

## Introduction

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# Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood

What does it mean to mother queerly? And how might such practices, if taken seriously, queer the study of motherhood? As someone who mothers outside of heteronormative contexts, I have been struck by how infrequently the scholarship of motherhood questions the heteronormative boundaries of kinship and maternal practice. Too often, studies of motherhood, including feminist studies of motherhood, require the reader to leave her queerness behind. At the same time, in seeking to find a scholarly home within queer theory, I frequently have to bracket my interest in mothering. Insofar as mothers are “breeders” and breeders are the presumed antithesis of queer, the notion of queer mothering is rendered oxymoronic. This volume emerges from a desire to bring feminist theories of motherhood and queer theory into closer conversation. I do so by exploring motherhood and mothering within families created through adoption, lesbian parenting, divorce-extended and marriage-extended kinship networks, or some combination of these. Without denying the differences between and within such forms of kinship, my focus is on what these families have in common, namely the presence of two or more mothers. The polymaternal family, I suggest, is a queer family structure that requires the queering of intimacy in triangulated—or even more complex—relations of mothers and child(ren).

It is my own experiences of mothering within queer (as well as normative) and marginal (as well as privileged) spaces that give rise to this project. Two decades ago, as a married woman, my husband and

I (both white) adopted a biracial baby girl in a semi-open adoption. Shortly thereafter, I gave birth to a second daughter. Approximately a decade later, my husband and I separated and I entered a long-term same-sex relationship. As my daughter's father also entered a relationship with another woman, the number of women mothering our children rapidly proliferated. These circumstances, coupled with some unorthodox custodial and living arrangements, a relationship with my elder daughter that became strained during her teenage years, and a relationship with her birth mother that suffered strains of its own during this time, have made it necessary to think about how to negotiate complex relations of intimacy departing significantly from norms of mother-child relationships within the "traditional" nuclear family.

In recounting their experiences within a nontraditional family, my daughters' perspectives frequently have differed from my own and from each other's. My elder daughter has struggled throughout her life with the question of who is her "real" mother. At times, she has insisted that her birth mother is her real mother; at other times, she has rejected her birth mother in favor of me as her real mother. Except in rare instances where she has found joy in the game of accumulating as many mothers as possible (including whoever might walk in the door), Tomeka has resisted queering her familial status. She bemoans being from a "broken" home and is frequently melancholic about the traditional, nuclear family that was lost to her once when she was adopted and then again when my husband and I separated and subsequently divorced. My younger daughter has been less resistant to multiplying her mothers, indeed voluntarily adding two neighborhood mothers as (in her words) her "other mothers." Dakota also has been more flexible than her sister about inhabiting a queer family—a family that provides her with a badge of uniqueness among her largely privileged and traditional peers. Like her sister, however, she will resist the authority of an adult female figure with whom she does not wish to negotiate by insisting that person is "not her [real] mother." As her legally recognized, biologically related parent, I am the only one to consistently escape this rhetoric. Although sometimes cast as "annoying," I am never cast as "unreal," as anything other than her mother.

In many ways, my interest in queer mothering has its origins in the claims about "real" mothers made by my children, as well as other family members, neighbors, friends, members of various professions (social workers, doctors, teachers, and lawyers), and even strangers I have encountered. As a mother, I have been frustrated, angered,

dismayed, and dumbfounded by both assertions of and denials of my status as a “real” mother. However, as a feminist philosopher and queer theorist, I also have been fascinated with the complex webs of epistemological, ethical, and political norms embedded in metaphysical claims about reality. Claims about reality frequently serve to render certain phenomena central to our field of vision while relegating other phenomena to the background, to uphold certain values to the exclusion of others, to illuminate or obscure certain relations of power. As Marilyn Frye (1983) so eloquently reminds us in *The Politics of Reality*, the etymology of the word “real” traces to that which is “regal” or “royal”; thus “reality is that which pertains to the one in power:” “The ideal king reigns over everything [his] eye can see. . . . What he cannot see is not royal, not real.” Noting that the king sees only “what is proper to him,” Frye reminds us that “[t]o be visible is to be visible to the king” (155).

What is at stake in claims about who is or is not a “real” mother? What is it that power is unable or unwilling to see? And what would happen if we made it more readily visible? In this book, I argue that what is at stake in our claims about “real” mothers is the notion that children must have *one and only one* mother. Heteronormative power cannot countenance polymaternal families and practices of childrearing. By making such practices visible, perhaps we can begin to queer motherhood.

