

“YOU MAKE ME FEEL LIKE MY LIFE IS OVER!”: TELE/VISIONS
OF CONTEMPORARY POSTMATERNAL WOMEN

A THESIS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Janet and Joe Maurer, who gave me a safe place to grow up;
the ability to empathize with others and think critically about everything I experience;
an imagination big enough to envision a more just world; and above all,
who allowed me to “govern myself accordingly” into a life that is truly my own.

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis is to promote a more holistic understanding of motherhood that acknowledges the temporary and shifting nature of maternal roles and practices longitudinally by including greater analysis of the experiences and perceptions of mothers of adult children in scholarship. While feminist scholars who study motherhood generally only confront mainstream U.S. cultural ideologies of sexism that seek to cast all women into mothering roles, this thesis seeks to also confront how this ideology of essential motherhood carries certain ageist underpinnings that interfere with women's abilities to adjust their maternal practices as their children age into adulthood. This thesis illustrates this point through an analysis of how mothers of adult children are depicted in the television shows *Brothers and Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *George Lopez*. It argues that mothers of adult children in these television shows continue to be affected, if not constrained, by the ideology of essential motherhood, even after their children are grown.

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CHAPTER I

THE LOST EPISODES – MOTHERHOOD AFTER PRIMARY CARE

THE “DEATH” OF MY MOTHER

I arrived at freshman orientation carrying two main pieces of advice from my four older siblings: First, register for classes based on when the finals are, not when the classes meet. The earlier you finish finals, the sooner you get to go home, and the longer your semester break will be. Second, get all your core classes out of the way early so you can take any electives you want during your last year. My head was full of gems like these; they prepared their baby sister well. What my siblings did not prepare me for was how a perfectly mundane moment between mother and daughter would become memorable.

As part of the mandatory two-day freshman orientation, parents and their college-bound children were required to spend the night away from each other in separate residence halls. At night after dinner, while all the other freshmen were at the student union socializing with each other, I snuck away to spend time with my mother in her room. We drank Diet Mountain Dew and snacked on dried mango – the flavors of my childhood. Mom sat on her bed reading a book, probably something by Louis L’Amour, and I sat on the floor reading the fall course catalog. Mom looked up from her book to

see me plotting the first leg of my transition into adulthood and abruptly started to cry. In chopped, wet syllables, Mom said, “You make me feel like my life is over!”

I am not sure which one of us was more surprised by her outburst. We were so thrown off by the declaration that neither of us really said anything. As I chuckled nervously and tried to think of a way to apologize for growing up, Mom calmed herself down and turned back to her book. The moment passed, and the exclamation hung awkwardly in the air for a while before finally settling under my skin. I have carried her words around with me ever since.

“You make me feel like my life is over!” My first reaction had been to apologize, but for what? What had I done to make my mother feel like “death” was upon her? When I enrolled in the graduate seminar “The Politics of Motherhood” eight years later, I was certain I would find some resolution to my questions. To my disappointment, not a single reading or class discussion acknowledged the social location in which my mother found herself when I turned 18. She had been a stay-at-home mom for 28 years, and when the day-to-day work of childrearing had ended, she found herself in a new territory that differed greatly from the life she was used to. So greatly, in fact, that it did not look like much of a “life” at all.

My own mother’s initial turmoil when her youngest left home, as well as an absence of her voice from the academic discourse on mothering, led me to the ideas I discuss in this work. This memory was just a moment in time that dissipated as quickly as it boiled up. So quickly, in fact, that when I asked my mom about the incident recently

she had absolutely no memory of it, but confirmed, “That sounds like something I would have said.” How strange that one of the single most transformative experiences of my adult life – the first time I was able to see my mother as a woman first and my mommy second – turned out to be not even a speck on my mother’s timeline. Still, her raw, though short-lived, expression of desperation that night many years ago now teaches me something about the way mainstream U.S. society thinks about women’s mothering and aging.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that U.S. mainstream society actually does not think very much about women’s mothering and aging, for it is the virtual absence of thought that I address in this work. Despite efforts by feminist scholars and activists to dismantle the notion that all women, can, should, and want to be mothers, an ideology commonly referred to as “essential motherhood” (Kinser), the lack of attention given to the experiences of mothers of adult children reflects the mainstream U.S. culture’s inability to divorce the notion of motherhood from the work of early mothering, as it is traditionally associated with primary caregiving. The popular conflation of motherhood with mothering and mothering with women’s value in society made even my own creative, hilarious, business-minded, feminist mom feel displaced and invisible when her last child left home. Understandably, to my mom my entrance into adulthood initially looked less like a graduation and more like a “death.”

It is not my intention to cast pity on my mom; rather, this memory serves as a way to locate myself in this work and as a jumping off point to begin discussing the need for a

more holistic understanding of motherhood that takes into account how women's maternal practices change over time. In many ways my mother embodied "traditional" motherhood by staying home to raise five kids, keep house, and make sure dinner was ready by the time my father arrived home from work, but in many other ways, and maybe even many more ways, she was anything but traditional. This thesis seeks to offer an original contribution to existing literature on motherhood by advancing a more holistic view of motherhood that is inclusive of mothers of adult children. More specifically, this thesis examines how contemporary depictions of mothers of adult children on television reflect and/or instruct cultural understandings of this time in a woman's life.

In this thesis I first highlight and compare important works in motherhood studies, identifying common themes and addressing strengths and limitations of the existing scholarship. I then identify the comparatively small body of work that focuses on mothers of adult children and define terms that are integral to this scholarship. In Chapter Two, "Media Analysis of Postmaternity," I discuss the value of media analysis as scholarship and provide a brief history of how motherhood has been depicted on television throughout broadcast history. I then provide an overview of media studies that contributes to a more holistic view of motherhood and describe trends in how mothers of adult children are generally depicted on television. In Chapter Three, "Postmaternity in Contemporary U.S. Television," I examine depictions of mothers of adult children on the four television series, *Brothers and Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *George Lopez*. I briefly summarize the episodes examined from each series that

provide examples of how mothers of adult children continue to be constrained by traditional notions of motherhood. I then compare how the women discussed are culturally valued or judged as mothers in each series. In the concluding chapter, I reflect on important points from the preceding three chapters and outline opportunities and plans for future research. The overall goal of this thesis is threefold: to synthesize and assess recent studies that focus on mothers of adult children; to suggest that mothers of adult children continue to be affected by the ideology of essential motherhood, even beyond their childrearing years; and to illuminate how constructing a more holistic understanding of motherhood, one that is inclusive of the experiences and perceptions of mothers of adult children, can achieve the goal of dismantling essential motherhood. In this thesis I argue that only through shedding the vestiges of ageism that contribute to the ideology of essential motherhood can scholars finally succeed in rejecting essential motherhood and adopting a fully inclusive ideology of parenthood.

A PREVIEW OF MOTHERHOOD STUDIES

Mothers and issues important to mothers have received an increasing amount of media attention over the past several years. Activists have worked to achieve or preserve mothers' rights to carry breast milk through airport security, receive affordable prenatal care, and take maternity leave without being penalized by employers. Despite efforts to disrupt rigid norms that shape motherhood, certain ideals about what it means to be a mother and what it means to be a "good" mother persist in popular media. Political parties and organizations, mobilizing maternal sentiments in advertising and recruitment

campaigns, gain support of mothers by claiming their causes are synchronous with notions of “good mothering” (Orleck). In 2008, U.S. Vice-Presidential hopeful Sarah Palin described herself as a “mama grizzly,” drawing a parallel between her own reactions to the media’s negative depictions of her children and a female grizzly bear’s instinct to protect her cubs (Bosman). Four years later, First Lady Michelle Obama famously announced at the 2012 Democratic National Convention that “at the end of the day, my most important title is still ‘mom-in-chief.’ My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world” (“Michelle”). These kinds of defensive assertions by women in the public eye to establish themselves as “good” mothers are very common in the media. They function to reaffirm that even when a woman occupies a traditionally male public space, such as a convention stage and podium, she still primarily identifies with traditional ideals of motherhood. Furthermore, as these examples illustrate, most popular media attention is placed on mothers of dependent children.

Extant scholarly literature in motherhood studies reflects a similar preoccupation. Early mothering is treated as the aspect of motherhood most worthy of extensive research, theorizing, and scholarly discourse, so the evolution of women’s roles and identities as mothers as and after their children reach adulthood is not afforded equal recognition within the scholarship. As a result, many gaps remain concerning the understanding of motherhood as an identity and mothering as a practice. Motherhood scholars commonly explore questions like: When does motherhood begin? What challenges and triumphs do women experience as mothers? How are traditional notions

of motherhood being deconstructed, rewritten, or upheld? Most literature on motherhood, however, does not explain or critique how mothers of older children or adult children are still constrained by “traditional” notions of early motherhood.

According to existing motherhood studies, a “traditional,” essentialist vision of motherhood, which inextricably links a woman’s fulfillment and life purpose to her “natural” ability to produce and nurture children, is still a dominant framework in U.S. society (Kinser 16-21). Feminist activism and scholarship during the past fifty years have lessened the influence of the standards of essential motherhood over women’s lives; however, feminist scholars and activists working to dismantle essential motherhood have focused almost entirely on mothers of dependent children. Such a limited focus reifies the notion that motherhood is an occupation best suited to young women and predominantly involving primary care. Most studies do not sufficiently acknowledge that motherhood is an identity that accompanies a wide range of roles and responsibilities that are not necessarily related to primary caregiving and that change and develop over time.

