but disappeared from her daughter's life and from the screen only to be replaced by the surrogate royal matriarchal figure. And when the mother is finally re-introduced into the story she has changed so much that she is referred to as the 'strange woman in the wardrobe'.



Fig. 42: A 'strange woman' in Mia's extensive wardrobe.

Invoking the rhetoric of the fictional Victorian female archetype of 'the mad woman in the attic' Helen is presented as 'jittery' and less sure of her role and relationship to Mia. Helen has also undergone a dramatic visual alteration: no longer dressed in the bohemian style that coded her as artistic, eccentric, spirited, and individualistic (and functioned in some way to justify her lone mother status in a less pejorative manner than the usual class based iconography of short skirts, cleavage enhancing clothes, bleach blonde hair and large hoop earrings seen in films such as *Sherry Baby*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Erin Brockovich* etc) Helen is now presented dressed in more sensible attire. More importantly for the purpose of this thesis, the transformation of Helen's physical/visual appearance lays the ground for the transformation of her previous social identity as lone mother. Helen is now the wife of Mia's ex-school teacher, Mr O'Connell (Sean O'Bryan) and the mother to the couple's newborn son Max.

While Mia receives her mother's surprise visit with joy, the relationship between the two is distant and changed—it bears no resemblance to the dynamics of the mother/daughter relationship foregrounded in the first film where we are privy to an intimate relationship based on honesty, filial and maternal love, creativity, and shared experience. And while

Helen was once depicted as the central agent in Mia's life, she is absent from the speech Mia gives in *A Royal Engagement* wherein she decides not to marry and to make reforms to the laws that stipulate Princesses should be married prior to coronation (surely a debate that the former lone mother would be interested in). Instead Helen has left the church to attend to her crying infant son and her seat is empty. I suggest that the eschewing of the film's lone mother in *The Princess Diaries* is reflective of the larger post-feminist, neo-conservative project of re-placing and recuperating the lone mother back into the traditional role of wife and mother. Specifically, *The Princess Diaries* and *A Royal Engagement* prioritize the importance of consumption in the process of female citizenship. More importantly, for the purpose of this chapter Marshall's makeover films conflate feminism, and lone motherhood with a type of disordered citizenship which denies the lone mothered daughter the opportunity to develop into the woman she has the biological and legal claim to become.

My argument here that feminism is being cast as a position of unjust and unfair maternalism through the body of the lone mother character whose authority is coded as unjust and whose politics deny the daughter her 'rightful' place in the social world is most readily realized in the Disney film, *Ice Princess*. The film, which heralds the tagline, 'From Scholastic to Fantastic' tells the story of 15 year old Casey (Michelle Trachtenberg), the daughter of lone mother Joan (Joan Cusack), a physics whizz kid whose ambition is to get a place at Harvard. Casey is urged by her science teacher to present a physics paper at Harvard and decides to combine her aptitude for physics with her love of ice skating. The narrative of transformation from scholar to star is instigated when Casey joins an ice-skating class so that she might apply the physics principles she has researched and finds that she has potential to be a competitor in the next ice-skating championship. (See Fig. 43.1 and 43.2) But her mother disapproves of ice-skating, and manifests a fierce resentment of sexy skating outfits.

She wants her daughter to succeed as a scholar, arguing that ice-skaters have no “shelf life”. According to the film, as a Women’s Studies professor it stands to reason that Joan would have such concerns. Casey has to negotiate her mother’s desires for her to go to university but more importantly, she has to circumnavigate her mother’s staunch feminist viewpoint (which is also encoded in the way that she dresses, her lack of makeup and her dietary choices—for a treat Casey is allowed pancakes made with white flour rather than wholemeal—a choice which reinforces the notion that Joan is a ‘political’ woman).