### “Real” Mothers and Monomaternalism

I refer to the ideological assumption that a child can have only one real mother as the assumption of *monomaternalism*. The ideology of monomaternalism stems from a combination of beliefs about the socially normative and the biologically imperative. Claims about what is real are frequently claims about social norms. As gender theorists have noted, claims about “real men” and “real women” are not empirical claims (although often postulated as such) but are, rather, injunctions mandating that we perform gender in socially circumscribed ways. As such, claims about real men and women are intended to keep us in line with gendered binaries and to bring those who might deviate from proscribed norms of masculinity and femininity back into line with normative ideals. Assertions about who is or is not a “real” mother often carry normative weight similarly intended to discipline those who

deviate from norms of femininity. Consider, for example, Danzy Senna's (1995) reflections on her childhood relationship with her mother in an essay aptly entitled "To be Real." Here Senna recounts asking her mother "Why can't you be a real mother?" and elaborates the tension between her mother's performance of adult femininity and social norms of mothering as follows:

In my mind, real mothers wore crisp floral dresses and diamond engagement rings; my mother wore blue jeans and a Russian wedding ring given to her from a high school boyfriend. (She had lost the ring my father gave to her.) Real mothers got married in white frills before a church; my mother wed my father in a silver lame mini-dress which she later donated to us kids for Barbie doll clothes. Real mothers painted their nails and colored their hair; my mother used henna. And while real mothers polished the house with lemon-scented Pledge, our house had dog hair stuck to everything. (8)

Claims about real mothers, such as this one, are roughly translatable as claims about *good* mothers. Such claims are frequently (although not always consciously) racialized and class-coded claims. Consider Senna's implicit childhood assumptions about how real mothers should perform the role of domesticated femininity. Her childhood complaints about her mother include criticisms of her mother's lack of Western-ness (she wears a Russian wedding band instead of a diamond engagement ring; she uses henna rather than hair dye) and her lack of class (she got married in a trashy dress, she wears jeans, and both her nails and house are unpolished). As this makes clear, part of what is at stake in claims about real mothers is white privilege and class privilege as these intersect with norms of femininity.<sup>1</sup>

A failure to recognize the ways in which various interlocking systems of privilege and oppression shape our claims about who has the right to claim the social and legal status of mother stems, in part, from biocentric theories of motherhood. All too often, claims about "real mothers" equate maternal reality with participation in a particular set of biological processes such as pregnancy, birthing, and lactation. Because of participation in these biological processes, a mother is frequently thought to possess a special bond with a child such that loving and caring for that child is natural, a matter of "maternal instinct." Conservatives frequently voice such claims; occasionally feminists do as

well. In her memoir of motherhood, *Baby Love*, for example, Rebecca Walker (2007) argues, “the love you have for your non-biological child isn’t the same as the love you have for your own flesh and blood” (69). Reflecting on her relationship with her stepmother (who claims Rebecca as “one of her children,” raised as “her own”) and her relationship with her biological mother (with whom the adult Rebecca has a fraught relationship at best), Walker finds herself nonetheless agreeing with a “study that finds that children living with a stepmother receive a good deal less food, health care, and education than they would if they lived with their biological mother” (73). Similarly, reflecting on her relationship with her stepson (the son of her previous lover) and her relationship with the child she now carries in her own womb, Walker claims that she “would do anything for [her] first son, within reason,” but that she “would do anything at all for [her] second child, without a doubt” (73). Walker dedicates her book to her newborn infant, “Tenzin, who made it [motherhood] real.”

Unfortunately, Walker’s privileging of biological motherhood is not uncommon. Within blended families (such as Walker inhabited both as a child and later as an adult), the nonbiological or “step” mother is frequently reduced to a secondary status due to a lack of blood ties (combined, perhaps, with a lack of seniority). Lesbian co-mothers often encounter a similar phenomenon, wherein the status of their relationship to the child borne of their partner is queried and they find themselves named (sometimes by their own partners or ex-partners) as something other than mother. Likewise, the status of adoptive mothers as “real” mothers frequently is queried by those (including one’s own children) who insist that a real mother is a biological mother. My adopted daughter frequently echoes Rebecca Walker’s sentiments, insisting her “real” mother is her biological mother (despite their inconsistent relationship) and that I love her less than her sister, my biological daughter. Tomeka’s commitment to biological essentialism has, moreover, been solidified—like Walker’s own—by becoming pregnant with her own child (a child for whom, she claims, “she would do anything”). There is, of course, a circular logic here: Antecedently convinced of biological essentialism, the romanticization of the biological mother–child bond shapes one’s phenomenological experiences of biological motherhood; those experiences then become “proof” of the essentialist hypothesis, making it a difficult hypothesis to dislodge.

When we equate “real mother” with “biological mother,” we render poly maternal families invisible by representing them as monomaterial (“normal”) families, wherein children have one and only one

“real” mother. At the same time, we may do psychic harm to children who do not live with their biological mothers, causing children who are adopted or raised by another mother to wonder why their real mother failed to exhibit maternal instinct. If the instinctual drive to care for one’s own offspring is as strong as biologically essentialist accounts of motherhood contend, then it is a mystery why any woman might relinquish her child into another woman’s care. A failure to interrogate biological essentialism typically leads to the conclusion that either the child must have been unlovable or the biological mother must have been monstrous. Notably, Rebecca Walker struggles with precisely this dilemma. Feeling that her biological mother has hurt her “over the years with neglect, withholding, and . . . ambivalence,” Walker asks for an apology. When her mother refuses to provide the requested apology (saying she has “apologized enough”), Walker terminates contact with her (monstrous) mother on the grounds that “she is too emotionally dangerous to me and my unborn son.” When her mother agrees to termination of contact, writing that their relationship has been “inconsequential for years” and that, after thirty years, she is “no longer interested in the job” of being Rebecca’s mother, Walker shifts into wondering why she (the daughter) is unlovable: “Am I that awful,” she asks, “that I should no longer have a mother?” (155–56).

