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Stepping On Maternal Ground Reflections On Becoming An “Other-Mother”

I have been a stepmother for almost four years, but my stepdaughters have been central in my life for much longer. Since they were very young, I have thought about them constantly, talked about them incessantly, fought with them frequently, and loved them consistently. Yet, in becoming a stepmother, I did not become *their* mother, but I did become—and I am now—a mother of sorts. I must be. I work too hard and care too much to be otherwise. But there is little room for stepmothers in the prevailing images of motherhood. Drawing on popular cultural images, academic writings and personal experiences, I reflect here on my attempts to claim an “other” maternal identity that is all too often rendered illegitimate and invisible. The general aim of this article, therefore, is to contribute to the few existing works that attempt to create a presence for stepmothers in our scholarly analyses and everyday worlds.

Biomothering as base-line

As an anthropologist, I am fascinated by the everyday assumptions and behaviours that constitute complex cultural constructs. As I explore the cultural dimensions of motherhood and mothering in particular, I am drawn to those academic and artistic works, like the popular Canadian play *Mom's the Word*, that poignantly illustrate how motherhood is a public, social terrain within Euro-Canadian society. For in presenting the ways in which the cultural boundaries that have previously marked women's privacy become transgressed under the mantle of maternity, these works lay bare the piercing societal gaze that is projected onto mothers, and new mothers in particular. This gaze, which in true postmodern fashion emanates and circulates in diffuse ways, allows and legitimates—in some cases even necessitates—that we ask if the mothers in our communities are good enough, giving enough, kind enough. Do they have

enough time, money, and energy? Like Atlas holding the world on his shoulders, do these women adequately and virtuously uphold the supposedly global institution of motherhood that the “New Right” (Abbott and Wallace, 1992: 44) tells us is a woman’s ultimate duty and responsibility? There are literally thousands of examples around us that speak to the power and force that these questions exert on women who are busy dealing with the often unseen and everyday challenges of mothering. The academic and artistic merit in addressing and problematizing this gaze is, in part, that it demonstrates how ideals of motherhood are elevated while the grounded experiences of mothering remain invisible. However, the majority of work that offers such insight is based primarily on the ideals of biological mothering and on the experiences of those women who have conceived, carried, and given birth to their children. In this article, I argue that taking biomothering as the base-line of mothering generally, and as the conceptual starting point for all analyses of motherhood, (re)establishes the normative idea that becoming a mother is—or should be—a biological process.

Even with the tremendous diversity in contemporary North American families and the fact that more women than ever before are stepmothers (Morrison and Thompson-Guppy, 1985: 11), there remains a strong and overriding cultural emphasis on biological child rearing. In her fascinating analysis of childlessness in the United States, Elaine May (1995: 213-14) argues that since the 1980s a new kind of pronatalism has been promoted, one in which the romantic and defining dyad is no longer the husband and wife, as it was in the marriage-focussed pronatalism of the 1950s, nor the man and woman, as in the “child free” anti-natalist movements of the 1970s. The prevailing image that defines the pronatalism of today, which may in fact be a reinvoation of what Claudia Johnson (1999: 159-172) describes as early nineteenth-century ideals of parenthood, is that of mother and child. Contributing to the contemporary currency of this image are the proliferation and popularization of reproductive technologies and medical visioning techniques that now allow us to see the biological connection between a woman and her fetus in unprecedented detail. Biological maternity, therefore, is uniquely positioned to be that which ultimately informs and defines contemporary and dominant views of motherhood and womanhood. Indeed, in an influential psychological and self-proclaimed feminist analysis of women in distress, Pamela Ashurst and Zaida Hall (1989: 97) argue that “A woman’s capacity to create, bear and nurture a child is the very essence of her womanhood, her unique and special capacity.... Birth is the only defence against the inevitability of death.... When a woman has a child, she confirms for herself and for others that she is a complete woman, fertile and capable of the biological task of creating and perpetuating life.” Like Natalie Angier (1999: xii), I am frustrated by the ongoing re-emergence of such essentializing descriptions that equate women with wombs and that represent a “resuscitation in recent times of all the fetid clichés that I, and probably you, ... thought had been drawn, quartered,

and cremated long ago.” However, it appears undeniable that set against the background of sensational fetal images and the increasing uses of and knowledge about technological “treatments” for infertility, such biological determinism has renewed salience and resonance, reinscribing the biological imperative onto motherhood and onto the expectations of those who are now becoming mothers.