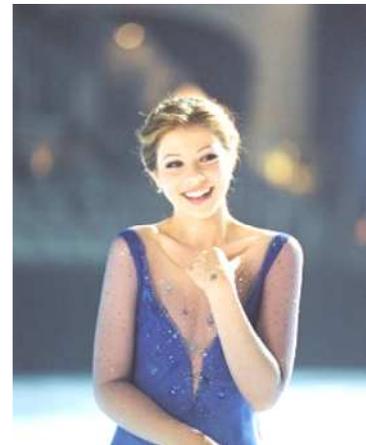


Fig. 43.1 and Fig. 43.2: ‘From scholastic to fantastic!’ Note in 43.1 mother and daughter are looking at their reflection in the mirror. At this point Casey is the image of her mother. By the end of the film we seldom see Casey and Joan share the screen rather Casey’s new identity of ice-princess renders her as independent from her mother.

Casey finds support in her quest to fulfil her dream to become an ‘ice-princess’ in the guise of the film’s second lone mother Tina (Kim Cattrall), a one-time skating champion and mother to daughter Gen (Hayden Panettiere) and teenage son Teddy (Trevor Blumas).³⁸⁸

Although Tina had been discredited by the ice-skating world, she spends her time coaching local girls to become future champions and is sanctioned with the authority to nurture Casey.

³⁸⁸ Tina is an interesting and unusual representation of lone motherhood because she is presented as the mother of a male and female child. I suggest that her former career as an ice dancing champion and job as an ice skating coach emphasizes her femininity in a way which is absent from the film’s presentation of Joan. And because she is more visibly invested in a heightened performance of femininity she is deemed less of a threat to the psycho-sexual development of her son and daughter.

Tina is not always portrayed in a positive light; in one scene she buys Casey some new ice-skating boots during a competition which cause Casey severe pain and she is coded as an unrelenting showbiz mother who lives her life vicariously through her daughter's bid to become a champion. Nonetheless it is under her tutelage that Casey fulfils her dream even as Joan envisions Casey's choice as a failure. Of course the film closes once the lone mother has relinquished some of her authority and goes to watch her daughter win the mantle of Ice Princess. What is at issue here though is not so much the transformation story, (although that itself resonates with a postfeminist inflected narrative that sees educational prowess as less aspirational target than princesshood), but the way in which Joan's politics are positioned as unreasonable and her behaviour as less than mature. The film is not blaming the lone mother for her daughter's inner conflict and the rupture in their relationship but rather accuses feminism of causing that rupture. Similarly, *The Princess Diaries* does not code Helen as a bad mother, nor does *Mamma Mia* foreground her Donna's status as a lone mother as the cause of the rupture of their relationship. Rather, in coding these lone mothers, whether implicitly or explicitly as feminists or at least as informed by popular cultural feminism, *The Princess Diaries*, *Ice Princess* and *Mamma Mia* implicate a feminist inflected belief system or life-style as inappropriate for good maternalism. Indeed I would argue, and especially in the case of *Ice Princess*, that feminism acts as *the* obstacle in the transformation of both female characters.

More importantly these films imply that in rejecting feminism, women are rejecting a politics that always positions them as always stubborn and unreasonable. In this regard I suggest that the lone mother characters in *Princess Diaries* and *Ice Princess* and to some degree, Donna in *Mamma Mia* reflect psycho-social discourse that sees lone mothers as never succeeding in the female maturation process without a husband by their side. Daphne's

neurosis (and lack of orgasm), Donna's constant shrieking and crying, Helen's paint-covered body, and Joan's pouting do much to distance these lone mothers from the realm of mature femininity. While their daughters (who want to be a princess or a wife) take pleasure in wearing glittery, skimpy ice-skating costumes or ball-gowns are sanctioned by these texts as mature and appropriate teachers for their mothers.

That the lone mother and her teenage daughter are being employed to disavow feminism in this manner is ironic given that lone mothers and teenage girls are often discussed under the rubric of female rebellion. But it is also highly apt that this dyad should be employed in the role of disavowing feminism because in so doing they are both recuperated into the postfeminist ideological repudiation of feminism. By casting the lone mother as immature and as a feminist, films such as *Ice Princess* challenge the conceptualization of feminism as a politics of mature, independent women who have rejected a hedonistic life style for one that is politically and socially engaged. That the post-feminist princess is teaching her mother to step away, or distance herself from her politics in order to allow her daughter to become the woman she has the (birth) right to be demonstrates that the princess figure might not be a passive one—rather she is a figure who successfully positions feminism as politically oppressive and personally limiting. By employing the lone mother as a figure of unjust authority and inappropriate maternalism, postfeminist cinema reiterates the politics of backlash that sees feminism as unjust and the lone mother as symbolic of a form of female politics that went badly awry.