Although children may wonder about their own self-worth in cases of familial unrest, the general public rarely does. In most cases of tension between mothers and their children, therefore, the “monstrous mother” hypothesis is the one that prevails. Because of the romanticization of biological motherhood—combined with a belief in childhood innocence, biological mothers who do not share or cannot live up to these romantic ideals of motherhood, may be deemed “unfit.” Indeed, the only exceptions to the normative equation of “real” mother with biological mother occur when biological mothers are publicly adjudicated as neglectful or abusive. In these cases (frequently characterized by racialized and class-coded portrayals of maternal fitness), a secondary mother will be promoted to the status of “real” mother. That her promotion to this status hinges on the first mother’s simultaneous demotion, however, once again demonstrates the ideological force of the notion that children must have one and only one mother.

The ideology of monomaternality, like the ideology of monogamy, promotes practices that uphold the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family. Those who advocate ethical, cultural, and legal norms of “one mother per person”—much like those who advocate ethical, cultural, and legal norms of “one mate per person”—frequently defend their values

as determined by biological dictates. Indeed, sociobiological explanations for monogamy typically emphasize the importance of long-term, monogamous, heterosexual pairings as an advantage for successful rearing of the young in the animal kingdom (see, e.g., Kleiman 1977; Young and Wang 2004). However, there is ample evidence in nature for a variety of patterns of raising the young, just as there is ample diversity in mating rituals to be found in both human and non-human nature. We tend not to notice this diversity because of our proclivity to view both human and non-human behavior through a heterosexual lens (Halberstam 2011, 40). By replacing that lens with one that is queer, perhaps we can begin to dislodge monomaternality and queer our heteronormative notions of kinship.

Monomaternality, as an ideological doctrine, resides at the intersection of patriarchy (with its insistence that women bear responsibility for biological and social reproduction), heteronormativity (with its insistence that a woman must pair with a man, rather than other women, in order to raise children successfully), capitalism (in its conception of children as private property), and Eurocentrism (in its erasure of polymaternalism in other cultures and historical periods). Monomaternality is normative in the contemporary, industrialized world—as well as in some postcolonial cultures that have adopted these contemporary Eurocentric values. Indeed, the assumption is so taken for granted that it has received slight attention even from feminist theorists. Part of my goal in this book is to highlight the negative consequences of monomaternality policies and practices for women and children and to suggest ways in which adoptive, blended, lesbian, and other queer families can be sites of resistance to monomaternality.

Among the negative consequences of monomaternality are the following:

- Competition among women for maternal status
- The erasure of many women's childbearing and childrearing labors.
- The treatment of children as private property.
- The separation of children from mothers (and mothers from children)
- The maternal grief and guilt often suffered both by those who relinquish custody of their children and those who come to bear full responsibility for them.

- A lack of attention to the ways in which women might—and sometimes do—mother cooperatively.
- A lack of imagination concerning ways in which laws, policies, and practices could be transformed to better serve both women and children.

Public policies deserving critical examination include monomaterialistic policies governing adoption practices, specifically, and those governing custody and guardianship, more generally. It is the assumption that children must have one and only one mother that prevents us, for example, from acknowledging multiple mothers (say both a birth mother and an adoptive mother or both lesbian parents or even a birth mother plus two lesbian adopters) on a child's birth certificate; monomaterialism likewise has been an impediment to opening adoption records and to allowing same-sex couples or other polymaternal forms of family to adopt. More generally, the assumption that monomaterialism is in the best interests of children prevents us from developing child welfare policies and custody laws that preserve the bonds between children and multiple caregivers and allow for what Eva Feder Kittay (1999) terms "distributed mothering." If a divorced heterosexual couple can share custody of a child (and the legal rights and responsibilities and institutional supports associated with this), then why can't two or more mothers? The policy ramifications of shifting from monomaterialism to polymaterialism are far-reaching, effecting current laws governing visitation rights, guardianship and custody, child protection policies, family preservation policies, social welfare policies, tax incentives, census bureau definitions of family, school policies, hospital policies, employer benefit policies, and (in the case of diasporic families created through transnational adoption or by some other means) even foreign policy. I touch on some of these policy concerns in various chapters, but my primary focus here is on the importance of developing practices of solidarity between mothers and children and among mothers themselves in complex, polymaternal kinship systems. There is no doubt that cooperative mothering would be facilitated by transformed public policies. However, as queer theory has taught us, kinship need not (and should not) be dependent on state recognition.