The notion that mothering almost exclusively involves primary caregiving is evident in most feminist scholarship on motherhood. In her book *Motherhood and Feminism*, Amber E. Kinser organizes the growing body of motherhood literature into several tracks (1-26), which examine how economic and epistemic power affects mothers positively or negatively, especially in their abilities to provide for their children (Crittenden); address and deconstruct essentialist views of motherhood and dualistic divisions of parenting roles (DiQuinzio; Ruddick); acknowledge intersections of

difference, such as race, class, disability, and sexual orientation, that complicate maternal discourse (Berry); and analyze how mothers are represented in the media (Kaplan; Coontz; Arnold). Each of these tracks relies on the conflation of motherhood with primary caregiving for young children.

Only a few motherhood scholars attempt to construct a more holistic understanding of motherhood that recognizes its temporary nature and fluidity over time. As early as 1914, Dorothy Canfield Fisher noted this disconnect between popular notions of motherhood and the reality of its temporary nature. She asserts in *Mothers and Children*, “Whatever it may have been in other periods in history, at the present day *maternity is not the occupation of a lifetime*” (252, original emphasis). According to Fisher, “this business of being a mother is a queer one, and in many respects quite unlike any other, but the queerest part of it often escapes mention in all the talk about maternity” (251). Fisher observes that the “queerest part” of being a mother is a kind of “unemployment” that occurs when children reach adulthood (251). Although Fisher’s original observation about the temporary nature of motherhood was made in 1914, her assertion has yet to be realized in the popular understanding of motherhood, as evidenced by my own mother’s experiences. In her now-canonical *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich echoes Fisher’s assertion, claiming that while motherhood “is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (36-37, original emphasis). Rich and Fisher agree that the role as primary caregiver that women may fulfill as mothers to dependent children must eventually end; however, Rich suggests that the “letting-go” of their children and

returning to their own selves is a transgressive act against the patriarchal constraints of traditional motherhood (Rich 37), whereas Fisher seems to feel that a child's entrance into adulthood represents an undesirable and passive "unemployment" (Fisher 251).

Margaret Morganroth Gullette has recently begun to expand the observations of Fisher and Rich by examining and theorizing about women's lives after their children are grown, and she uses the term "postmaternal" to describe this time period. As Gullette describes them, postmaternal women historically have been those who reach "the 'end' of [their] childrearing years and still retain many years of 'surplus' life to 'fill'" ("Inventing" 221). According to Gullette, postmaternal women have been depicted in literary fiction as everything from lonely and empty creatures of pity to selfish sexual deviants to new members of the workforce, but the common attitude held by authors across most of these literary depictions is devaluing and resentful of middle-aged women. Since coining the term "postmaternal" in an effort to construct new age-positive possibilities for mid-life women, Gullette has developed a lexicon for discussing women's lives after childrearing years in many scholarly works ("Why"; "Valuing"; "Wicked"; "The Broken"; "Can").

A more popular term than Gullette's neologism "postmaternity" is the "empty nest period." Although these two terms refer to the period of time after childrearing is complete, the empty nest period carries a stigma of pathology that postmaternity does not. Research exploring the impact and prevalence of the "empty nest syndrome" (ENS), the colloquial term used to describe "feelings of depression, sadness, and/or grief"

(“Empty”) associated with an adult child leaving home, yields conflicting results (Borland 118). Although fathers have been found to experience feelings of loss qualifying as ENS, and in fact may experience ENS more acutely than mothers (Mitchell and Lovegreen 1659; Dodd), the negative stigma and pathological implications are reserved almost entirely for mothers (Raup and Myers 180).

Mass-market literature on the subject includes a multitude of popular coping guides to help parents adjust to the empty nest. Many of the texts address mothers specifically in their titles, while others have more general titles, though their contents still primarily address women or primarily include women’s perspectives (Canfield; Hanna and Y’Barbo; Schaffer and Wasserman; Stabiner; Crowson). The only title listed in a cursory search that addresses men specifically is entitled *Where Did My Wife Go? Understanding and Surviving Menopause, Mid-Life Crisis and the Empty Nest Syndrome*. In other words, popular guidebooks on empty nest syndrome usually counsel women on coping with their changing roles and families and counsel men on coping with their hysterical wives. This demonstrates that even though major gender differences may not actually exist when it comes to how mothers and fathers feel and adjust when their children reach adulthood, the U.S. cultural imagination still relies on an understanding of motherhood that is all-consuming of women’s thoughts, feelings, and activities, even after their children have “launched.”

Some scholarly studies of ENS argue that data is inconclusive and that there is a general lack of consensus about the impact of the prevalence of ENS. Delores Cacic

Borland believes that this may be accounted for by controlling for certain socio-cultural markers in the subject group. Borland, by comparing trends in social circumstances and cultural values in white, Mexican American, and Black communities, comes to the conclusion that white middle-class heterosexual women may be more likely than other demographic groups to experience a strong, negative impact of their children leaving home because this demographic group is more likely to be able to enjoy the privilege of a single-income, two-parent household, and therefore would also have the luxury of devoting more time to traditional domestic responsibilities (127).

Although Borland is able to support her hypothesis that white middle-class women may be more acutely affected by ENS than other demographic groups, more recent studies introduce new evidence that may disprove her claim. Heather E. Dillaway and Trish Green each focused on these women in qualitative studies sampling heterosexual, middle-class, college-educated women in the Midwestern United States and mostly white academics in the United Kingdom, respectively. Dillaway's study determined that mothering, as defined by primary caregiving, continues well after a woman's child(ren) have left home, thus displacing the notion of an "empty nest" altogether. Furthermore, Green's work reveals that an adult child's home-leaving need not be a sorrowful event, but rather can be a positive one offering new opportunities for personal and professional growth (147). These conclusions suggest that even within more homogenous groups, including white, middle-class college graduates, women's experiences of their children leaving home are varied. Whether or not empty nest

syndrome exists, and whether or not it affects one group more strongly than another, women of all races and classes grapple with a unique combination of social realities that complicate their transitions to being mothers to adult children in different ways.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, “motherhood cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context” because it “occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender” (“Shifting” 45). Although Gullette challenges feminist scholars to nurture the development of a strong pro-aging theory that works to deconstruct ageism in society, neither she nor Green or Dillaway explore or even acknowledge in their work the intersections of race and class that contribute to and complicate those hierarchies. While the specific postmaternal experiences of women of color and working class women have not explicitly been explored, Dillaway’s finding that mothering continues in varying capacities long after children are grown aligns with Patricia Hill Collins’ discussion of “othermothering” among African-American women. According to Collins, among African-American women there often are “women-centered networks,” in which “grandmothers, sisters, aunts or cousins act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another’s children” (*Black* 178). In these situations, such women are simultaneously postmaternal, having raised their own children to adulthood, at the same time they engage in “motherwork” (“Shifting” 48) to help raise another woman’s young children. The nuanced postmaternal experiences of working class mothers and mothers of color, like the othermothering by older relatives and community members that Collins describes, enrich discourse on postmaternity in new

ways not only by complicating the meaning of postmaternity, but also by breaking down traditional notions of motherhood.

How do women's roles and identities as mothers change as their children grow up? What challenges and triumphs do women experience as a result of those changes? How do social differences complicate or enrich the experiences of postmaternal women? When does mothering end, if at all? Most scholarly literature on motherhood leaves questions like these not only unanswered, but unasked, suggesting a common belief that motherhood is equally and completely transformational and identically experienced across all intersections of race, class, sexual orientation, marital status, ability, and so on. Under this ideology, babies become children; children become adults; but mothers occupy a fixed social location wherein they are recognizable not as fully human individuals but as permanent, selfless caregivers whose roles in and value to society ends when their children reach adulthood.

THE "HERMETIC" NATURE OF ESSENTIAL MOTHERHOOD

Some strands of contemporary U.S. feminism are fundamentally concerned with ensuring women's ability to determine their own life courses without intervention by others. According to Patrice DiQuinzio, these forms of Western feminism have historically advocated for and engaged in the internalization of masculine frameworks of individual subjectivity as a way of advancing parity with men in a variety of spheres, both political and private. DiQuinzio argues that such a practice of invoking an individualistic ideology becomes problematic when women are mothers. In part,

DiQuinzio asserts, this is because when women mother they must necessarily reject the notion that they are completely autonomous individuals because at least one other human life is dependent on them for survival and care. Mothers are then left in a “double bind” between the individualism that prompts them to be self-determining and the notion of “essential” motherhood that conceptualizes women as “naturally” self-sacrificing (DiQuinzio).

Rather than categorizing this location for mothers as what DiQuinzio calls a “double bind,” which is rigid and narrows the possibilities for resistance on the part of mothers, I instead suggest that the mothers’ predicament more closely resembles what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as “the Borderlands.” For Anzaldúa, “the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (19). The intimate nature of motherhood, then, not only blurs the boundary between a woman’s individual identity and her maternal identity, but also collapses the boundary between her free-willed self and her child(ren). A woman’s mothering years are then spent “living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity” (Anzaldúa 19). In other words, while in the U.S. people are socialized to identify primarily as individuals, it is difficult to maintain autonomy while simultaneously living up to the cultural standards of essential motherhood. As a result, women who mother are frequently engaged in a struggle to consolidate conflicting norms.