In conclusion, *Princess Diaries* and *The Royal Engagement* are, as I earlier stated, part of a cultural reinvestment in the archetype of the princess, a character type that has traditionally been associated with Disney's established narrative plot of the widowed father

and his daughter (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (David Hand:1937), *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise: 1991), *The Little Mermaid* (Ray Clements and John Musker: 1989), *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson 1950) and more recent incarnations of the Princess trope in *A Cinderella Story* (Mark Rosman: 2004), *The Princess Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted* (Tommy O'Haver: 2004) and *Stardust* (Matthew Vaughan: 2007) etc). Given that the traditional princess narrative relies on the lone father/daughter dyad it is worth briefly exploring why more contemporary manifestations of the narrative trope are investing in the lone mother/ daughter dyad in texts where the father figure is wholly absent from the narrative and from the screen especially within a time where 'Daddy's Little Princess Culture' is otherwise conspicuous.

These wish-fulfilment stories, which are at heart concerned with the transformation of one type of girl (specifically white, poor and beleaguered) into another type of girl (white, rich and happy), are in part stories about social mobility. More recent manifestations of the princess have functioned to dispel feminist challenges to the passivity of the princess by imagining her as more assertive and dynamic, however the texts still remain invested in the fantasy of romance as the central factor in their transformation. Even as Mia rejects the marriage between her and Prince Devereaux (Chris Pine) in *The Princess Diaries* and challenges Genovian laws that dictate sexist practices, the film still closes on the promise of a heterosexual coupling between Mia and her childhood sweetheart, Michael (Robert Schwartzmann) as well as the marriage between Queen Clarisse and her bodyguard Joe (Hector Elizondo). As such, the princess trope has resurrected the fantasy of romance, which

as journalist Peggy Orenstein of *The New York Times* argues has rendered feminist challenges to romance as no longer valid.³⁸⁹

That feminism is being challenged and disavowed through the cultural investment in romance narratives and princess culture is not a new argument. Feminist academics such as Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, Sue Thornham, Patricia Mellancamp among others have explored the ‘re-authoring and re-possession’ of the romance narrative within the context of a postfeminist cultural environment and have pointed to the princess narrative as one which has been pivotal in the formation of viable femininity. This point is particularly reinforced by Negra where she notes in reference to another princess related film *Enchanted*, that the focus on the “viability of princesshood is as an alternative to the troubled terms of ‘real world’ female achievement”.³⁹⁰ While Negra correlates the narrative of princesshood with a fantasy space of wish fulfilment and ‘enchantment’ that serves to evade social, political and cultural realities of female life, Orenstein notes that the princess narrative is one which acts as an indicator of social upheaval. Arguing that “Historically princess worship emerged during periods of uncertainty and profound social change” Orenstein points to the re-emergence of more traditional forms of gender identity that emerged after 9/11 as a way of contextualizing the cultural emphasis on princesshood.³⁹¹

Clearly such arguments are highly salient but they do not account for the shift to a lone mother/daughter paradigm that is central in these films. I would argue that the social change that Orenstein imagines to be a result of the events of 9/11 can also be explained through the conceptual lens of postfeminism and suggest that the lone mother/daughter

³⁸⁹ Peggy Orenstein. ‘What’s Wrong With Cinderella?’ *The New York Times Magazine*. 24 December 2006. Pg 2

³⁹⁰ Ibid. Pg 14

³⁹¹ Orenstein. Pg 4

paradigm utilized in princess narratives not only functions to disavow feminism but foregrounds the post-feminist princess as *the* transformative political figure in gender politics. In analyzing the trajectory whereby the lone mother replaces the traditional father figure at the centre of princess narratives, I argue that the princess narrative is here reassuring contemporary audiences that the challenges to ideas of femininity posed by second wave feminism can be effectively contained under the skirts of a glittering ball-gown. (See Fig. 44)



Fig. 44: Princess Mia-Anne Hathaway (*Princess Diaries*).