Indeed, the desire for recognition and approval of non-normative family forms may (and frequently does) lead to assimilation to normative expectations, thus neutralizing the radical politics adoptive, lesbian, blended, and polygamous families potentially embody. For example,



much as the resistance to heteronormativity embodied in lesbian mothering is recuperated by the assimilationist politics of gay marriage and replications of the domestic spaces and practices of nuclear families, the queerness of adoptive mothering is recuperated into dominant ideologies of mothering when adoptive kinship is closeted by sealed public records and practices of “as-if-genealogical” mothering (Modell 1994). Moreover, the resistance to racism and colonialism potentially embodied in transracially adoptive kinship systems frequently is neutralized by Eurocentric standards of maternal fitness that keep mothers of color and white mothers divided along and differentially empowered by ideological fault lines. Resistance to what Kathleen Franke (2004) aptly terms “domestinformative” kinship structures is potentially embodied in divorce-extended and other families who inhabit queer familial space and time. And yet this resistance may be, and often is, undercut by custodial practices that insist children have a “primary” (nuclear) family home. In these and myriad other ways, the potential of polymaternal families to resist dominant cultural perspectives on and practices of family-making is too often recuperated into normative kinship by mothers and others who—wittingly or unwittingly—refashion their families in ways that mirror traditional ideals of family and home. As I also discuss here, the ways in which lesbian, adoptive, and extended/blended families might teach their children to disidentify with dominant cultural ideologies may be undermined by maternal disciplining, training, and abjection of children who fail to conform to familial and/or social conventions.

### Polymaternalism and the Queering of Intimacy

One of the ways in which queer forms of life are recuperated into normative spaces is through reframing queer practices as practices of intimacy. As Berlant and Warner (1998) note, when “complex cluster[s] of sexual practices” are confused with “the love plot of intimacy and familialism,” “[c]ommunity is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship,” and historical relations to the future are “restricted to generational narrative and reproduction, [a] whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normality” (554). Moreover, reducing queer lives to forms of same-sex intimacy threatens to uphold neoliberalism’s privatization of public concerns thus obscuring the sexism, classism, and racism—as well as the heterosexism—of practices of familial intimacy

(Eng 2010; Griffin 2007). For these reasons, many queer scholars have resisted portrayals of non-normative sexual practices and the communities emerging from and facilitating such sexual practices as kinship relations based on intimacy.

In situating polymaternal families as potentially queer communities of kinship, I wish to explore the relations between the queer and the intimate from a different angle. What if, instead of domesticating the queer by cloaking it in the rhetoric of intimacy, we were to make intimacy strange by revealing it to be (at least sometimes) queer? My claim here is that polymaternal families (like polyamorous relations) might queer intimacy in both its psychological and its material dimensions. Psychologically, such families (minimally) triangulate the mother-child relationship, thus propelling us away from a romanticized version of mother-child love as a dyadic relationship of mutual recognition. Materially, polymaternal families queer intimacy by destabilizing the domestic space and time in which intimacy is lived, thus propelling us away from a notion of home as a safe haven from the challenges of public life.

For Freud, sexuality and identity are the result of a triangulation between a child and its mother and father. Although the dyadic mother-child bond is assumed to be the earliest and primary bond, the triangular Oedipal drama breaks the bond between child and mother, redirecting a child's attention toward the father as the all powerful figure and resignifying the previously all powerful mother as deficient by virtue of her discovered lack of a penis. As many feminist scholars have noted, the Freudian story of a child's maturation is deeply misogynist in its assumption that sexual differentiation is marked by the presence or absence of masculinity and its corollary assumption that a girl's sexual maturation is necessarily more vexed than a boy's sexual maturation because of her lack of desired male genitalia. In response, feminist psychoanalytic theorists have modified Freudian theory in various ways, attempting to rewrite the Oedipal drama in ways that rid it of sexist bias, thereby depathologizing girls and women and allowing for a celebration of the mother-child bond.

With few exceptions, however, feminist psychoanalytic accounts fail to contemplate a family structure wherein the mother-child dyad is broken not by the presence of a father, but is instead triangulated by a second mother. If we resignify the family in less heterosexist, less monomaterialist terms, it becomes obvious that the Oedipal story will not suffice to explain a child's developmental process or psychic

structures. The child of two (or more) mothers—like the child in a heteronormative nuclear family—has to accommodate itself to the fact that it cannot identify (solely) with one parent. But unlike the child in a heteronormative family, the child's recognition of differences between parents in a polymaternal family cannot be reduced to recognition of sexual difference or sexual hierarchy. Instead, such a child's psychic development may well respond to other salient differences. Primary among these is the difference between biological mothers and others. Equally salient in some cases, however, will be differences such as race, class, ability, and age. When a child does not have psychic room for two mothers and insists on prioritizing one mother as the "real" mother, a psychoanalytic account of this will need to take into account the ways in which social norms of good mothering privilege the normative female body as biologically fertile, as white, as middle class, and so forth. A queer analysis of mothering will need to attend to the ways in which these and other received norms of femininity help to structure a child's affective psychology and sense of self.