Unlike Anzaldúa's lifelong residence in the borderlands, women who mother migrate to the maternal borderlands at the time they become mothers. Sixty years ago, women found themselves occupying a maternal borderlands much earlier in life, and whether or not they ever became mothers the pressure to get married and reproduce was applied much more acutely than it is today. According to the PBS documentary *Makers: Women Who Make America*, "For the high school graduates of the 1950s, life looked good. America was booming, creating a prosperous new middle class. For boys, the future held almost limitless possibilities. ... For [white] middle class American women, the ideal was to get married, and then to cheerfully assume their proper place in the home as wives and mothers" (Streep). The strict ideal of white femininity that required women to aspire toward the goal of essential, "traditional" motherhood eventually led to "the problem that has no name" that was explored in Betty Friedan's classic *The Feminine Mystique*.

The "traditional" aspect of motherhood implies that there is a "right" way to become a mother and to perform "motherwork" (Collins "Shifting" 48). Traditional motherhood requires women to be heterosexual, middle class or upwardly mobile, educated, able-bodied, and married before becoming mothers. Teen mothers, older mothers, mothers with disabilities, lesbian mothers, "othermothers," and mothers of color, for the most part, cannot fit the mold of traditional motherhood. According to traditional notions of motherhood, children reach adulthood at around the same time as their mothers enter middle age and menopause and exit "true" womanhood (Raup 180),

and newly postmaternal women once again find themselves in different territory. Neither the embodiment of the fruitful, ageless mother that the concept of essential motherhood promotes, nor ready to be written into the broader narrative of decline that frames “old age,” postmaternal women occupy a borderlands fenced in by ageism and essentialism.

Postmaternal borderlands were different just over a century ago, when the life expectancy of forty-nine years did not exceed the childrearing years in any marked way (Fodor and Franks 445). Because women did not expect to live thirty years or more beyond the maturation of their children, it was less necessary to prepare for a second “occupation.” In the present day U.S., on the other hand, it is common for women to live thirty or more years beyond the completion of childrearing (Fodor and Franks 445). The years that now span the time between the end of the occupation of childrearing and the end of a woman’s life leaves enough “‘surplus’ years to ‘fill’” (Gullette “Inventing” 221) that are nearly equivalent to the length of a traditional professional career.

As mentioned previously, the empty nest period is the popular term used to describe the borderlands between maternity and mortality. In the forward to *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Empty Nesters—101 Stories about Surviving and Thriving when the Kids Leave Home*, editors Carol McAdoo Rehme and Patricia Cena Evans write, “From the moment children enter our lives, whether by birth or by bonding, they become an extension of our selves. When she sings, we sing. When he hurts, we hurt. In a whisper, we plant seeds that say, ‘You will always be my baby. Forever and ever’” (xiii). This description summarizes the implications of essential motherhood. Under essential

motherhood, women are socialized to think about their children as permanent babies in need of primary care; therefore, women must also think of their own tasks, identities, and roles as mothers as unchanging. When mothers are unable to envision their lives beyond their caregiving roles, the maternal borderlands become more treacherous and begin to resemble the “double bind” that DiQuinzio describes. This is because essential motherhood imposes a fixed identity onto women who mother, an identity that neither acknowledges mothering as fluid or temporary nor allows women to pursue interests outside of traditional motherhood. “You will always be my baby” actually means, I will always exist for the sole purpose of mothering you. “Forever and ever,” as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, motherhood without end (Rehme and Evans xiii). This sentiment is at the heart of what I refer to as “hermetic” motherhood.

The word “hermetic” means “complete and airtight,” especially when used to describe a seal (“Hermetic”). I use “hermetic” in this case to describe the long-term effects of essential motherhood. The “hermetic” nature of motherhood means that when women become mothers, they are culturally viewed not as people in their own right, but as permanent, selfless caregivers, regardless of the needs and desires of themselves and their families. Understanding the “hermetic” implications of essential motherhood have developed over the last fifty years as feminist scholars and activists, catalyzed by *The Feminine Mystique*, have begun to dismantle notions of essential motherhood.

For a highly concentrated example of “hermetic” motherhood, compare Raphael’s *The Madonna and Child* to Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. Trish Green uses this pair of examples

to illustrate a slightly different issue in her work on postmaternity, but it also functions to demonstrate the “hermetic” nature of motherhood. In the first example, *The Madonna and Child*, Mary holds the infant Christ child in her arms. She has youthful features representative of her age. In the second example, *Pietá*, Mary cradles the body of her dead son. Although Christ has aged to adulthood, Mary appears at most to be of comparable age to her son, almost as if she’s been vacuum-sealed. The physical preservation of Mary’s features is symbolic of the supposed stasis of motherhood, and her physical act of cradling her son at the end of his life in the same way she did at the beginning reinforces this idea by showing that her maternal practice is likewise unchanged. Although both *The Madonna and Child* and *Pietá* are centuries old, the symbolism of the Virgin Mary persists into the present day. Mary is the mystical epitome of The Maternal; she is ever fertile, ever youthful, and ever selfless – all qualities valued in traditional mothers.

Feminist scholars have attempted to dismantle essential motherhood by confronting the ideology’s sexist underpinnings, but they have not confronted the vestiges of ageism that are inherent to the ideology. Studying essential motherhood “in isolation from its context” (Collins “Shifting” 45) in this way ultimately gives rise to the ideology of “hermetic” motherhood. By continuing to operate under the ideology that motherhood is a young woman’s issue and that there is a mystical quality somehow inherent to motherhood, scholars attempt to dismantle essential motherhood with the same “tools” used in its original construction (Lorde). To conduct feminist research from

within an ageist construct renders women outside their reproductive or childrearing years invisible and negates the work of embracing a more holistic and demystified understanding of motherhood. This vision informs the contemporary U.S. ideal of maternal femininity, thus potentially leading women to believe as long as they are mothering, they are young; as long as they are young, they are alive, and they are valuable.” As long as women have children to mother, they embody the immortal figure of The Maternal; therefore, the moment they reach postmaternity, this elevated status is permanently lost. Due to the conflation of youthfulness and fertility with femininity and usefulness in society, postmaternal women might understandably feel devaluation at the point their children reach adulthood. They might feel as though their lives are “over,” and in response cling to their traditional maternal identities and roles in an attempt to retain their feminine value in society.

Whether the ideology of essential motherhood is internalized voluntarily by women or imposed on them by others, it is a complex system of pressures that work to constrain women’s identities as individuals. The “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood prevents women from redefining their maternal practices or moving beyond the kinds of “motherwork” (Collins “Shifting” 48) associated with unreciprocated primary caregiving, even when there is no one left at home to mother. As I illustrate in the next two chapters, some postmaternal women may resist their “forced retirement” from traditional mothering by continuing to impose unnecessary care on their adult children. Others may enact their mothering on grandchildren in order to relive traditional

motherhood, even if only part-time. Both of these situations are examples of how the ideals of essential motherhood continue to affect postmaternal women, thus invoking a “hermetic” quality of motherhood.

STAY TUNED

As I illustrated in this chapter, a large portion of maternal studies literature is focused on the concerns of mothers of dependent children. Some scholarship has also focused on women who reject essential motherhood by “opting out” of having children entirely (Mollen; Jamison, et al.; DeLyser; Letherby). The perceptions and experiences of mothers of older children and postmaternal women are largely excluded from feminist research on motherhood, which is indicative of the broader underlying issues of ageism within the scholarship. Although feminist scholars outwardly reject the notion of essential motherhood and regularly confront the sexist stereotypes associated with the ideology, the failure to adequately address how ageism also contributes to the ideology negates efforts to permanently dispel essential motherhood. Moreover, the failure to confront ageist stereotypes that contribute to the ideology of essential motherhood also works to further marginalize mothers of color within the scholarship because it ignores the role of “othermothers” within the family structure. When the devaluation of aging women and the reification of essential motherhood combine, the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood becomes evident.

In this chapter I identified the need for a more holistic understanding of motherhood that begins with a thorough examination of motherhood beyond early

mothering roles. I summarized some studies that have already addressed this need to some extent and established the theoretical foundation on which I base my discussion of postmaternal characters on television in the chapters that follow. In the next chapter I identify key media studies on postmaternity and discuss how my analysis of television contributes to that scholarship. I then describe how and why the four series on which I focus in the third chapter were selected.

CHAPTER II

MEDIA ANALYSIS OF POSTMATERNITY

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed how limitations in scholarly feminist literature have resulted in an incomplete understanding of motherhood. I argued that the exclusion of the experiences and perceptions of postmaternal women from motherhood studies prevents a more holistic understanding of motherhood and that the ideals of essential motherhood take on a “hermetic” quality when they continued to be applied to postmaternal women. In the next chapter I will use specific examples from television shows to demonstrate how this ideology of “hermetic” motherhood affects postmaternal characters’ lives. However, before beginning that discussion, in this chapter I provide a brief overview of media studies that focus on depictions of mothers and provide important background information about entertainment television’s history to provide important context for the next chapter.

