

WMNST 497

BAD MOTHERS

Spring 2017



Professor Tracy Rutler
MWF 1:25-2:15 P.M., Willard 319
Office hours: 2:30-3:30 M&F and by appointment
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Representations of kind, caring mothers have dominated much of Western cultural and artistic production since at least the rise of Christianity. Depictions of mothers in the act of mothering (for example, nursing an infant, instructing a child, or carrying a baby on her back) in art, literature, and philosophy both inform and are informed by practices of mothering. However, what it means to be a “good” mother is conditioned by specific historic and cultural moments. Recently, for instance, the publication of parenting books such as Alicia Silverstone’s *The Kind Mama* have renewed debate about what we should and should not expect from mothers, and about what it means to be a good – or implicitly a bad – mother. Mothers who do not live up to social standards are often devoured by the media. Furthermore, the broad acceptance of terms such as “Refrigerator mom,” “Tiger Mom,” or “Soccer mom” attest to a general belief that the mother is ultimately responsible for the successes and the failures of her child. In this course, we will analyze artistic and literary representations of “bad” mothers. We will explore how the expectations of mothers vary according to time and place, paying particular attention to how the perceived role and function of motherhood has evolved over the past 300 years. Through analyses of novels, comic books, self-help books, stand-up comedy, poetry, and critical theory, we will question the stakes for women in a society where mothering is often considered to be a woman’s most important (or even only) function.

Required Texts:

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (978-0393312843)
Kelley Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet, Vol. 1* (978-1632153661)
Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (978-0679758693)

Octavia Butler, *Blood Child and Other Stories* (978-1583226988)

Euripides, *Medea* (978-0486275482)

Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (978-0520221550)

Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?* (978-0544002234)

Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Sarah* (978-1603290272)

Course Objectives:

This is a literature and cultural studies course in which we will analyze books, movies, and television shows that depict (and often scrutinize) motherhood as a fundamental institution of individual formation and social organization. In this course you can expect to:

- ✓ examine the various ways in which the category and institution of motherhood emerges and evolves, particularly in the West
- ✓ learn how culture, class, race, and many other categories shape the way we understand motherhood
- ✓ discuss various forms of resistance to motherhood
- ✓ analyze literary and cultural texts through the lens of psychoanalysis, structuralism, feminist, queer, and disability studies
- ✓ sharpen your analytical and critical skills

Rules, Regulations, and Rights:

- **Attendance:** Regular attendance is mandatory. Please let me know when you won't be in class and keep in mind that more than three absences will affect your grade.
- **Citations:** In this course, you are required to properly cite sources in your work using the Chicago or MLA style guides, unless otherwise instructed. If you have questions about proper citation, don't hesitate to ask me.
- **Electronic Devices:** phones and laptops are not permitted in class without my explicit permission. Please be sure to put your phone on silent mode, and to keep it out of sight during class.
- **Canvas:** I use Canvas to communicate relevant information about the course. Any readings for the course that are not a part of the required texts can also be found on Canvas. Please be sure to check Canvas regularly or to set it to alert you when changes are made to the site. You may also download the Canvas app for easy access.
- **Disability Policy:** Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. Every Penn State campus has an office for students with disabilities. The Student Disability Resources Web site provides [contact information for every Penn State campus](#): [**http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/disability-coordinator**](http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/disability-coordinator). For further information, please visit the [Student Disability Resources Web site](#): [**http://equity.psu.edu/sdr**](http://equity.psu.edu/sdr).

In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you

are officially enrolled, **participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation**: <http://equity.psu.edu/sdr/applying-for-services>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your **campus's disability services office** will provide you with an accommodation letter. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. You must follow this process for every semester that you request accommodations.

- **Academic Integrity:** Penn State defines academic integrity as the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner. All students should act with personal integrity, respect other students' dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts (Faculty Senate Policy 49-20).
- **Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course.** Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, submitting work of another person (including information from the Internet) or work previously used without informing the instructor, having unauthorized possession of examinations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, or tampering with the academic work of other students. Students who are found to be dishonest will receive academic sanctions and will be reported to the University's Judicial Affairs office for possible further disciplinary sanction.

Breakdown of Grade:

Attendance and active participation in class	10%
Contributions to Canvas Discussions	10%
Presentation of a cultural object	15%
Creative Project	30%
Final Paper	35%

TENTATIVE WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WHERE DID SHE COME FROM? THE INVENTION OF MOTHERHOOD.