To queer our notions of mothering, however, we cannot attend merely to the ways in which the presence of multiple mothers affects the child. A purely child-centered approach to mothering too easily recuperates polymaternalism into heteronormative family structures and affective relations wherein the mother-child dyad remains primary and becomes the site of contestation between mothers. A queer account of mothering needs to explore the third arm of the mother-mother-child triangle, namely the affective relationship between the mothers themselves.

In understanding why accounts of motherhood so rarely focus on the relationship between mothers, Eve Sedgwick's (1985) analysis of male homoeroticism is instructive. In *Between Men*, Sedgwick argues that male homoerotic relationships are typically configured as relationships of rivalry that are triangulated around a woman. Much as our culture insists on framing male-male desire as male rivalry triangulated around a woman (thus reframing queer desire as heterosexual desire), we frequently render female-female desire intelligible by triangulating it around a child (thus reframing queer desire as reproductive desire). For example, we assume that a daughter cannot truly understand her mother until she becomes a mother herself; we assume that all mothers have an empathetic bond by virtue of their relationship to children, and perhaps even that all women share a common bond by virtue of their mere reproductive potential. In cases of polymaternal families,

moreover, female bonding over children is frequently signified (like male homoeroticism) as a site of rivalry. Grandmothers are viewed as “interfering” in a new mother–child relationship; adoptive mothers are fearful that a child’s birth mother will return to reclaim their child; stepmothers are depicted as intruding on a biological mother’s territory. Much as both men and women are oppressed by a cultural system wherein male–male desire becomes intelligible by routing it through putative male desire for a woman, both women and children are harmed by a cultural system wherein relationships between women are rendered intelligible by routing female–female desire through putative desire for a child.

To queer mothering is, in one sense, to understand lesbian mothering as a prototype for other forms of mothering (rather than viewing it as an odd or deviant form of mothering). What would happen if we viewed (and lived) mother–mother relationships as (at least) equal in importance to the affective bonds between mothers and children? What would happen if maternal love was configured not only (or even primarily) as a putatively unconditional bond between a woman and her offspring, but also as an affectionate—and perhaps even erotic—relationship between mothers?

Although lesbian mothering highlights loving relationships between mothers, adoptive mothering, foster mothering, and stepmothering highlight forms of kinship that resist the logic of the nuclear family. As Judith (Jack) Halberstam (2005) suggests, queerness may be less a matter of sexual identity than it is an outcome of strange temporalities and spatial configurations. Adoptive families and blended families frequently become queer (whether that is their conscious intention or not) because of the ways in which they live outside of normative familial time and space. Adoptive mothers and stepmothers exemplify a form of motherhood that is not ruled by a biological clock and whose story of motherhood may not begin with mothering an infant. Moreover, they inhabit domestic spaces that lack picket (or other) fences to define their boundaries. Unlike the nuclear (homonormative) lesbian family, adoptive and blended families reveal the family to be a permeable and malleable structure spread across multiple households and, not infrequently, across more than one city, nation, or even continent (as in the case of transnational adoption). In such cases, lived intimacy—between mothers and children and between the mothers themselves—cannot be based on geographical proximity or the practices of everyday domesticity, but must find other modes of embodiment. One such mode of

embodiment considered here is cyborg mothering or the use of communication technologies to enable intimacy at a material distance.

What might transpire if we viewed adoptive mothering and step-mothering as a lens through which to view mothering more generally? What happens if we treat such polymaternal families not as deviations from the familial norm, but instead as revealing facets of maternal practice simply hidden in normative families? How might our theories of maternal practice change if we no longer envisioned home as a stable and coherent material place? Families that are spread across multiple geographical spaces, I suggest, trouble the alleged boundary between private and public spaces, encouraging us to rethink (or reimagine) the distinction between home and elsewhere. Living intimacy within the complex configurations of time and space inhabited by mothers and children in adoptive and blended families requires abandoning the notion of home as a fixed and static location wherein one always feels safe, protected, or even comfortable. Thus, to move adoptive and blended families to the center of our theorizing about motherhood specifically and kinship generally is to move toward a notion of families as coalitional entities requiring practices of solidarity among and between the various inhabitants of diasporic homes.