From Adrienne Rich to Andrea O’Reilly, much work has been done to catalogue the concerns and experiences of real-life mothers, and although few, some scholars have begun to stretch the scope of motherhood studies to include postmaternal women. The depictions of fictional mothers are also considered salient in motherhood studies. Some of these scholars who study representations of motherhood in the media have examined how mothers are characterized as “good” or “bad” (Arnold); how parenting duties are divided along gender lines (Nathanson); and how depictions of mothers reflect or instruct

cultural ideologies about motherhood (Coontz). A few media analyses have also expanded the scope of motherhood studies to examine the depictions of postmaternal women in print journalism, film, and literary fiction. For example, Gullette examines depictions of postmaternal characters in literary fiction (“Inventing”; “Valuing”) and cinema (“Wicked”). According to her analysis of films, mothers of adult sons are often depicted as overbearing, obsessive, insane, and sometimes even possessing superhuman abilities, making it impossible for sons to “escape” their mothers’ dominance over their lives. In contrast, Gullette finds that mothers of adult daughters are often forced to return to early mothering roles to care for a daughter in crisis (“Wicked”). In addition, Michelle Sheriff and Ann Weatherall found in their study of newspaper articles that women who reacted positively to a child’s home-leaving were generally characterized as shallow, selfish, or “bad” mothers (103-104).

Other than a few brief observations made by Gullette about the 1990s drama series *Judging Amy* (“Can”; “Why”), television remains a relatively unexplored medium for studying representations of postmaternal women. Television can be an extremely important medium for analysis when it comes to determining how certain individuals, groups, institutions, and ideologies are perceived in dominant society, as well as how television instructs those perceptions and ideologies. Whether science or historical fiction, drama, documentary, or comedy, the stories depicted on television reflect and instruct cultural realities, fantasies, and values across all decades of entertainment television’s history (Mittell). Analyzing how postmaternal women are depicted on

television will further illustrate how postmaternal women are valued in society and how the ideology of essential motherhood continues to affect women beyond their childrearing years.

Underdeveloped postmaternal characters who embody the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood have been staples of U.S. entertainment television throughout broadcast history, and while the depictions of young mothers have received a considerable amount of attention in media studies, postmaternal characters have received far too little attention. Whereas works by Dillaway, Borland, and Green seek to determine how women view themselves and experience postmaternal life, and works by Gullette and Sheriff and Weatherall seek to examine how postmaternal women are depicted or assessed in certain media as “good” or “bad” parents, I explore through an analysis of selected television shows how postmaternal life is scripted in the mainstream cultural imagination of the U.S. Understanding what we, as a society, expect from postmaternal women and postmaternal lives, is key to breaking down negative stereotypes that are based in ageist sexism toward older women.

MOTHERHOOD – AS SEEN ON TV

In the song “Superhero,” Ani DiFranco asserts, “Art may imitate life, but life imitates TV.” This sentiment is at the heart of why examining extant television media is an important part of understanding how and why particular perceptions of motherhood develop and persist within U.S. society. Televisions have occupied the majority of U.S. households since 1955 and have since become integrated into the daily routines of their

owners (Spigel 1). According to Gemma López-Guimerà, et al., “Mass media transmit the ideas, values, norms, attitudes, and behaviors that socialize and construct the social reality of those who use them for a wide variety of reasons” (338). Identifying how those transmissions are internalized by audiences is integral to determining the mass media’s effects on viewers’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Although it may be difficult to achieve a data-driven consensus about the pedagogical impact of television on its viewers (Gerbner, et al.), there is evidence that television, at the very least, reinforces learned gender stereotypes (Ross, et al. 592) because “children pay closer attention to, and show better retention of, the actions of same-sex characters” (McGhee and Frueh 186). Other studies have found that mass media depictions of unrealistic beauty standards promote “body dissatisfaction” in young women (López-Guimerà, et al.) and that viewers internalize false information presented on television as fact (Jensen, et al.).

Mainstream cultural values and sensibilities regarding motherhood have been reflected on television throughout broadcast history. Before 1952, it was considered improper to show a pregnant woman or even say the word “pregnant” on television. After refusing to hide a pregnant Lucille Ball behind furniture on the set of *I Love Lucy*, Desi Arnaz reached a compromise with studio executives and advertisers by agreeing to use the word “expectant” on the show instead of “pregnant,” thus popularizing the euphemism (McClay 68). In contrast to the enforced privacy of pregnancy from which *I Love Lucy* broke free, *Private Practice*, on the air since 2007, is premised on the art and ethics of making babies for those who can afford to pay. The prevalence of shows

focusing on pregnancy and birth, including countless reality shows like *I Didn't Know I was Pregnant*, *Baby Story*, *Bringing Baby Home*, *Runway Moms*, and *Babies: Special Delivery* demonstrates how the boundaries between private and public life have deteriorated since broadcast television's early days.

Television in the 1950s is remembered for situation comedies that depicted white, middle-class housewives who cooked, cleaned, and mothered wearing high heels and pearls (Coontz), but in the 1960s and 1970s, new kinds of family structures began to emerge and be reflected on television shows. The iconic moms in the 1950s, like Margaret Anderson on *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and June Cleaver on *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), were replaced in the 1960s by less “cookie-cutter” parents, like Morticia Frump Addams on *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) and Samantha Stephens on *Bewitched* (1964-1972). Although both were suburban housewife mothers, like their televisual predecessors, Morticia Addams had a flair for the macabre; meanwhile, the union between Darrin Stephens, a mortal, and his wife Samantha, a witch, might be considered one U.S. television's earliest “mixed marriages.” Still, Samantha and Morticia needed a thread of the ridiculous running through their worlds to make their expanded characters less threatening to audiences. In the 1970s, television mothers could enjoy more personhood without such fantastic premises. For example, the historically fictional *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), set in the 1870s, reflected feminist politics of the 1970s; thus, Caroline Ingalls was an educated, multi-talented, opinionated, strong woman with a keen business sense. Families of color also became more prominent on

television in the 1970s, allowing for more “realistic” depictions of diverse families than their fantastic *Bewitched* and *Addams Family* counterparts. For example, Norman Lear’s *Good Times* (1974-1979) told the story of Florida Evans, an African-American working mother who lives with her family in Chicago.

The changing social framework of the U.S., catalyzed by the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, led to richer depictions of mothers on television in the 1960s and 1970s, and that progression continued into the 1980s and 1990s, in part, because of important media legislation and technological advancements in entertainment media. At the beginning of the 1980s, ninety percent of prime-time television viewers were watching programming provided by the “Big Three” networks NBC, ABC, and CBS (Hindman and Wiegand 119). The passage of the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 triggered increasingly rapid growth of the cable television industry in the United States and in turn, the development of enough programming to run hundreds of new cable channels twenty four hours a day (Parsons 479). Cable television led to more viewing options for consumers. With the inception of specialized channels dedicated to reaching niche audiences, such as MTV, BET, TLC, Discovery, Nickelodeon, and so on, more and more diverse audiences, including mothers, were able to see quantitatively more, though perhaps not qualitatively more accurate, reflections of themselves and their worlds on television. Meanwhile, VCRs and remote controls were becoming common household products (Hindman and Wiegand 119). Increased viewing options coupled with the

abilities to record one program while watching another and channel surf without having to leave the couch “created something like a video democracy” (Auletta, introd.).

As cable television subscribers increased, the Big Three networks started to lose their hold over the viewing habits of consumers. The competition for viewership, which has now extended into Web presences, has ultimately led to a continuous drive to tell more unconventional stories that simultaneously challenge and reflect cultural norms. The lineage of popular shows from *The Waltons* to *The Sopranos* makes it possible to map how U.S. ideologies of motherhood have changed over the past sixty years. The changing ideologies about motherhood can be seen not only in how some mothers have historically been portrayed on television, but also to the extent that they have been portrayed. Mothers depicted on *Roseanne*, *Married... With Children*, *The Cosby Show*, *Kate and Allie*, *Murphy Brown*, and others challenged U.S. audiences to grow beyond antiquated notions of motherhood. Not confined to *Leave it to Beaver*-style caricatures of happy housewives, these shows featured mothers who were single, divorced, career-minded, teenaged, working class, lesbian-identified, neglectful, adoptive, unhappy, selfish, and imperfect.

Despite these exceptions, which were largely seen during the 1980s and 1990s, most TV moms continue to be completely defined and consumed by a rigid form of motherhood that is predicated on the performance of primary care, regardless of their children’s ages or independence. Limiting maternal characters to the work of primary care, even during all stages of a woman’s life, is indicative of a society that lacks a

strong, even imaginary, cultural understanding of the fluidity of motherhood through time or the temporary nature of mothering. Moreover, the legacy of these iconic shows throughout entertainment television's history is solidified through syndication on channels like TV Land, DVD sales, or digital release on Netflix and other streaming services. As a result, ideologies of traditional motherhood and family structures are presented nostalgically to new audiences. Given the ability of mass media to instruct cultural norms at the same time they reflect cultural norms, the depictions of mothers on "classic" television shows promote cultural ideologies about motherhood at the same time they reflect those ideologies already in place.