Conclusion

In January 2009, a Californian mother, Nadya Suleman gave birth to octuplets. Initially, media stories focused on the unusual nature of the birth and the progress of the babies who were born prematurely. One of the most regular images foregrounded in the popular press early on was of Suleman caring for and talking to each individual child while they lay in hospital incubators. However the cultural celebration of Suleman and her babies very quickly turned into a prolonged backlash campaign against her, with the popular press at the helm of the attack. Indeed, within weeks Suleman was an internationally recognized symbol of abhorrent femininity and pathologized maternalism, and the nature of attacks became so serious that Suleman and her family were forced to go into 'hiding' until police discovered the origins of the many death threats she was receiving.

Murmurings of unease about Suleman began shortly after it was reported that she had conceived her babies through IVF. Although her decision to keep all eight foetuses ostensibly coalesced with neo-right, Christian and pro-life challenges to abortion, that Suleman 'chose' reproductive technologies in order to conceive rather than natural reproduction methods cast her as a highly problematic figure. Debate ensued about the moral and legal duty of the human reproduction industries and the professional integrity of Suleman's doctor who carried out the procedure, but these discourses were quickly superseded by vitriolic accusations about Suleman's ability to raise eight babies as well as the six other children she already had as a lone mother. The popular press vilified Suleman for the 'false' narrative of childhood trauma she employed to justify her desire to have a large family and regularly invoked Suleman's troubled relationship with her own mother as evidence of her pathology.

While American television's 'self-help guru', Dr Phil publicly advocated on behalf of Suleman (a platonic relationship which soon became sexualized in media reports about the breakdown of Dr Phil's marriage), other celebrities, such as Cher articulated her personal misgivings about Suleman's ability to raise her children without a father. The most famous of the celebrity interventions emerged after it was alleged Suleman underwent plastic surgery so that she might look more like Angelina Jolie. Indeed, it was reported that Jolie had been 'creeped out' by Suleman's desire to look like her. Given that Jolie is regularly invoked as the most beautiful and sexy woman in the world and as the example of perfect motherhood it is hardly surprising that women aspire to be like her. Nonetheless, Jolie's comments ignited stories about Suleman's mental stability (she was described as a stalker) and sanctioned the media's casting of Suleman as deeply and problematically obsessed with stardom (recent reports that Suleman is to star in her own reality show have compounded these sentiments) to the detriment of her children.

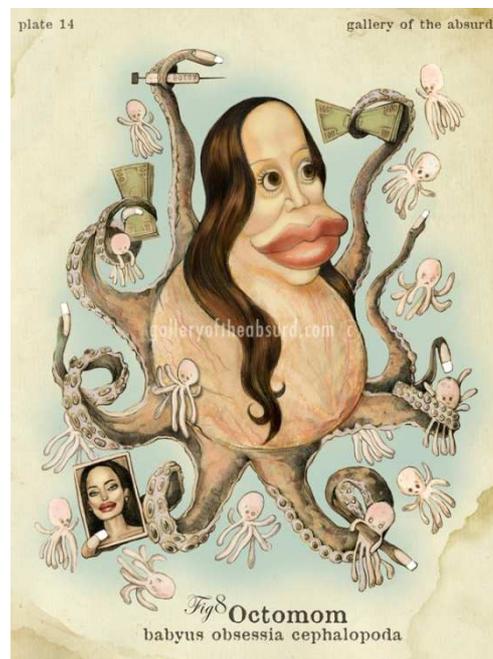
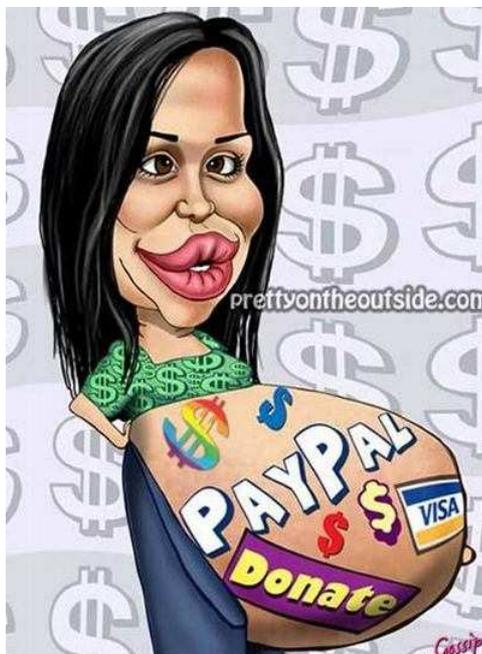


Fig. 45.1 and Fig. 45.2: Cartoons of Nadya Suleman as octomom in circulation within the popular press.