### Good (Queer) Mothers and Bad (Queer) Mothers

Contested norms of good mothering provide an ideological terrain that too often prevents practices of solidarity between mothers—whether those mothers are members of different families or belong to the same family. The adoptive mother may stereotype the birth mother as incapable, neglectful, or abusive. The first mother may characterize the stepmother as too harsh in her discipline. The daughter-in-law may reject the advice of her mother-in-law as intrusive and unwelcome. The righteousness (and self-righteousness) we bring to our own practices of mothering makes it difficult for us, as mothers, to embrace practices of mothering different from our own and, related to this, makes it difficult to share responsibility with the other women who do play or who would like to play a maternal role in our children's lives. Instead of acting in solidarity with other mothers, we too often criticize, judge, and feel criticized and judged by one another. The good mother/bad mother dichotomy, in other words, works to uphold the ideology of monomaterialism by giving us a personal stake in claiming to be a

child's "real" mother and thus the only mother who counts. Attempting to control the interactions of other mothers with our children, we lay claim to a centrality in our children's lives, establishing by word and deed a hierarchy of command that our children's other mothers (stepmothers, foster mothers, birth mothers, nannies, neighbors, relatives, friends, and lovers) dare not transgress.

Much as the good mother/bad mother dichotomy upholds the ideology and practices of monomaternality, the good queer/bad queer dichotomy upholds the ideology and practices of heteronormativity. As many queer theorists have noted in the past decade, an implicit distinction between good queers and bad queers has been operative in the struggles to obtain marriage and adoption rights for (some) gays and lesbians, struggles that have eclipsed the more radical queer politics of AIDS activism, struggles for economic redistribution, and struggles for a wide-ranging sexual freedom. Lisa Duggan (2003) identified the trend toward recognizing the citizenship and consumer rights of those gays and lesbians who most closely mimic heteronormative standards of gender identity (namely, those who espouse a commitment to monogamy and childrearing within nuclear domestic normative middle-class families) as evidence of a "new homonormativity . . . a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them" (50). As Duggan asserts, homonormativity has fragmented the queer community into hierarchies of worthiness that seek recognition of those who mimic gender-normative social roles while marginalizing those who challenge monogamy as well as those who resist a binary gender or sex system.

One example of the ways in which homonormativity has fragmented the queer community is found in the response of same-sex marriage advocates to what has become widely known as the "slippery slope" argument. According to this argument, any move away from the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defines marriage as a bond between "one man and one woman" would open the floodgates to approving of a wide variety of marital relationships including polygamy, as well as same-sex marriage. According to the Human Rights Campaign (the primary U.S. advocate for same-sex marriage and also a fierce advocate for "ending abuses against women and girls in polygamous fundamentalist Mormon communities in the U.S."), the link between same-sex marriage and polygamy is "offensive" (Saunders 2010). Same-sex marriage and polygamy are fundamentally distinct, the campaign argues, claiming "two people is the defining element in our system of

government on contractual marriage” (Saunders 2006). In response to polygamists who claim to lead happy, harmonious lives, same-sex marriage advocates argue that the practice is, nonetheless, “poison for cultures at large,” arguing that the institution is intrinsically oppressive to women and bad for children, citing as evidence for this “polygamy’s most famous son: Osama bin Laden, whose father sired 54 children with 22 wives” (Saunders 2006).

As these comments suggest, at the same time as adoption, divorce and remarriage and (monogamous) same-sex relationships have become a “normal” part of our social fabric in recent decades, polygamy as a form of kinship remains largely exoticized and vilified as the queer (and apparently terrorist-producing) “other.” Thus, it is not surprising that both feminist theorists of motherhood and queer theorists and activists have largely ignored polygamy—except insofar as it is used to highlight an oppressive practice against which the gender freedoms sought by feminists and queers can be upheld. The common assumption is that polygamous families are inevitably heteropatriarchal and thus could be neither feminist nor queer. This assumption, however, like the assumption that mothering (breeding) itself is inevitably complicit with heteronormativity, has prevented strategic alliances among a variety of persons interested in creating non-normative kinship relations, as well as between these persons and those interested in a variety of non-normative erotic relations. Indeed, polygamous kinship highlights, perhaps better than any other form of kinship, a meeting place for feminists seeking to resist normative (monomaterialist) forms of motherhood and queers seeking to resist normative (monogamous) forms of intimacy. With these considerations in mind, I have chosen here to examine polygamous families as part of a larger spectrum of polymaternal families, alongside adoptive families, stepfamilies, and same-sex families. My hope is that by doing so, I might blur the distinction between “good” queers and “bad” queers that undermines a truly queer political theory and movement.

In developing an account of queer mothering here, I wish to resist both the good mother/bad mother dichotomy as well as the good queer/bad queer dichotomy. In identifying practices of queer solidarity between mothers (as well as noting failures of such solidarity), I hope to contest the multiple hierarchies of worthiness that pit mothers against one another, queers against one another and queer mothers against one another. To this end, I examine a variety of maternal bodies and practices that are frequently abjected as unintelligible. These bodies and

practices include the “mad” and “bad” mothers who commit infanticide and filicide, the drug-addicted black or brown mother and the unwed teen mother (all of whom can be seen as resisting social norms), as well as the “controlling” mother (who forces social norms on her children) and the “submissive” mother (who, in not questioning the norms imposed by her husband or other patriarch, may be seen as neglecting her maternal responsibilities). If we are to overcome our tendency to abject these and other cases of allegedly “bad” mothering, I suggest, we must strive to recognize the Other as a potentially analogous being who, although not a mirror image of ourselves, is not our opposite either. To avoid the good mother/bad mother dichotomy, we will need to re-cognize ourselves in ways that allow us to accept and care for those parts of ourselves that we may find strange, alienating, or shameful. By allowing the lines between our (good) selves and the (bad) Other to blur, we queer both our notions of self and other thus laying the groundwork for solidarity between and among diverse mothers.