What effect does this emphasis on biological mothering have on other forms of mothering and on the women who do that mothering? And how might that penetrating societal gaze discussed previously differently affect these other mothers? To address these fundamental, yet too often unasked, questions, it is useful to begin by offering a very straight forward sociolinguistic analysis. Every category of mother except for biomothers appears to require adjectival qualification—grandmothers, adoptive mothers, foster mothers, godmothers, mothers-in-law, and stepmothers—and the resulting marginalization is therefore reasonably clear. For just as feminist scholarship of almost thirty years ago has shown that modifying professional categories with feminine descriptors—lady doctor, female lawyer, poetess—reinforces the fact that these are normally masculine domains with a few feminine exceptions, so too the qualification of categories of mother reinforces a view that normative motherhood is that which involves pregnancy, childbirth, and a genetic relationship with the child. Just as it was reasonably uncommon twenty years ago for anyone to refer to a “gentleman doctor” or “male lawyer,” so too it is uncommon today for the term biomother to be used. It is taken for granted that “mother” refers to the woman with the biological connection to the child. But, of course, not just any biological connection will do. This normative position is also restricted to those of certain economic standing, age, marital status, racial privilege, and heterosexuality, with welfare mothers, teen mothers, mothers of “advanced age,” single mothers, minority mothers, and lesbian mothers, relegated to their own adjectival margins. Perhaps I am being too critical, for it can be argued that such linguistic specificity reflects the diversity of motherhood, allowing us to avoid grand-narrative homogeneity and to recognize the different contexts in which women work as mothers. However, because this kind of definitional qualification is reserved only for those who do not fall within the prescribed demographic category connoted by the term, “mother,” a hierarchical dichotomy is established. This dichotomy separates those who became mothers in, to use Gayle Letherby’s (1999: 359) words, an “unusual” way from those who became mothers in the “regular” way.

As I reflect on becoming a stepmother and further deconstruct the biological imperative that is imposed on dominant models of motherhood, my intent is not to dismiss or devalue the importance of biomothering. I fully recognize that as the most common form of mothering in North American societies today, biomothering remains an important aspect of millions of women’s lives and deserving of the attention it frequently garners. Instead, my aim here is to address the regulatory dichotomy between assumptions of usual

and unusual motherhood and to discuss how such regulation affects other mothers.

A narrative on becoming

Becoming a mother is a rite of passage and is therefore marked by culturally celebrated and venerated rituals. Reflecting the emphasis on biological mothering, the majority of these in Euro-Canadian society focus on pregnancy and childbirth. My induction into motherhood did not begin with pregnancy tests, baby showers, or naming ceremonies, but with an unceremonious and unscripted meeting at an Italian restaurant when my partner introduced me to his two children, then nine and seven years old. Amara, the youngest, sat chewing on the crust of her pizza, staring at me over the serving pan, answering my nervous questions with only a nod or shrug. Her older sister, Kaitlin (Katie), was more willing to engage with me, and I felt a promising moment of hope when she and I playfully hid my partner's car keys, causing him to dash about in a frantic search. That initial meeting led to a period of approximately three months when I literally felt nauseous with trepidation at the thought of sharing a life with these two remarkable children. I continually questioned whether I was "up to" the challenge of being in their lives in such a systematic way. My confidence was waning; what if I made a mistake? What if I was a disappointment? And, more self-centeredly, did I really want to let the freedom and rewards of my single life go? In sum, I went through a dizzying period of ambivalence, when I knew I should be excited but was sick with terror instead.