Discourse that emerged after the birth of Suleman's babies positioned her as a monstrous and parasitic figure and as a mentally unstable woman whose desire to be a celebrity superseded her role as mother. (See Fig. 45.1 and 45.2) That Suleman's financial needs were being met by tax payers who themselves were struggling to meet the needs of their own families at a moment when the nation was facing the dire consequences of economic recession became a regular criticism of this lone mother.

I highlight the story of Suleman not to initiate debate about the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of the choices she made, but to reiterate the argument that this thesis has raised throughout; that the figure of the lone mother functions to conceal deeply disturbing postfeminist, socio/political ideological points of view about gender, race, sexuality and class. The homogenized identifiers of lone motherhood have served to render the lone mother as a trope, indeed, the story of Suleman became the story of all lone mothers who turn to the state for financial support and who 'chose' to raise children without fathers. And, because the lone mother is a trope rather than a stable, independent figure, she can be utilized as a discursive filter to articulate all manner of social and political concerns about society, economics, national security, motherhood, race, fatherhood and, more especially, about all women in general.

Mindful then of that the negotiation of mainstream cinematic lone motherhood has as much to do with anxieties and tensions about homosexuality, of race and class, and for the articulation of anti-feminist discourse as it does the repudiation of women who parent alone, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate how this specific female identity has been both 'brought into being' and become the subject of struggle and contestation. Chapter One illustrated how the cultural celebration of celebrity lone mothers and the media's investment

in the archetype of the yummy mummy and ‘momism’ ideologies have mediated the lived experiences of actual lone mothers whose economic situation denies them cultural, social and economic capital. In Chapter Two I highlighted the matrix of race, postfeminism and lone motherhood to argue that the exclusion of black lone mothers from contemporary cinema’s conspicuous investment in the archetype of the lone mother is indicative of a post-race, postfeminist erasure of blackness from the mainstream. Even when she does exist in mainstream films such as *Monster’s Ball*, the black lone mother figure is not presented as an autonomous figure but as a cipher for discursive practices which problematize race and gender. For all the reviews that commented on redemption and racism as themes within *Monster’s Ball*, the narrative essentially recycled limited representations of the black lone mother as psychically damaging and overtly sexualized and as a rehabilitative force for the redemption of white masculinity. But I also argued that the function of the black lone mother is to highlight social and political anxieties about black masculinity while simultaneously maintaining the hegemony of white masculinity. In rehearsing historically constructed notions about black female promiscuity and maternalism and deeply problematic discourse that renders the black male as inherently violent, films such as *Baby Boy* and *Bullet Boy* in which the black lone mother and her son figure, not only pathologize black women’s maternalism but argue that black masculinity must always be contained.

Through close textual analysis of films such as *Jerry Maguire*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* Chapter Three argued that the dyad of the lone mother and her son underline concerns about the lone mothered son’s sexuality. According to these texts for a young boy to successfully transition from boyhood to manhood he must be under the tutelage of a father figure. The symbolic patriarch who normally comes in the guise of the films’ love interest (and sometimes becomes the love interest precisely because he takes on the role of father) is

also searching for conformation of his own masculine credentials. He becomes, as Nicholas Salmond so astutely observes, “one who acts as a prophylactic against negative effects” caused, in the main by the child’s lone mother.³⁹² Such pathologization of the lone mother/son dyad insists on the importance of fatherhood in mediating any potential threat of homosexuality and ensures that lone motherhood always remains on the periphery of the text; disenfranchised and disavowed by gender and by lack of parental agency.