CHANNEL SURFING FOR POSTMATERNAL CHARACTERS

Postmaternal characters, while not uncommon on television, are not often featured in main or major-supporting roles. The underrepresentation of postmaternal women in significant roles on television reflects the invisibility of this group within mainstream U.S. society. Characterizations of postmaternal women on television are generally limited to guest appearances and minor supporting roles that bring chaos and stress into the lives of their adult children. For example, Endora, Samantha's mother on *Bewitched*, is constantly, and quite literally, popping in on her daughter and son-in-law to meddle in their marriage. On *Roseanne* dysfunctional parent-adult child relationships across multiple generations are often observed. Even the USS Enterprise (NCC-1701-D), which explores the galaxy on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, occasionally plays host to Counselor Deanna Troi's troublesome mother, Lwaxana. As a Betazoid, a species of

alien that has telepathic abilities, Lwaxana Troi not only meddles in the lives of the crew of the Enterprise, she also meddles in their minds by reading their thoughts and emotions without consent. Thus, Lwaxana possesses those superhuman abilities that Gullette refers to in her analysis of cinema (“Wicked”). Lwaxana’s intrusive presence on the ship, followed by her relieving departure, seems to suggest that the trope of unnerving mother-adult child relationships is truly universal: they are not confined to this planet or this species, and they are still the norm in the utopian fantasy of the twenty-fourth century.

The history of postmaternal characters on television yields only a few prominent dynamic roles. Gullette identifies Maxine Gray, a main character on *Judging Amy* (1999-2005), as a more contemporary postmaternal character who embodies an anti-sexist, anti-ageist construct of life after childrearing. When *Judging Amy* begins, Maxine is happily postmaternal and a retired social worker. Her adult daughter Amy and granddaughter Lauren move in with her when Amy, recently separated from her husband, becomes a family court judge in her hometown. Maxine is wise and honest, and although at the beginning of the series, her character does not even have a name (Gullette “Can”; “Why”), she becomes a more prominent and dynamic character as the show continues. She initially adopts a maternal role in her granddaughter’s life as Amy struggles to balance her demanding professional career with her maternal responsibilities, but Maxine also comes out of retirement and returns to social work in pursuit of her own ambitions.

Maxine’s best-known predecessor would probably be *Maude* (1972-1978). Maude, who was first introduced to audiences in *All in the Family* before winning a spin-

off, is “uncompromising, enterprising, anything but tranquilizing” (Bergman), according to her theme song. Maude is a middle-aged, liberal political activist, who is comfortable in her postmaternal identity. Even though her empty nest fills up again when her newly divorced daughter and young grandson move back in with her and her husband, Walter, Maude actively refuses to parent her grandson and expects her adult daughter to take care of herself, too. Maude has no interest in reliving or regaining her traditional maternal roles, and so actively rejects her former maternal identity that she chooses to abort an unexpected pregnancy in order to preserve her postmaternal lifestyle.

Like the postmaternal women I discuss in the next chapter, Maude and Maxine are frequently shown interacting with their adult children throughout their series. Maude and Maxine also enjoy mutually-enriching relationships with their daughters more often than not, but as I demonstrate in the next chapter, this is not a common occurrence on television. In fact, mother-adult child conflict is so common on television that it is practically a rule for narrative structure, and, based on television portrayals, it would seem that the simplest way to avoid this stereotypical kind of conflict is not to re-imagine mother-adult child relationships, but rather to dissolve the relationships entirely by rarely, if ever, showing interactions between postmaternal characters and their children.

For example, *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) follows the dating misadventures and other experiences of four postmaternal women living in Miami, Florida. What makes the mismatched household of sarcastic Sophia, pragmatic Dorothy, naive Rose, and flirtatious Blanche so inviting is the friendship and support they give to each other as they

work, love, play, and fail as independent postmaternal women. More recently, *Til Death*, which aired between 2006 and 2010, follows the relationship of married couple Joy and Eddie Stark. Eddie and Joy have one daughter, Allison, who is already living away from home at college when the series begins. Another postmaternal main character who has emerged recently is Patty Hewes on the show *Damages*, which aired between 2007 and 2012. Patty is a highly successful litigator in New York City whose questionable ethics and proclivity toward manipulation and passive aggression, even when it comes to her adult son, make her one of the most dynamic, if not frightening, characters on television. Finally, the comedy series *Hot in Cleveland*, on the air since 2010, follows the postmaternal trio of Melanie Moretti, Joy Scroggs, and Victoria Chase, who decide to start over in Cleveland, Ohio rather than return to the youth-obsessed culture of Los Angeles, California. With the exception of Sophia, who is Dorothy's mother in *The Golden Girls*, the other eight postmaternal characters in these respective shows are rarely, if ever shown interacting with or even acknowledging the existence of their children.

These characters represent complex, nuanced, and important depictions of postmaternal possibilities, which for the most part support Green's findings that postmaternal women enjoy opportunities for personal and professional growth after their children reach adulthood, as well as provide some evidence that postmaternal women have made strides in recent years in the pursuit of representation in pop culture. However, even as they function to break down some ageist stereotypes of older women, they also reinforce the idea that women cannot exist as both mothers and individuals at the same

time. Generally speaking, when a postmaternal character on television is shown interacting with her adult child, she is an unwanted “guest star” in her child’s life with very little personhood. In contrast, when a postmaternal character fills a prominent role with personhood, her relationships with her children are all but erased. Even Dr. Abbey Bartlet, First Lady of the United States on *The West Wing* (1999-2006), who is often described on the show as having a very stable and mutually-enriching relationship with her adult daughters, is rarely shown actually interacting with her children, even when they are physically in the same room. Although Abbey Bartlet, Maude, and Maxine Gray stand out from the overbearing, hostile, and meddling postmaternal women that are all too common on television, far more Endoras than Abbey Bartlets are included in the grand narrative of postmaternal characters on television.

Even when a postmaternal woman is well-adjusted, well-rounded and able to enjoy a mutually-enriching relationship with her adult child(ren), she is still generally a secondary or tertiary character to the primary character of the adult child. Since these peripheral characters mainly exist to advance a protagonist’s storyline, they generally do not have enough screen time to become full, dynamic characters. In order to illustrate how the ideology of “hermetic” motherhood is reflected in depictions of postmaternal characters, it is important to focus on shows that more prominently feature postmaternal characters who also regularly interact with their adult children. *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Brothers and Sisters* (2006-2011), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005), and *George Lopez* (2002-2007) are four popular, contemporary shows that feature significant

postmaternal characters who appear in at least twenty-five percent of all episodes in the series. I carefully selected to include mother-son and mother-daughter relationships, families of color, and working class families, as well as provide a mix of drama and comedy.

In this chapter I briefly summarized media studies that focus on motherhood, including a few studies that specifically address depictions of postmaternal women in print news and cinema. I provided an overview of how depictions of mothers on television have evolved over time, driven partially by the civil rights movement and partially by important technological advancements and legislative measures. Finally, I identified important trends in how postmaternal women have been depicted on television. This chapter serves as an important foundation for the next chapter, in which I use specific examples from *Brothers and Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *George Lopez* to demonstrate how the ideology of “hermetic” motherhood affects postmaternal characters, especially in their relationships with their adult children.

CHAPTER III

POSTMATERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. TELEVISION

POSTMATERNAL LEADING LADIES

In the previous chapter I provided an overview of how postmaternal characters have historically been portrayed on television. Postmaternal women have the same problem as many other women when it comes to the media: there are not very many of them in dynamic or leading roles. Nearly every show on television includes an occasional visit from a postmaternal woman to the main character. *Grey's Anatomy*, *Medium*, *Dr. Quinn*, *Medicine Woman*, *Murphy Brown*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Scrubs*, *Friends*, *Roseanne*, *Will and Grace*, and even *Gilmore Girls* and *Brothers and Sisters* occasionally play host to the mother or mother-in-law of a main character; however, more often than not, the visit puts a great deal of stress on the hosting adult children. Even when the relationship is not strained, the fact that most postmaternal characters are confined to sporadic guest appearances and minor roles further demonstrates the devaluation of older women on television and in mainstream U.S. culture.

The problem of the underrepresentation of women, especially postmaternal women, on television is exacerbated by other issues of representation, including limited depictions of women of color, working class women, women with disabilities, and non-heterosexual women. Moreover, many series are canceled after only a few episodes or

after a single season, and others, while successful at the time of production, have not been preserved in the cultural memory through syndication, home video/DVD release, or digitization to streaming video subscription services like Netflix. Finding shows that provide significant material to analyze, represent a range of women's experiences, and are legally accessible proved difficult. With limited choices for analysis, I ultimately selected four postmaternal women who are leading or major supporting characters on the long-running television shows *Brothers and Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *George Lopez* – four series that were in production during the early to mid-2000s, around the same time my mother was transitioning into postmaternity.