Approximately five weeks into this first phase, a good friend of mine became pregnant and as she spoke about her own feelings of excitement and circumspection as well as the physical adjustment to morning sickness and exhaustion, I was amazed at the similarities in what we were experiencing. From that point forward, we began to relate the stages we were both going through in becoming mothers and, again, they were remarkably alike. The second trimester was, for both of us, a tremendous departure from the first in that the nausea and trepidation ultimately passed, and the next three months were, for lack of a more academic phrase, great fun. Just as my friend spent time with her family preparing their home for the baby, I spent time with my partner and his daughters preparing for my new role and our new life as a family. We all went to the circus, established a Sunday dinner tradition, spent afternoons at the zoo, cooked Thanksgiving dinner, and dressed for Hallowe'en. I started doing things that I had never done before (nor did I ever think I would be doing), including assessing everything around me—from signs on passing buses, to movies, to fast food packaging—to determine whether they were "suitable" for children. I poured through catalogues and scoured stores looking for just the right gifts, wrapping, and cards. Reading everything that had anything to do with stepparenting (and that wasn't much), I was anxious to "get it right," and to prepare as fully as possible for my new role. More aware of the girls' presence than ever before, I no longer approached my life as if it were a

solo performance; there was now an ensemble cast. Viewing this period of my journey with the comfort of hindsight, I find it interesting to read Gayle Letherby's (1999: 370) description of her personal transition from "involuntary childlessness" to stepmotherhood: "I am no longer 'involuntarily childless'." Indeed, as I 'fell for' a person and not a family it is possible to argue that I have become an 'involuntary parent'." While I can appreciate the ambivalence she alludes to here, this description really does not fit with my experiences because I truly did "fall for" a family. I never knew my partner before he was a father, and because when we first met the girls lived with him on a more or less full-time basis (as they do now), it is a role that he embraces and that contributes centrally to his self-identity and presentation. "Falling for" a family, then, was my only option if I chose to pursue this relationship. During what I see as this second phase in the process of becoming a stepmother, I willingly made the decision to reinvent myself, adopting a very definite parenting role. Just as my friend felt her fetus move within her for the first time and who became aware of the significance of her newly emerging parental status, I too became aware of the significance of my shifting identity as my family continued to develop.

The months before the wedding (the event which served as the birth of my bonafide stepmother status) constitute the third trimester in this process of becoming. During this time, I found that the generic parenting role to which I was adapting in the second phase shifted, and I was now engaged in a far more gender-specific process. I became particularly and intensely aware that I was not becoming a stepparent, but a *stepmother*, an "other-mother," a second nurturer. While this burgeoning maternal identity was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that my relationship with the girls was deepening (I was now living with them full-time and was therefore doing more of the routine and daily "mothering" tasks), I firmly believe that the responses that this increasingly public relationship garnered from others was of greater influence. Because I was participating more openly in the girls' lives by attending softball games, science fairs, band concerts and the like, I was being recognized by other mothers and this recognition was thoroughly enjoyable. I felt as if I was finally in the world's largest women's group and, as a feminist, began to revel in the everyday recognition that women—more specifically, mothers—accord one another. When I (temporarily) took on the task of grocery shopping for all of us, for example, I was astounded that the same grocery store where I had shopped while single suddenly took on a whole new dimension now that I was shopping for a family. The place that I had once found to be a fairly boring and sterile environment had become a place for socializing, for lively discussions in cereal aisles about nutrition, the trials of early adolescence, sex education and school curriculum. In a world falsely and far too simply divided between "mothers" and "non-mothers," I had moved quickly from one side to another and was enjoying the strokes and pats of attention that, once again, acknowledged my changing status. Although I did not have the mobility and freedom I once had, I truly felt as though I were glowing.

In this narrative of becoming a stepmother, I have relied on the same metaphorical template that underlies Mary Silverweig's (1982) compelling story of becoming *The Other Mother* to her partner Stan's three daughters. She too describes a trimestered process marked by pregnancy-like stages of initial uncertainty, midway excitement, and ultimately external recognition (which she describes as "validation"). Given that Silverweig (1982: 109) expresses the same kind of frustration with the everyday overemphasis on biological mothering that I do, why, then, are she and I both drawn to this metaphor of pregnancy? In "real time," the phases that marked my becoming a stepmother exceeded the three month period claimed above (especially the third phase that was actually several years in duration), and yet in my recollection, they become neatly distilled down to the equivalent of human gestation. Why does this biological imperative exert such an analytical grip on how so many of us recall our ascendance to non-biological motherhood?