More importantly the chapter demonstrated the importance of the lone mother as an appropriated agent in maintaining the ideological schema of postfeminism. Her recuperative, redemptive and restorative capacities—key characteristics of the lone mothers in romantic comedies and chick flicks—not only support patriarchy by offering the lone mothered family, and home, as the space for the transformation of masculinity but they also function to elevate the position of the traditional family unit as the only healthy environment for men, children and for women. Romantic comedies and chick flicks aimed primarily at female audiences are predominantly conservative texts. While they purport to foreground what are seen as women’s issues, they more often than not conceal the process by which these issues become problematic or indeed, why they become especially female problems. In other words, although films such as *Erin Brockovich* might offer an analysis of gender politics and grapple with issues of poverty or issues affecting working mothers, they do not offer a reason as to why these issues are gendered. However, in saying this I am ignoring recent iterations of the celluloid lone mother/daughter dyad which suggest that the ‘problem’ of the lone mother is ineluctably tied up with gender and female politics. Films such as *Mamma Mia*, *The Princess Diaries* and *Ice Princess* cast the lone mother as interpolated by feminism, or at least informed by popular cultural feminism; a politics which is inappropriate for good

³⁹² Nicholas Salmond. *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005). Pg 7

maternalism and oppressive and limiting to the mother and to her postfeminist daughter. Thus in Chapter Four I argue that the purpose of the lone mother/daughter dyad in these films is to present postfeminism as a liberating force, one which enables the daughter to mobilize her social status as a postfeminist princess. The repudiation of feminism through the narrative and image of the cinematic lone mother is truly reflective of a postfeminist culture that expends an inordinate amount of energy in an attempt to prove that lone motherhood is not good and, more importantly that feminism is to blame for fatherlessness.

Lone Motherhood: The Scourge of Feminism

To understand the social, cultural and political positioning of lone motherhood goes some way to understanding the politics of postfeminism. The lone mother is perceived as a threat, symbolizing female power and autonomy (even though she rarely has it) which are the core ideologies of feminist politics. Thus feminism is regularly invoked as the cause of lone motherhood with much anti-feminist discourse pointing to lone motherhood as indicative of the ‘ills’ of feminism. Take for example the sentiments of self professed feminist Laura Doyle, author of the best selling book *The Surrendered Wife: A Guide To Finding Intimacy, Passion and Peace With Your Man* – a pernicious tome that calls for women to surrender their identity and independence to their husbands in order to make them more secure. Doyle claims feminists have “simply empowered women to get divorced, become single mothers, get married, again, then leave the next man because he’s no good too.”³⁹³ Fathers groups, informed by the polemics of the 1980’s Men’s Movement spearheaded by Robert Bly certainly see feminism as the central factor in the confusion of masculine/feminine binaries

³⁹³ Laura Doyle. *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide to Finding Intimacy, Passion and Peace with Your Man*. (New York: Simon and Schuster Ltd. 2000). Pg 15

that has emerged in tandem with the rise of female headed households. Taking their cue from what the British media has termed as ‘terrorist’ organisations, groups such as Fathers4Justice, Fathers for Life and Families Need Fathers, don the costumes of superheroes (because all dads are heroes to their kids, so claimed one father’s rights campaigner as he was arrested for breaking into the grounds of Buckingham Palace, and another, arrested after throwing what was feared to be anthrax, at members of the House of Commons), to fight injustices caused by the scourge feminism.³⁹⁴ (See Fig. 46)



Fig. 46: Heroic Fathers for Justice

The lone mother embodies the very essence of popular cultural feminist ideology, and because of this mainstream post-feminist cinema will take every opportunity to fiercely renounce feminism within lone mother narratives. The British 2003 film *About a Boy* succinctly exemplifies my argument. In a basement of a London street, hidden from view, sit