In this chapter I examine how the ideals of essential motherhood are applied in four television shows that feature developed postmaternal women in significant roles, despite the relative absence of postmaternal characters in most television shows. *Brothers and Sisters* and *Gilmore Girls* are one-hour dramas, while *George Lopez* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* are half-hour situation comedies. *Gilmore Girls* features mothers of adult daughters. *Brothers and Sisters* features mothers of both adult sons and adult daughters, and *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *George Lopez* both feature primarily mothers of adult sons. The postmaternal characters depicted in the four series are from working, middle, and upper class families; they are white, Mexican American, Italian American, conservative, and liberal. They mothered as teens, traditional homemakers, blue collar workers, and unmarried moms. The social reality in which each character lives complicates her experiences of postmaternity in profound ways. Not only do the

postmaternal characters in these series cover a relatively wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, each woman also engages in regular, if not daily, interactions with her adult child(ren).

Focusing on how relationships between mothers and their adult children play out on television is integral to the discussion of postmaternal women's experiences of essential motherhood. Gullette and Rich each highlight the importance of women "letting-go" (Rich 37) of their traditional mothering roles by coming to see their children as adults with full personhood. Rich argues that rejecting maternal roles when women's children reach adulthood "is an act of revolt against the grain of patriarchal culture" (37). "Letting-go" of adult children defies patriarchal culture by rejecting the "hermetic" nature of essential motherhood. Gullette also acknowledges the need for women to, as Rich describes, return to "selves of their own" (37) when mothering is complete, but she also rightly notes that it is not enough for women to let go of their adult children. Gullette argues that in order for mothers to truly become postmaternal, adult children must also come to see their mothers as adults with full personhood ("The Broken"). I refer to this mutual realization as "adult reciprocity," the idea that each individual recognizes the other as an equal.

In each of the television shows I discuss in this chapter, achieving a mutually-enriching relationship of "adult reciprocity" between a postmaternal character and her adult son or daughter is a key to resolving the "hermetic" quality inherent in the ideology of essential motherhood. In this chapter I use specific examples of postmaternal

characters in four contemporary television shows, *Brothers and Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *George Lopez*, to illustrate the “hermetic” nature of motherhood and identify efforts to reject or support that ideology.

For each of the four series I discuss, I begin by providing specific information about each show, including how long the series ran, on which network or channel the series aired, and the significant industry awards or nominations the series received. I also provide an overview of scholarly literature published about the series, a synopsis of the series as a whole, and details of specific episodes that provide a typical look at the relationship between a postmaternal character and her adult son or daughter. I use an inductive approach to analyze moments in each episode that exemplify the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood as well as moments when characters successfully reject that ideology. This analysis shows that characters with well-developed postmaternal identities are generally those who maintained stronger individual identities when their children were young, while characters who strongly identified with ideals of essential motherhood are more likely to struggle to develop postmaternal self-identities after their children are grown.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS AND MOTHERS

I will first discuss is Nora Walker, a prominent postmaternal character in the drama series *Brothers and Sisters*, which aired on ABC for five seasons between 2006 and 2011. Sally Field won a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series in 2009 for her portrayal of Nora Walker, and the series was recognized as

the Outstanding Drama Series of the year by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Awards four times (IMDb). Of the four series I discuss in this chapter, *Brothers and Sisters* has received the least scholarly attention; however, its record of positive depictions of same-sex relationships makes it a subject for analyzing depictions of gay procreation and parenting in the media (Erhart).

Nora Walker is an affluent, white, suburban housewife and mother from California, who for the most part conformed to the ideal of the “feminine mystique” while her children were young, and she fits the demographic that Borland identifies as more likely to experience empty nest syndrome (127). In the pilot episode of *Brothers and Sisters*, the patriarch of the Walker family, William, dies unexpectedly of a heart attack (“Patriarchy”). William’s death shatters the facade of the perfect middle class family, as secret affairs, possible extramarital children, and questionable business practices are revealed. Losing her husband and confronting the truth about her marriage to William is somewhat liberating to the new family matriarch, Nora. Having raised five children as a stay-at-home mother and filled a role as a “happy housewife” for the entirety of her marriage to William, Nora realizes little by little how her life has not really been her own.

Following the death of her husband, Nora gains new freedoms; however, she is never truly able to redefine her maternal role and therefore experiences the social constraints of essential motherhood in different ways throughout the series. These experiences generally take place in the confines of Nora’s own home. Her return to

traditional motherhood is usually an act of rescuing, similar to the kind Gullette observes in film (“Wicked”). According to Gullette, mothers in film are far more likely to be seen playing savior to their adult daughters, but in Nora Walker’s case, her role as savior is not limited to her daughters, and in fact, it is not limited to her own children. During season one, her son Justin moves back in with her following his release from a drug rehabilitation program, and later in the series her daughter Kitty returns to Nora’s home to stay while she undergoes treatment for lymphoma, despite the fact that Kitty has a husband and home of her own. Nora assumes many of her old duties of cooking for and cleaning up after her adult children as they revert to their own old habits as dependent children, which is synchronous with Dillaway’s finding that mothering continues into a child’s adulthood. Although some care resembling motherwork is necessary when family members fall ill, Nora’s caregiving work is rarely shared by other siblings, spouses, or partners, nor is there any reciprocity in the caregiving. Rather, Nora’s return to her familiar mothering roles is reminiscent of the all-consuming work of traditional motherhood she performed when her children were young and her husband was alive.

Nora frequently opens her home to orphaned adults, whether the act is intrinsically motivated or imposed on her by her own children. Often during the series Nora offers herself as a surrogate to orphaned adults whose own mothers failed to live up to society’s image of the ideal mom. During season one, Nora is so attached to her maternal identity that she invites Rebecca, the daughter of her late husband’s mistress (who Nora believes is also William’s biological daughter) to move into her house, thus

informally adopting her, even though Rebecca is an adult in her early twenties. Nora's children also volunteer her and her home for care and shelter when they are unable or unwilling to provide it themselves. Nora's oldest daughter Sarah forces Nora to take in a French visitor whom Sarah herself barely knows. Despite her protests, Nora eventually acquiesces to her daughter's pleas and adopts the strange foreigner, who, although he's an adult who speaks fluent English and managed to buy a plane ticket to the U.S., is apparently unable to locate his own food and shelter.

These intrusions into Nora's home are examples of how the ideology of essential motherhood interferes with Nora's attempts to develop her own postmaternal identity. At the end of the second season, Nora begins to embrace postmaternity and decides that her next life endeavor will be to open a temporary housing facility where parents who travel a long way to obtain medical care for seriously ill children can live and receive emotional support ("Double"). Given Nora's many years acting as caregiver and counselor to her own family, as well as manager of her husband's affairs, she is well-qualified for this kind charity work, and the endeavor provides a way for Nora to develop a postmaternal identity outside the home in pursuit of the personal and professional opportunities for growth that Green identifies as the positive benefits of children's home-leaving. However, even as Nora works proactively to redefine her familial roles, her adult children and others outside her family continue to apply constructs of essential motherhood that ultimately negate Nora's actions.

Although way Nora thinks of herself as a postmaternal woman has changed somewhat by the beginning of the third season, she experiences a setback when she discovers her children's perceptions of her have not changed. Although Nora begins the "process of letting-go" (Rich 37) by recognizing her children as adults and herself as no longer responsible for their well-being, her children have yet to reciprocate that recognition. Thus, Nora continues to experience the "hermetic" quality of essential motherhood, not because she internalizes the ideology, but rather because her children are unable to see their mother as a responsible adult. For example, when Nora's son Kevin insists that he accompany her to the auction of property she hopes to purchase for the charity house, it is clear that Kevin seems to think that Nora lacks the ability to make sound decisions because she has spent her entire adult life as a traditional housewife and mother. Kevin infantilizes her because he has internalized the ideology of essential motherhood, which precludes him from being able to see his mother as an adult with full personhood.

Nora confronts Kevin and addresses his interference in her life. The two make up and Nora continues the work of establishing her charity. She empties her late husband's home office and repurposes it as her own ("Everything"). In doing so, she severs the material ties to her former identity as William's wife and is liberated by creating a physical space in her home that is truly her own. She writes the grant proposal to fund her charity house project, but her search for funding, as well as her progress toward self-definition, is nearly thwarted again when the funding committee dismisses her as "just" a

housewife and mother who has “no experience.” In response to the committee’s evaluation of her abilities, she confronts them:

I know I have never run a business. But let me tell you, Mr. Goldschmidt, I have run a household of seven. I know it’s an unpaid and unappreciated position. But I defy you or any of your people I spoke to this morning to do what I did for the past forty some-odd years. ... The problem is, no one values the experience of a stay-at-home parent, which is truly a shame. Because basically, running this “big enterprise,” as you call it, would be a day at the beach for me. (“You Get”)

This impassioned speech about the devaluation of motherwork not only wins her the funding she needs for her charity, but also serves as an epiphany for Nora that if she wants others to value her expertise, she must first value herself and define herself without worrying about how others might try to constrain her into a maternal identity and practice that no longer suits her.