Rejecting the sociobiological and evolutionary psychological arguments that put genetics and female physiology forward as answers to these questions, I believe that what Betsy Wearing calls "the ideology of biological motherhood" has become so normalized and routinized in collective consciousness, it is the standard against which all other forms of mothering are measured. To be socially recognized as a mother, a woman usually must meet some elusive and unspecified but nonetheless naturalized ideal of connection and care. Although we have the works of Ann Daly (1982), Nancy Chodorow (1978), Adrienne Rich (1977), and Evelyn Glenn (1994) (to name only a few) that persuasively present the social and cultural underpinnings of motherhood, it appears that greater influence lies with the idea that motherhood is ultimately the product of a natural "maternal instinct," and that this biological instinct must be embraced and exhibited in order for a woman to be a good and "real" mother. For example, the seven-step process of becoming a stepparent set out by Patricia Papernow (1993: 13) is based on Gestalt and family systems theories but is draped in biological discourse that is used at one point to describe the "umbilical cord connection" to the children that may ultimately be achieved in the Contact and Resolution Stages of a stepparent's development. Similarly, in her extremely critical and negative recollection of her father's second wife, Alison Townsend notes that she longed for a stepmother who would be a "mammary mom" and would therefore "really know how to nurture and to love" (1989: 153). Likewise, in a 1997 broadcast of Laura Schlesinger's popular "Dr. Laura" radio program, Schlesinger contradictorily referred to an absentee father as "only a sperm donor" but repeatedly referred to an egg-donating woman as "the baby's real mother." Regardless, then, of who is doing the daily work of mothering, the biological connection to the woman who conceived, carried, and bore the children is reified as the ultimate definition of mother and motherhood.

With these kinds of assumptions about biological mothering establishing the rules of the game, it makes a certain kind of sense for other-mothers to adopt

the related language of biology in order to be allowed to play and to be recognized as players. According to Donna Smith (1990: 25), stepmothers may be more likely than adoptive or foster mothers to embrace idealized standards of biological maternity because we have been historically branded as the very antithesis of those ideals. Indeed, it would be impossible to become a stepmother in this time and place without running into that ubiquitous characterization of stepmothers as the ultimate evil. For as tirelessly as we try to care for our stepchildren with love and kindness, few can fully step away from that prevailing sentiment that was once succinctly summarized by one of my stepdaughter's friends, "God, she's such a bitch."

Mirror, mirror on the wall, am I even a mother at all?

Returning to a basic sociolinguistic analysis, I am interested (because most of my academic research has been in Central America) in the Spanish colloquialisms for "mother" (*madre*). *Mama*, *mamita*, and *mamasita* are only a few of the common terms of affection used for "the most important woman in the world, *mi madre*," to quote a Costa Rican research participant. *Madrastra*, on the other hand, is the singular and phonetically harsher word used to refer to a stepmother. Whereas the word *madre* is translated in the 1987 University of Chicago Spanish-English dictionary to mean "mother; womb; river bead," denoting a cradle-like nurturance, *madrastra* is translated more negatively to mean "stepmother; discipline; discord." Donna Smith (1990: 14) raises a similar distinction between bio- and step- mothers as she delves into the English etymology of the word and notes that "we find the very word, 'step', means loss; it comes from Old English 'steop' and Old High German words linked with those for ... bereavement." Although this phrasing historically arose because becoming a stepmother in European societies was in fact associated with the actual death of the biomother, the idea of loss now has a more metaphorical meaning given that most stepmothers of today usually share the care of the children with biomothers. The notion of loss, then, is extended to infer that something is missing from both the stepmother herself and her relationship with the children. This is well exemplified by the definition of "stepmother" that, according to Smith (1990: 14-15), appeared in the 1961 version of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: "one who fails to give proper care and attention." Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary cited by Smith defines the verb "to stepmother" as meaning "to provide ... unfairness or cruelty." Clearly, then, the "loss" symbolized through the prefix "step" is now colloquially associated with a cruel deprivation of nurturance, virtue, and kindness.