³⁹⁴ The threat to kidnap Tony Blair’s youngest son has led to a loss of support for groups such as Fathers4Justice, who campaign for changes in access and custody laws. Founder, Matt O’Connor, endorsed by the self-proclaimed guru on the family and fatherhood Bob Geldof, as heroic, was recently voted as one of Britain’s most influential men. Given that mainstream cinema is so concerned with the theme of fatherhood it comes as no surprise to learn that O’Connor has sold his story to Harbour Pictures. As an aside, Matt O’Connor was denied access to his three children after his divorce, for what, the judge claimed “were very good reasons”. Fathers4Justice. Since writing Fathers4 Justice has been closed down after a father, having called Fathers4Justice for advice, killed his two young children and himself on Father’s Day 2008

the members of S.P.A.T (note the acronym), a single parent support group. Above them, on street level is the self-aware, white, privileged Will Freeman (Hugh Grant); a man who 'loves women' as a less demanding alternative to 'loving a woman'. Will is experiencing a mid-life crisis; with very little direction in his life (he is financially secure, does not need to work and has the common male affliction of commitment issues) Will decides that lone mothers offer the possibility for non-committed sex. "Single mothers", he claims "are the best invention I have ever heard of. Women who would start off thinking that they wanted a regular fuck and end up thinking a quiet life was worth any number of noisy orgasms which was brilliant because it allows guilt-free parting". In order to join the SPAT support group, Will fabricates a new man/fatherhood narrative (demonstrating the film's recognition of the centrality of fatherhood in the process of rescuing obsolete masculinity), which he employs as a method of seduction. (See Fig. 47)



Fig. 47: 'New man' Will lends his support to S.P.A.T.

As he enters the basement the camera pans around the group of women, and one by one they recount their personal histories. We are only too aware that these women are not those of his

fantasies; most are over forty, unattractive and overweight. More problematic and pernicious is the film's explicit coding of these women as informed by cultural feminism.³⁹⁵

By coding the lone mothers of SPAT as informed by cultural feminism (support groups like SPAT are often seen as emerging from feminist activism) *About A Boy* begins a process of defeminising the lone mothers, reflecting common psychoanalytic thought that lone mothers who 'play' the role of father and mother are forced to put aside feminine traits, and in so doing confuse masculine/feminine binaries to such an extent that prescribed gender traits become indefinable. For this group of lone mothers, their lack of femaleness is wholly confirmed firstly by their status as lone mothers, secondly as feminists and thirdly by the way the film codes them as unattractive and unfeminine.

While *About A Boy* might offer the audience the opportunity to agree with Will's internal narrative that "men are bastards" his narrative functions as an ironic nod to popular cultural feminism because ultimately the film is concerned to demonstrate the incongruity of Will's sentiments. Indeed, the fact that he becomes a surrogate father figure to the son of a troubled lone mother, teaching her how to parent correctly and setting her son on the right path to masculine maturation, wholly negates any real challenge to his behaviour. (See Fig. 48)

³⁹⁵ See Denise Riley's 'The Right to be Lonely'. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. 13.1 (2002), Pg 1-113, for a philosophical and political critique of the ways in which the state of loneliness has been so wholly disavowed and the subsequent effects of this disavowal on women who parent alone.



Fig. 48: Will and Marcus- 'Fatherly Love'

I have argued that cinema's lone mother is Other, contained on the periphery of the text and, always in the service of masculinity. Moreover the common use of cultural/liberal feminism within lone mother narratives such as *Chocolat* and *Jerry Maguire* as symbolic of ideological progression actually camouflages a process of negotiation which disavows the lone mother's agency. The miscoding of the lone mother as symbolic of feminism surely highlights the urgent nature of feminist film analysis of this representational field. After all it is feminism's challenge to patriarchal notions of the nuclear family that has been explicitly blamed for the rise in lone mothered households. Note how Johnnie Tilman, black, welfare lone mother and one time chairwoman of the U.S activist group, National Welfare Rights Organisation calls for the economic, cultural, social and political condition of the lone mother to be seen as a feminist issue. "There are a lot of lies that male society tells about welfare mothers, that we are immoral, lazy, misuse welfare checks; are stupid and incompetent. If people are willing to believe these lies, it is partly because they are special versions of lies society tells about all women".³⁹⁶

³⁹⁶ Johnnie Tilman cited in Douglas and Michaels. Pg 175

The limited compass of this thesis and the vast subject area means there are specific issues that are beyond its scope. Constraints prevent analysis of representations of the lesbian lone mother (or more precisely the invisibility of this figure) within mainstream cinema. The invisibility of lesbian lone motherhood attests to the very uneasy relationship mainstream cinema has with representations that fall outside those deemed as normative. The lesbian lone mother figure presents an image that cannot fit neatly into mainstream conceptualizations of motherhood nor that of the single woman because both require the presence of (or at least the search for) a man to continue the continuum of female heterosexuality. To explore such representations, to the extent that they exist at all, would intervene in a discourse that maintains heterosexual reproduction as the norm and would offer a space in which to challenge the marginalization of lesbian motherhood.