With her new-found confidence, Nora begins renovating and staffing the charity house (“Unfinished”), but once again finds herself constrained by the ideology of essential motherhood when Ryan, the son of another of William’s mistresses, enters Nora’s life. As Ryan’s image of his own mother is shattered when he finds out that William is his true biological father, Nora falls back on her maternal identity in an effort to give Ryan a second chance at having a “good” mother. She buys him a plane ticket and all but begs him to fly home with her (“Lost”). Although he initially declines the

invitation, Ryan soon shows up on Nora's doorstep, and she immediately takes him into her home in yet another informal adoption ("Taking"). The "hermetic" nature of essential motherhood, which rigidly defines women's maternal practices and identity throughout the life course of her family, causes Nora to immediately shift her focus from the new endeavor of her charity to concentrate almost exclusively on her new adult child, almost as if the charity never existed. The fact that the storyline so abruptly and completely bounces from her postmaternal development to her former role in traditional motherhood creates a disconnect between the constraints of essential motherhood that "hermetically seal" her within her home and the postmaternal identity she develops through her charity work. Rather than occupying and navigating a postmaternal borderlands in which she seeks to balance her domestic and external practices, Nora is instead depicted as being either a mother or a non-profit entrepreneur, but never both at once. Nora's journey throughout the series maintains this back-and-forth process in a way that makes Nora not a dynamic character who progresses and changes along a winding path, but rather a vibrating character who constantly moves between the same two points, never really making permanent changes in her life. Anytime she attempts to step outside her traditional maternal identity, the "hermetic" or socially constraining quality of essential motherhood prevents her from doing so in any meaningful way, whether it is by choice or by necessity.

NOSTALGIC FANTASIES OF *GILMORE GIRLS*

I will now shift focus to *Gilmore Girls*, as series that aired on The WB network for seven seasons between 2000 and 2007. Kelly Bishop was nominated for Golden Satellite Awards in 2003 and 2004 for her portrayal of the postmaternal character Emily Gilmore, and the series was recognized in 2003 as the TV Program of the Year by the American Film Institute (AFI) (IMDb). Although *Gilmore Girls* generally received fewer major industry awards than *Brothers and Sisters*, the series has received considerably more scholarly attention. In addition to numerous articles that have been published on the series, the book *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls* (Diffrient and Lavery) includes essays that explore everything from depictions of masculinity to the main characters' relationships with food, while *Gilmore Girls and the Politics of Identity: Essays on Family and Feminism in the Television Series* (Calvin) examines the show from a post-feminist perspective.

Like Nora Walker, Emily Gilmore is an affluent, white housewife; however, Emily's economic privilege allowed her to hire housekeepers, nannies, and cooks, thus relieving her from some aspects of motherwork. Emily's daughter, Lorelai, is in her early thirties when the series begins. Lorelai became pregnant at the age of sixteen, ran away from home shortly after her daughter Rory was born, and settled in the small town of Stars Hollow, Connecticut, where she found a job at a local inn. By the time the series begins, Lorelai has worked her way up to a management position and has dreams of one day opening her own inn. Because of the choice Lorelai made as a teenager to reject her

upper class privilege and become a parent on her own terms, Emily was quite literally forced into the maternal “unemployment” Fisher identifies (251). As a result, Emily’s relationship with Lorelai is very strained.

Emily resents Lorelai for denying her access to Rory, and Lorelai resents Emily for not providing a more nurturing maternal homelife for her when she was growing up. The main problem Lorelai and Emily experience in their relationship is again one of reciprocity. Emily is openly, sometimes venomously, critical of Lorelai’s choices, but is ultimately accepting of the fact that Lorelai is strong-willed adult. In contrast, Lorelai is unable to accept Emily for the woman she is now, focusing instead on the mother she was, or more accurately, the mother she was not. According to Melanie Haupt, “Emily’s domestic responsibility rests solely in the realm of managing staff . . . and staging elaborate parties” (par. 3). Emily, it seems, defines herself primarily by her role as a businessman’s wife, her charity work, and her membership in organizations like The Daughters of the American Revolution and the local country club. Emily was not the warm and self-sacrificing mother Lorelai and the cultural ideal of essential motherhood expected her to be. Even though Emily performed her motherwork using the framework of “good parenting” she established for herself, which included sending Lorelai to expensive, if not stifling, private schools and hiring nannies to assist in her caregiving, Lorelai is only able to see Emily’s mothering “mistakes,” and she positions herself as Emily’s maternal opposite. Lorelai’s parenting decisions are often made by identifying

how Emily would have handled a situation and then doing the opposite, which is a practice that regularly causes their relationship to erupt into conflict.

Many conflicts between Emily and Lorelai seem to be centered on Lorelai's inability to recognize her mother as the human being she is instead of focusing on the allegedly guiltless, controlling, and neglectful mother she was. Even though Emily has a well-developed postmaternal self-identity, Lorelai applies a construct of essential motherhood to her that takes on a "hermetic" quality because it "seals" Emily into a maternal role that does not suit her, especially now that Lorelai is grown. Lorelai's internalization of the ideology of essential motherhood prevents her from building a mutually-enriching relationship of adult reciprocity with her mother.

Emily is portrayed as a "bad" mother, even though Lorelai has aged sixteen years beyond her need for direct care; therefore, it is not Emily who must make a dynamic shift to self-identification, but rather Lorelai who must reject the ideology of essential motherhood that keeps her from recognizing Emily as a postmaternal woman and equal. Because Lorelai internalized a traditional understanding of motherhood, she often tries to prove that she is a better mother to her daughter, Rory, than Emily was to her. While Lorelai and Emily have a rocky relationship throughout the series, Lorelai and Rory are mother-daughter best friends who are very rarely split by major conflicts. When she observes the fairytale-like relationship between her daughter and her granddaughter, Emily seems to feel some remorse for the tumultuous nature of her relationship with Lorelai, as well as some regret over the alleged mistakes she made while raising Lorelai.

Emily's feelings of regret sometimes manifest themselves as practices of traditional motherhood, which she generally directs toward Rory, who is in high school when the series begins, but also occasionally toward Lorelai. Emily pursues a relationship with her granddaughter Rory in a way that gives Emily a quasi-second chance at traditional motherhood. In this way, Emily constructs her own special kind of "hermetic" motherhood that is not based on a nostalgic memory of what occurred, but on a nostalgic fantasy of what she missed out on by rejecting essential motherhood and allowing domestic workers to perform the majority of motherwork when Lorelai was a young child. Emily seems to feel at times that she "failed" as a mother in some way and that if she had performed the direct care as the ideals of traditional motherhood required, Lorelai would not have become a teen mom and run away from home.

In the ninth episode of the series, "Rory's Dance," a formal dance at Rory's elite private high school, Chilton, gives Emily, who pays Rory's tuition, a chance to live out an archetypal maternal experience she did not get to have when Lorelai was a teenager. Emily guilts Lorelai into inviting her over to take pictures of Rory and send her off to her first formal dance. When Emily arrives at the house, she discovers that Lorelai hurt her back in the process of making Rory's dress. This presents another opportunity for Emily to try on her maternal identity once again, and she decides to spend the night so she can take care of Lorelai, even though Lorelai insists she can take care of herself. Rory and her date, Dean, go to the dance, leaving Lorelai and Emily at home to reconnect. Emily attempts to make Lorelai more comfortable by doing all the same things she used to do

when she was sick as a child. She makes Lorelai a mashed banana on toast, and they share a laugh over how disgusting it is. This breaks the tension between the two, and Lorelai becomes more receptive to Emily's caretaking. As Lorelai dozes off on the couch, she mumbles, "Thank you, Mommy," in a childlike voice. Emily eventually dozes off, as well, still waiting for Rory to get home from her big night.

After leaving the dance, Rory and Dean decide to go someplace quiet to talk. They sneak into a dance studio run by a Stars Hollow resident, and promptly fall asleep. The next morning, Emily wakes up to discover that Rory never returned home from the dance. She alerts Lorelai to the situation, and the heightened stress ignites an argument between Lorelai and Emily about who is the worse mother. Even though each of them enact(ed) maternal practices in ways that suit(ed) their own personalities and familial needs, neither of them is able to realize that parenting need not follow a single prescriptive model. If they were able to come to this understanding, Lorelai may finally be able to reject the ideology of essential motherhood and come to recognize her mother as a postmaternal woman.

EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND (BUT HATES HIS MOM)

Everybody Loves Raymond was one of the most popular and awarded sitcoms of the 1990s. Doris Roberts received Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2005 for her portrayal of the postmaternal character Marie Barone, and the series was awarded Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Comedy series twice out of its seven nominations (IMDb).

Despite the show's popularity, *Everybody Loves Raymond* has not received very much scholarly attention. Most often, the series is used as an example to contextualize other studies. For example, J. Jill Sutor, et al. call on the relationship between Raymond and his brother Robert to introduce their study, "The Role of Perceived Maternal Favoritism in Sibling Relations in Midlife." Katharine E. Heintz-Knowles conducted a content analysis of the series as part of her research on depictions of work-family balance on primetime television. She found that while mothers and fathers may both be seen participating in primary caregiving, fathers are more likely than mothers to be seen playing with or consoling their children (195) and also more likely to perceive their work lives as more important than their family obligations (187).