In examining the ways in which this idea of the cruel stepmother permeates cultural thought and public ideology, many scholars (e.g., Hughes, 1991: 50-72) provide interesting analyses of well-known stories, such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, that show how the second mothers (to mostly young girls) are repeatedly represented as being diametrically opposite to "true" maternity.

Interestingly, the adoptive mothers, godmothers and grandmothers who occasionally appear in these fables are also other-mothers but they are not mired in images of evil as stepmothers are. This is because the archetypal wicked stepmother is far older than those who appear in these well worn tales. In her fascinating analysis of Greek myth, Patricia Watson (1995) argues persuasively that the historical origins of stepmotherly wickedness lie in those ancient, mythical characters who aspired to be powerful deities but were handicapped by their hybrid half-monster constitution. Stealing and eating the children of other women (often after having “stolen” or seduced their partners), these feminine characters used their abilities to eschew gender distinctions and to try to impress the gods with their powers. They virtually always failed, of course, and their reckless abuse of other women’s children was frequently blamed for wider unrest in the godly and human worlds. Watson (1995: 214) therefore concludes that long before there was mother blame, there was stepmother blame that stemmed from the deep seeded fear of anyone who disrupted the accepted dichotomies marking socially sanctioned roles and identities. Certainly being positioned as half human/half monster, half mother/half-not qualifies as such a disruption.

This fear of disrupted and disturbed boundaries—particularly those that pertain to children—has remained strong in societies influenced by European values. As noted earlier, stepmothers challenge boundaries of identity and prescribed social roles because they occupy what anthropologists call “liminal positionings” (see Becker, 1997: 119). Stepmothers, like me, who have no biological children of our own but who cannot be considered childless because of the presence of stepchildren, occupy that undefined middle ground; we have “been declassified but are not yet reclassified: [we] have died in [our] old status [but] are not yet reborn in a new one” (Murphy *et al.*, 1988: 237). Such disruption of the taken for granted social taxonomy results in a collective sense of discord (to return to one of the themes identified in the definitions of stepmother set forth previously) which in turn causes a kind of social anxiety. This anxiety manifests itself differently across cultures, but for stepmothers in this cultural context, we are presented as undeniable threats to children (e.g., Daly and Wilson, 1999: 44). In their Canadian-based study, Kati Morrison and Airdrie Thompson-Guppy have found that the alleged threat of truculence and danger affects the daily lives of stepmothers because we are “observed more closely and judged more harshly for *perceived* errors” (1985: 13, original emphasis) while “natural mothers are excused for anything [they have] done or not done” (1985: 8). While the results of this study may unfairly characterize and idealize biomothering as unproblematic, it certainly does suggest that the piercing societal gaze, discussed previously, is even more penetrating and painful when it is projected onto other mothers through presupposed assumptions of failure and cruelty.

Given such a presiding image of wickedness, why would a woman want to become a stepmother? Interestingly, I have never found any studies that suggest

women do want this; rather, they want (as I did) to be other-mothers to the children whom they have come to cherish. Although becoming a stepmother may not be a decided goal in the same way that becoming a biomother often is, it is not usually a simple byproduct of marriage or co-habitation either. As I indicated through my own narrative of becoming a stepmother, including a partner's children into our lives is a conscious and desirable choice that means accepting and embracing a mother-like role. But there are virtually no adequate models for this role or how we might situate ourselves in relation to the children and their biomother. Indeed, because biomothering remains the base-line against which all mothering is measured, most existing literature, even that which is sympathetic towards stepmothers, distances us from the maternal realm. Donna Smith (1990: 2), for example, writes to assure stepmothers that they "need not be threatened by the myth of the perfect mother; they can choose to be other things to their stepchildren, not a mother figure, but a friend, a confidante, or a sponsoring adult, perhaps." The problem, however, is that many of us assume not just parental but mothering tasks, and the affection we develop for the children—perhaps because no other explanatory metaphor exists—can feel decidedly maternal.