### Queering Queer Theory

The theoretical grounding for this book draws from a combination of feminist philosophy, post-structuralist theory, critical race theory, post-colonial theory, cultural studies, and queer theory. It is my training as a feminist philosopher that leads me to interpret statements about real mothers as having meanings located at the intersections between questions about reality (ontology, epistemology, metaphysics) and questions about values (ethics and politics). A fundamental assumption of this book is that our theories about reality are never value-neutral. Post-structuralist thinking shapes the ways in which I approach some of the central dichotomies in this book. It is with a deconstructive sensibility that I approach the binary thinking underlying discourses of “real” mothering: dichotomies between biological and social mothers, good mothers and bad mothers, materially present and materially absent mothers, and so on. A similar deconstructive sensibility also informs my desire to blur the boundaries between heteronormative and homonormative forms of mothering, and to contest the dichotomous opposition between “breeders” and “queers” that may make the notion of “mothering queerly” advanced in this work sound oxymoronic to some. Critical race and postcolonial theories inform my thinking about the race- and class-inflected politics of mothering. They also have assisted me in



thinking about families that are geographically dispersed, whereas cultural studies has shaped my thinking about the possibilities of cyborg mothering as a queer, postmodern phenomenon. Both cultural studies and queer theory have enabled me to rethink maternal embodiment and our traditional notions of domestic or familial space and time. Feminist psychoanalytic theory and queer theory inform my thinking about the development of adolescent subjectivity and the processes of abjection that haunt the boundaries of the self, for both mothers and their rebellious teens. Queer theoretical approaches to love and family, together with feminist theories of dependency work and critiques of romanticized motherhood, figure prominently in my attempts to theorize mothering outside of the confines of the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family. Although queer theory takes center stage here, I am particularly indebted to those scholars who work at the intersections of queer, feminist, and postcolonial theories. My reflections in the following chapters have been heavily influenced by the work of disciplinary border-crossers such as Michel Foucault, Sara Ahmed, David Eng, Maria Lugones, and Jasbir Puar, among others. Although none of these scholars study motherhood, their work has been an ongoing source of pleasure and insight that has consistently provoked me to rethink many of my own assumptions on normative and non-normative identities, practices, and perspectives as these relate to mothering.

I have framed this project as an attempt to queer motherhood—including motherhood studies. In applying the term “queer” to mothering and families, however, I also participate in the project of queering queer studies itself. The family is a point at which the axes of feminism, postcolonialism and queer theory frequently diverge. During the 1970s and 1980s, feminists critiqued the family as a site of patriarchal oppression. In response, women of color and critical race theorists pointed out that families of color were a critically important site of resistance to racism and colonization. As feminism began developing more intersectional analyses of gender as inflected by race, class, nation (and other variables), more nuanced analyses of the family slowly began to emerge, resulting in what is now a prolific field of motherhood studies that provides one important (albeit still underdeveloped) point of contact for postcolonial and feminist theorists.

Early lesbian and gay studies, like early feminist scholarship, voiced misgivings about the family. For many lesbians and gays, the family was experienced as a site of closeting or rejection—although, again, the experiences of people of color complicated this vision of the

family. Later lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (lgbt) scholarship began developing more positive portrayals of the family, featuring lesbian- and gay-headed households. These accounts of lgbt families have provided a point of intersection between contemporary gay and lesbian studies and feminist studies of motherhood. Such intersectional studies continue, however, to be largely (although not exclusively) dominated by portraits of white, middle-class, nuclear families—giving rise, in part, to queer theory’s denunciation of the “homonormative” family as upholding heteronormative ideals.

In providing analyses of discursive forms of sex, gender, and sexuality and the implications of these for queer subjectivities, queer theory has largely ignored the family altogether—except as an institution through which “abnormal” sexuality is regulated by the state. Moreover, insofar as queer theory *has* positively addressed issues of family, the focus has been on intragenerational forms of kinship based on friendship (in the Foucauldian sense), communities of those engaged in non-normative sexual practices (e.g., BDSM [bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, masochism] communities and polyamorous intimacies) and communities of persons who embody non-normative forms of gender (e.g., drag culture, and the social and political alliances among transgendered, transsexual, and/or intersexed persons). These and other queer kinship relations are frequently premised on the rejection of children insofar as queerness is viewed as incompatible with breeding as a matter of both theory and practice. Theoretically, queerness resists narratives of reproductivity; practically speaking, queerness resists the alterations to lifestyle that childrearing (allegedly) requires. One cannot, it is presumed, rear children without succumbing to homonormative and domestinnormative practices, schedules, routines, and concerns.