Week 1: 1/9 - 1/13:

Monday

- Alicia Silverstone, *The Kind Mama: A Simple Guide to Supercharged Fertility, a Radiant Pregnancy, a Sweeter Birth, and a Healthier, More Beautiful Beginning* (Selections on Canvas – “Kind Mama” Parts 1-3)
- William and Martha Sears, *The Attachment Parenting Book* (Selections on Canvas)
- *Leave it to Beaver* 3:31 (“Mother’s Day Composition”) (link on Canvas)

Wednesday

- Rousseau, *Emile, or Concerning Education* (“Sophie”) (Selections on Canvas)
- Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (“Oedipus Complex”) (Selections on Canvas)

Friday

- Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*, Chapter 5 “The New Mother” (Selections on Canvas)
- Your choice of one episode of *Modern Family*, *Fresh off the Boat*, or *Black-ish* (For the last I suggest episode 1:4 “Crazy Mom”)

Week 2: 1/18 - 1/20

Monday 1/16 – Martin Luther King Jr. Day, no classes

Wednesday

- Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*, Part II intro and Chapter 4 “The Defense of the Child” (Selections on Canvas)
- Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (Selections on Canvas)

Friday

- *The Donna Reed Show* 1:1 (“Operation Deadbeat”)
- *Gilmore Girls* 1:1 (“Pilot”); 1:14 (“That Damn Donna Reid”)

Week 3: 1/23 -1/27

Monday

- Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (CH 1-3)

Wednesday

- Euripides, *Medea*
- Pierre Corneille, *Médée* (Selections on Canvas)

Friday

- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (CH 1) (CH 4-5 optional)

BUT WHAT ABOUT ME? PREGNANCY AND THE 2-BODY PROBLEM.

Week 4: 1/30 – 2/3

Monday

- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (CH 2, 9) (7-8 optional)

Wednesday

- Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Selections on Canvas)

Friday

- Abby Rabinowitz, “Why Egg Freezing is an Impossible Choice”
- Articles on female bodies and pregnancy / conception (Links on Canvas)

Week 5: 2/6 – 2/10

Monday

- Donna Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”

Wednesday

- Elisabeth Badinter, *The Conflict*, CH6 “Wombs on Strike”

Friday

- Raya Al-Jadir, “Disability and Motherhood: The Choice Mothers Make”

IMPERIALISM, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE BAD “OTHER” MOM

Week 6: 2/13 – 2/17

Monday

- Kelley Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet, Vol. 1*

Wednesday

- Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (CH 1 “Reproduction in Bondage”)

Friday

- Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (CH 5 “The Welfare Debate: Who Pays for Procreation?”)

Week 7: 2/20 – 2/24

Monday

- Doris Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves*, CH3 “Daughters and Paternalism: Marceline Desbordes-Valmore” (On Canvas)
- Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Sarah*

Wednesday

- Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Sarah*

Friday

- Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Sarah*

Week 8: 2/27 – 3/3

Monday

- Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (**CH 6 “Race and the New Reproduction”**)
- Octavia Butler, *Blood Child and Other Stories*

Wednesday

- Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (**CH 7 “The Meaning of Liberty”**)
- Octavia Butler, *Blood Child and Other Stories*

Friday

- Edwige Danticat, “Night Women” (On Canvas)

Week 9: SPRING BREAK (3/5-3/11)

THERE MUST BE 50 (MILLION) WAYS TO BE A BAD MOTHER.

Week 10: 3/13 – 3/17

Monday

- Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Selections on Canvas)

Wednesday

- Sylvia Plath, “Morning Song”
- Articles on postpartum depression (Links on Canvas)

Friday

- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (CH 10)

Week 11: 3/20 – 3/22 Friday 3/24 – NO CLASS

Monday

- Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, “On the Origins of Autism” (On Canvas)

Wednesday

- Patty Douglas, “Refrigerator Mothers” (On Canvas)
- *Life Goes On*, episodes 1-3

Week 12: 3/27 – 3/29 Friday 3/31 – NO CLASS

Monday -Wednesday

- Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*

LEANING INTO IT.

Week 13: 4/3 – 4/7

Monday

- Ali Wong, “Baby Cobra”
- **Kate Meier, “I can’t be that mom” (Link on Canvas)**

Wednesday

- **Presentations of creative projects**

Friday

- **French and Saunders, 3:6 (“Modern Mother and Daughter”)**
- *Absolutely Fabulous*, Season 2, episode 3 (“Morocco”)

Week 14: 4/10 – 14

Monday

- Shelley Park, “Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood” (On Canvas)

Wednesday

- *Arrested Development*, Season 1

Friday

- *Arrested Development*, Season 1

THE END OF MOTHERHOOD?

Week 15: 4/17 – 4/21

Monday

- Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (Selections on Canvas)

Wednesday

- Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Selections on Canvas)

Friday

- *Children of Men* (we will schedule a screening outside of classtime)

Week 16: 4/24-4/28

Monday-Wednesday

- *Orphan Black*, season 1

Friday

- No readings – course wrap-up