Without societal acceptance of stepmothering as a form of valued other mothering, many stepmothers try, as the psychologists say (e.g., Burgoyne and Clark, 1984: 92; Norwood and Wingender, 1999: 144), to "pass" for "regular" mothers and "normal families." Yet because we are not our stepchildren's biomothers, our attempts "to pass" often fail. Moreover, the children do not always want to represent their stepmothers as biomothers for a whole variety of reasons; among them is the awkwardness children may feel in trying to explain who we are in relation to them and to their pre-established mother-child relationship. There are complex and varied relationships between biomothers and stepmothers (and between former spouses/partners and current spouses/partners) that intricately affect how the children and others in society perceive the women who have maternal connections to the children. These relationships are worthy of a discussion far too lengthy for inclusion here, but I raise it to emphasize the point that as stepmothers try to negotiate a culturally recognized space for themselves, their efforts are often attenuated because their legitimacy as other-mothers is called into question. The very presence of the biomother will frequently cast a shadow of doubt on the mothering activities of the stepmother, rendering her to a secondary and less defined position in relation to the children.

The cost of this liminality is quite high. Several noted studies have shown that women who become stepmothers are more likely to experience depression, anger, and despondence than are those who become biomothers (Duberman, 1973: 292; Quick, McKenny and Newman, 1994: 124; Nadler, 1976: 5367) and the leading cause of the breakdown of second marriages is problems with children from a previous union (Clamar, 1985: 160; Salwen, 1990: 124). Becoming a stepmother, then, is fundamentally different from becoming a

biomother because of the justifiable ambivalence in accepting such a culturally precarious position for which there are only negative models. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions that I will discuss shortly, the tribulations and triumphs of becoming a stepmother have received such scant attention by feminist scholars that there is virtually no analytical base on which we can act as advocates and try to validate the work of stepmothers. We therefore continue to try to pass ourselves off as the real thing while remaining fully aware that to most in society, we don't come close.

In my case, I have tried very hard to "pass" as a "regular" mother to Katie and Amara, always with only partial success and always mindful of the tenuousness of my parental claim. Yet I continue doing so because when asked if I have children, I receive a decidedly different response when I say "yes, two daughters" than when I use the word "stepdaughters." In the first instance, I receive the same kind of positive reaction that characterized my third trimester of becoming a stepmom. There is a great deal of recognition and validation for the work I do. In the second step-scenario, however, I find that people often become confused, uncomfortable, distant, and unwilling to engage any further in the discussion. One of the participants in Donna Smith's study put it well when she said, "Some people are embarrassed when I mention that I am a stepparent. It has connotations of failure (divorce), being second best (second wife), and it is a challenge to the myth of the 'happy family'" (1990: 10). In becoming a stepmother, I learned quickly that risking a failed attempt at passing as the "real thing" was far less awkward than dealing with the ambivalent or even downright hostile responses to my step-status.

While many stepmothers see the prevailing images of evil and cruelty as the biggest barrier to embracing an other-mother identity, the invisibility of stepmothering was, and still is, a greater obstacle for me. By invisibility, I not only mean the lack of recognition, support, or value that stepmothers deal with on a daily basis, but also the exclusion of stepmothers from popular and technical discourses of parenting and motherhood. These issues of invisibility are dealt with most effectively in the rich and burgeoning literature on lesbian mothering, as scholars like Dawn Comeau argue that "the rules of hetero-patriarchy ... mandate only one mother" (1999: 46) and they relegate co-mothers to the secondary margins. The women whom Comeau interviews face a heterosexist bias that I do not, and although this is a critically important difference, I can nonetheless identify with their stories of transparency and devaluation. One woman echoed my own feelings particularly well when she said, "I kinda' felt like behind the scenes I was working my butt off to do this and do that and the stuff you don't see. You don't see my stomach growing [but I'm working just as hard at being a parent]" (Comeau, 1999: 48). The accounts presented and analyzed by Comeau are characteristic of others, including those in Fiona Nelson's (1996) monograph of lesbian mothering and Susan Dundas' (1999) personal account of "second mothering." Taken together, this literature offers plenty of evidence that this kind of invisibility and lack of recognition

occurs constantly in the lives of lesbian and heterosexual stepmothers.