In addition, this thesis has asked why the celluloid lone mother figure has seldom been the subject of academic endeavour within film and feminist studies which are concerned with issues of race, class and gender even though she has become such an established figure within mainstream cinema. As I argued before, the little academic attention she has received could be understood as reflecting the cultural ambivalence of the lone mother in the social world. Above all this thesis calls for feminist scholars to be mindful of the pernicious ways in which the lone mother figure is employed as the primary figure in shoring up traditionally conservative, homophobic, classist and racist ideologies that form the foundation of postfeminist politics.

This thesis has offered a critical feminist inflected media studies account of the ways in which mainstream cinema negotiates the lone mother figure. One of the problems in using this form of methodology is the tendency to over look the polysemic nature of texts and

ignore the contradictions inherent in mainstream texts that have to both interpellate a wide audience whilst negotiating a shifting ideological terrain. *Mamma Mia: The Movie* proved to be exemplary of a text which advanced seemingly progressive ideas about gender and lone motherhood whilst relying on more conservative assumptions about women, motherhood and family values. However, having said that films such as *Mamma Mia: the Movie*, or *The Princess Diaries* for instance might well be more polysemic than I have accounted for, I would argue that the solutions advanced in these films recommend that women, or more specifically lone mothers, acquiesce with more conservative norms which ultimately erode their parental agency and their feminine status.

In carrying out this analysis I have been mindful that I have not acknowledged aspects of popular culture that may contradict the overall argument I offer. There are spaces where accounts of the lone mother refuse and refute normalizing and universal claims about women who parent alone. Television shows such as the U.S shows *Sex in The City*, *Charmed*, *Friends*, *Judging Amy*, *The Gilmore Girls* and British sitcoms such as *Single*, *Life Begins* and *Blue Murder*, all of which centralize a lone mother character often offer paradoxical moments which invite the viewer to assess conflicting values about lone motherhood. A further development of this thesis might consider the relationship between television and film to ask how television seems to have a sometimes more progressive relationship with the lone mother figure and what would be at stake if cinema did the same?

The white marble statue of Alison Lapper, a disabled mother who is raising her son alone, on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square (2007) offered the British public an alternative aesthetic of lone motherhood and femininity. Lapper was also the star of the BBC series *A Child of Our Time* and has written a book, 'My Life in My Hands' recounting her

experiences of disability and discrimination. Her high visible profile has surely exposed some of the ways in which different forms of female identity are so regularly excluded from mainstream culture. The arrival of the internet has allowed for more counter-cultural accounts of lone motherhood in websites such as www.hipmama.com, www.Girl-mom.com and www.Mamaphonic.com which reject media images of motherhood and offer support and guidance to women making alternative child rearing choices. The British Gingerbread campaign group is vociferous in its challenges to the stigmatization of all lone parents and takes its place amongst the many, many thousands of lone parent/lone mother support groups that have been enabled by new media technologies. Another development of this thesis might consider these alternative accounts of lone motherhood which refuse mainstream tendencies to effect normalizing and universal presentations of lone mothers. However, despite the evidence that there exists a lone mother counter-cultural aesthetic which forces us to think about the ways that “different forms of female identity are made to *mean*” I would suggest they tend to exist in more elite spaces.³⁹⁷ Positioning these more resistive narratives and aesthetics within the elite tends to exclude the working class majority and ethnic and racial minorities from engaging in an oppositional form of cultural expression, an exclusion which mirrors the very exclusions that postfeminism thrives on.

³⁹⁷ Joanne Hollows. *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). Pg 32.

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