I agree that queerness involves (minimally) an uncoupling of sex and reproduction. Procreation is not the *telos* of sex; heterosexual coupledness is not mandated by biological dictates, nor should it be mandated by cultural or legal norms. Nor do I believe that child-free lives are less meaningful, satisfying, or fulfilling than those featuring children. However, the idea that queerness *demand*s the absence of children in one’s life (and hence the idea that mothering queerly is an *im*possibility) arises, I think, from several interlocking, but questionable, assumptions. One assumption is that dependency work inevitably structures one’s life in normative ways. As anyone who has cared for a child, an aging parent, or an ill partner or friend knows, caregiving

work (which still falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women) often is physically and emotionally demanding. And it can, to be sure, deprive one of the time and energy to engage in other pleasurable pursuits. It is highly unlikely, however—given the historical emergence of queer theory and queer activism from the AIDS crisis—that queer scholars would claim that all forms of caregiving inevitably render one homonormative. Why, then, presume that caring for *children* specifically threatens queerness?

Underlying the presumption that in childrearing we cease to be queer may be an implicit notion of childhood innocence as incompatible with adult perversities. As Lee Edelman's (2004) work reveals, however, the ideal of childhood innocence is a conservative one; furthermore, as Kathryn Stockton's (2009) work on queering childhood reveals, the idea of childhood innocence is a myth. Arguing that children "grow sideways" (rather than "up") and require intensive training in order to "mature" into heteronormative citizens, Stockton proposes that childhood is an essentially queer experience. Indeed, as any mother knows, infants and toddlers are shameless about playing with their sexual organs and even their own excrement; teens and young adults, although sometimes shamed by their peers, frequently continue to rebel against most forms of adult prohibition. If children are, as Halberstam (2011) suggests, "always already anarchic and rebellious, out of order and out of time" (27), they would appear to be right "at home" with queer-identified adults. Indeed, in my experience, children are quite happy to accompany their parents (or friends' parents) to drag shows and other counter-public spaces.

The fact remains that few parents do, however, identify as queer. Moreover, even those who do so identify may want, as Michael Warner (1999) suggests, to be (or to pass as) "normal." This leads us to the third assumption underpinning the suspicion that childrearing threatens queerness, namely, the presumption that childrearing inevitably takes place within nuclear families that seek to replicate culturally (hetero- or homo-) normative practices and identities. It is this assumption that is the focus of the present work. Although I agree that most mothers (and I am no exception) internalize normative practices of mothering that abject the disorderly conduct of their children—partly out of the shame that attends being seen as a "bad" mother and partly out of a concern for children's future well-being, I wish to argue for the *possibility* of a form of mothering that resists such tendencies. Such resistance is, I think, facilitated by childrearing and homemaking

practices that are “shared and improvised,” and view mothering as an act “of culture rather than nature, an act of construction rather than reproduction” (Halberstam 2011, 45).

A central argument of this book is that caring for children has been queered by a proliferation of nonbiological polymaternal families of choice who resist (although they may not entirely transcend) normative familial configurations and normative domestic patterns. I do not claim that mothering is essentially a queer activity (to be sure, it is not). Nor do I claim that non-normative forms of mothering are always chosen or practiced as intentional incarnations of queer subjectivities. (Often they are not, although this doesn’t preempt providing queer readings of such practices, much as literary theory has frequently queered literary texts whose authors may not have “intended” such readings.) My goal is simply to create a space in which to make room for the possibility of mothering queerly by investigating how mothering—as both practiced and theorized—may be importantly transformed by two (or more) mother families. In adoptive, lesbian, extended-blended, and polygamous families, narratives of reproximity frequently are (albeit not always) displaced by narratives of chosen kinship—choices that may include homosocial and even homoerotic relationships between women. In such families, moreover, practices of distributed mothering make it possible to inhabit intergenerational kinship networks while continuing to enjoy adult pursuits and intimacies (including, but not limited to, non-normative sexual pursuits and intimacies) outside of the family. By providing alternative models of kinship featuring female homosociality and resistance to gendered norms of self-sacrificial mothering, polymaternal families allow for (although they do not guarantee) the formation of queer subjectivities in both mothers and children.

In using feminist and postcolonial theory to interrogate the limits of queer theory, I work alongside a trend of queering queer studies that emerges primarily from queers of color.<sup>2</sup> Using a strategy José Muñoz (1999) terms “disidentification,” many queers of color argue against wholesale dismissals of family—even those with heteropatriarchal tendencies—adopting instead the tactics of working “on, with, and against” kinship structures that simultaneously nourish, contain, and exclude complex, even contradictory, identities (12). In *Queer Latinidad*, for example, Juana María Rodríguez (2003) claims that “the spaces of *familia* . . . have taught me almost everything I now know