One of the first times I became aware of this invisibility was early in my relationship with my stepdaughters, probably in my second trimester. I was becoming more involved with the girls' sporting events and had taken a particular interest in Katie's new-found enthusiasm for basketball. I wanted to attend as many games as possible and was attempting to rearrange my work schedule to accommodate this. However, when a senior colleague asked me to commit myself to a meeting schedule that would have disrupted these plans, I asked—with the trepidation of a then untenured junior faculty member—if the schedule could be slightly changed and I explained why. My colleague's reply was very direct, "No," she said, "they're not your kids." Her answer suggested that if they *were* my children—that is, my "real" children—my request could have been accommodated but because they weren't, I was extraneous to their lives, what I did for them was of no importance, and therefore work should come first. As a feminist, this colleague had previously shown great support for the needs of mothers in the workplace, but in my case, the work I did for Katie and Amara was not considered mother-work and was therefore rendered invisible.

I have been confronted with the trials of transparency many times since, including an occasion quite recently when I was on my way to a national conference and ran into a former friend from graduate school. I was excited to see her and hear about her life; "how are things going?" I asked. "That's a complex question," she replied (with airs that I do not recall her having in grad school), "can you narrow it down? My life is very full." Asking first about her new academic appointment and then about her children, I offered (in an attempt to keep an awkward conversation moving forward) that I, too, have children. With genuine interest, she immediately asked how many and how old, but when I explained that they were stepchildren, she shook her head as if to reorient herself, "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you meant *real* children." She walked away; our conversation was over. It was probably not the actual existence of Katie and Amara that my former friend was questioning here but my relationship to them and my purported claim to be a "real" mother. Any information that I wanted to share about my life with the girls was of no interest to her. It was, in every sense, rendered once again invisible.

These two incidents not only reflect the kind of reactions I garnered as I have become a stepmother, they are also representative of the general and far-reaching ways in which stepmothering, in all its complex permutations and at all stages, is so frequently dismissed. A comprehensive list of examples would be seemingly endless and would most certainly include the fact that stepmothers in Canada and the United States have no legal standing in regard to the children and therefore do not have well established rights on which they can rely in order to protect the children. (Contradictorily, they can, and have been, held financially indebted to their stepchildren after a divorce). Until recently, stepparent relationships were not recognized or counted in the Canadian

census, and even the literature on stepparenting follows this trend in that the work and rewards associated with stepmothering as a unique form of mothering are subsumed under general and generic references to stepparenting that does not distinguish mothering from fathering.

It appears therefore that there is a choice for women who are becoming stepmothers; they can be seen as wicked tyrants, or not be seen at all. Caught in an interminable position of liminality, many stepmothers choose to cloak themselves in the rubric of idealized motherhood, adopting—as I did in my narrative of becoming—discourses of biological maternity. However, this misrepresents the reality of our lives and ultimately adds to the precariousness of our position in that it perpetuates our invisibility. In her study of stepmothers in nineteenth-century America, Robin Hemenway notes that “As ‘replacement’ mothers, [stepmothers] found themselves negotiating a role for which there was no prescribed codes, which was often looked upon with suspicion, and which stood in stark contradiction to some of the most basic aspects of the motherhood ideal” (1999: 78). Both the existing literature and my own experience indicate that this difficult negotiation is still very much a part of the process of becoming a stepmother and this must be more fully acknowledged, explored, and revealed.

I remain hopeful that as we accrue more information about other mothering generally, we can step away from the negative characterizations that make becoming a stepmother so challenging and move towards new models of inclusive motherhood that will allow the positive, pleasurable, and rewarding aspects of stepmothering to be seen and celebrated.

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