Marie Barone, one of the main characters in this series, is one of the most iconic postmaternal characters of the late 1990s, and she is the epitome of the smothering mother and nagging wife (Roberts 3). She falls into the category of white middle class housewives that Borland predicts are more likely to experience ENS (127), and she is also a perfect example of the stigma postmaternal women experience when they struggle with, or are perceived to struggle with, ENS (Raup and Meyers 180). Marie's son Raymond, a husband and father in his late thirties, lives across the street from his parents. Their physical proximity makes it possible for Marie to barge in uninvited any time she likes, and at times she is characterized as monstrous or superhuman in a similar way that mothers of adult sons are often depicted in film, according to Gullette ("Wicked"). Marie is hypercritical of the way her daughter-in-law Debra keeps house, parents her children,

and cares for Ray, and she is constantly pushing her way into Debra's kitchen with dishes full of Ray's favorite meals and luring Ray back to her place for cake. In a strange way she sets herself up as Debra's rival in a bid to be recognized as important person in Ray's life, demonstrating that Marie continues to internalize an ideology of essential motherhood that takes on a "hermetic" quality. Marie defines herself exclusively by her caregiving, especially when it comes to Ray, and he enjoys the culinary benefits of his mother's dedication to traditional motherhood, though he generally seems to prefer that his mother stay out of his business.

Halfway through the second season, the episode "Marie's Meatballs" opens with Ray arriving home from work. Even though Debra's lemon chicken dinner is waiting for him, Marie walks through the back door into the kitchen carrying a pot of spaghetti and meatballs, Raymond's favorite dish. Ray is then forced to choose between his mother's meatballs and his wife's chicken, and when Ray chooses the meatballs, he hurts Debra's feelings. In an effort to make things right, he arranges for Marie to teach Debra how to cook. Before he has a chance to clear it with Debra, Marie arrives for a surprise lesson. An annoyed Debra tells Marie, "I'm sure he would love for me to cook like you. I'm sure he would love for me to be you." Marie replies, "Well, let's start with the meatballs and see how far we get."

That evening, Debra's attempt at making meatballs just like Marie taught her backfires. The meatballs are so terrible that Ray spits them out when Debra briefly turns her back to him. She catches him in the act and confronts him. Unable to figure out how

the same recipe and procedure Marie uses in her own cooking could yield a completely different result, Debra begins to suspect sabotage. Debra investigates her theory and discovers that she was right. Marie put the basil label on the tarragon jar. Vindicated, Debra confronts Ray about what an “evil genius” his supposed “saint of a mother” is. Ray goes next door to confront Marie about her plot to drive Debra insane.

Marie confesses, “I didn’t mean to make her crazy, I just wanted her to try to make the meatballs, fail, and give up. That way, everything would be right.” In Marie’s mind, therefore, everything is “right” when she is the only one able to adequately care for her son. Marie continues, “Raymond, I’m your mother. I used to do everything for you. And then, like, I blinked and you grew up. What do I do for you anymore? I mean, what’s left? My food!” Marie seems to be saying that she did not expect Ray to grow up at all, thus invoking the sentiment that Ray “will always be [her] baby. Forever and ever” (Canfield, et al. xiii). She also alludes to the “unemployment” Fisher describes as being the “queerest part” of motherhood (251). After talking to Ray, Marie explains and apologizes to Debra, too. She tells Debra that she would have given her all her recipes when she died anyway, but “I just wanted to wait till I was gone before I was replaced.”

Throughout the series, Marie’s culinary skills are symbolic of her maternal skills in general, and when Debra agrees to let Marie teach her to cook, Marie feels as though she has won the title of ultimate mother. Because her dominance over Debra as the better caregiver ensures her usefulness in the family structure, she sabotages Debra’s meatballs to retain her maternal role in her son’s life. Not only does this demonstrate Marie’s

internalization of a “hermetic” ideal of essential motherhood, it also says something about how mainstream U.S. society thinks about marriage. The adage about women turning into their mothers and marrying their fathers seems to have been replaced, on television, at least, by a new construct that suggests women simply turn into their husbands’ mothers.

Whereas Nora Walker and Emily Gilmore experience “hermetic” constraints of motherhood that are usually enforced by their children, the unending nature of Marie Barone’s motherhood is almost entirely self-imposed. Marie internalized the ideal of traditional motherhood so deeply while her children were young that when it came time to let go of her adult children, Marie had no self of her own to return to, as Rich puts it (37). Thus, she continues to pour all her energies into the kind of motherwork her family has long since outgrown. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, it is also Marie’s inability to recognize Raymond as a responsible adult that keeps her from enjoying a mutually-enriching postmaternal relationship with her adult-child, and not the other way around, as is the case in *Gilmore Girls* and, to some extent, *Brothers and Sisters*.

GEORGE LOPEZ ACHIEVES RECIPROCIDAD CON SU MADRE

The fourth and final show I will discuss is *George Lopez*, which aired on ABC for six seasons from 2002 to 2007. While it did not draw as high an overall viewership as the other three series, it is well-known for being the most successful television show to feature a Latino main character and Hispanic-themed content since *Chico and the Man* (1974-1978) (Markert). Belita Moreno won an Imagen Foundation Award for Best

Supporting Actress in a Television Comedy in 2004 for her portrayal of the postmaternal character Benny Lopez, and the series was awarded Imagen Foundation Awards for Best Primetime Comedy Series twice out of its five nominations (IMDb). Because of its Latino-centric storyline and all Latino main cast, the majority of published scholarly works related to the series generally explore the representation of Latinos on U.S. television (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz; Hoffman and Noriega), but some works have also focused on how Latinos are depicted on *George Lopez* specifically (Markert) as well as on representations of gender and family roles in the series (McClelland; Pehlke, et. al.; Heintz-Knowles).

George Lopez has a unique relationship with his mother Benny. When the series begins, George has just been promoted to a management position at the aviation parts factory where he and Benny both work. Most of their interactions are a volley of sarcastic jabs and criticisms exchanged between them in jest. Even though George and Benny practice insensitivity toward each other, their jokes are their language of mutual respect and love, and given that the show is a comedy series, it is important not to read too deeply into their exchanges. Benny makes fun of George for having a big head, and George gives as good he gets. When a co-worker asks him why he did not start dating until he was seventeen, George replies, “She told me, you’ll never find a woman as wonderful as your mother. So I figured, if that’s the best I’m gonna do, why look?” (“Curious”). Neither George nor Benny seem to buy into the ideology of essential motherhood. In fact, Benny rejects traditional motherhood so fiercely that she frequently

proclaims regret for ever having George in the first place. She smokes, drinks, gambles, and does not like to hug or talk about her feelings. Even though George sometimes pokes fun at her by criticizing her for never fitting into the traditional framework of motherhood, it is clear that George holds no actual grudges against her in the way Lorelai does in her relationship with Emily on *Gilmore Girls*.

In the episode “This Old Casa,” George and his wife, Angie, notice that Benny never says thank you for anything. When Angie offers her a cup of hot coffee, Benny asks, “What, are you trying to burn me?” When Angie offers her some leftover French toast for breakfast, Benny snaps back at her, “Why don’t you get me some sausage out of the trashcan while you’re at it? What am I, your goat?” Angie convinces George to complete a surprise renovation on Benny’s bathroom for the sole purpose of eliciting appreciation from her. Instead of hiring a contractor to complete the work, George does most of the remodeling himself. He tiles, paints, and wallpapers the bathroom, updates the plumbing, installs a heat lamp, and replaces the sink, the toilet, and the tub. He even installs an ashtray in the shower for Benny’s convenience.

George and Angie present Benny with her new bathroom, sure that she will finally express her appreciation, but the only thing she says is, “The hook for the robe is too high.” George returns home to sulk and play violent video games to comfort himself. Angie suggests that the reason Benny never thanks George for anything is because she has a hard time letting other people help her to begin with. Angie encourages him to have a real conversation with Benny rather than just to “bark at each other,” like they usually

do. George and Benny return to her new bathroom, and George admits he only remodeled her bathroom for the thank you. He confesses, “Then I realized that there were a lot of things I never thanked you for. I know how hard it was for you, raising me alone. And thank you for your sacrifices. And thank you for being my mom and my dad. And thank you for all the things I don’t even know that you did for me.” By acknowledging his mother’s sacrifices, George demonstrates new understanding that Benny parented in the best way she knew how, and he can never really know just how hard it was for her to be a working single mother of color. In so doing, George also demonstrates his acknowledgment of his mother as an adult and equal.

When Benny finally squeaks out a thank you to George, which she is only able to do under the threat of George destroying her pretty new bathroom, George asks, “Was that so hard?” Benny replies, “Yeah, it was, ‘cause I don’t have a lot of practice doing this, you know. Who do I thank for having to drop out of school when I was fifteen to work in a factory? Who do I thank for getting me pregnant and leaving me at seventeen? Who do I thank for feeling like I was 68 when I was 25?” In this confession, Benny acknowledges that she could not have lived up to the ideals of traditional motherhood, even if she had wanted to, because the environment and circumstances in which she raised her son prevented it. George realizes why his mother often acts much tougher than she needs to, and he comes to a new understanding of the choices she made in order to support her family. The two make up quickly and settle back into their usual routine of gentle ribbing.

Of all the relationships between postmaternal women and their adult children discussed in this chapter, Benny and George share the one that is least affected by the ideology of essential motherhood. Neither Benny's understanding of motherhood nor her maternal practice followed the dominant narrative of traditional motherhood. As a postmaternal woman, she lives life on her own terms; she allows her son the autonomy to do the same. When one of them is in need, the other offers support. Despite the fact that their interactions are laced with sarcasm, their relationship is one of mutually-enriching adult reciprocity, rarely seen between parent and adult child on television. Although George sometimes critically notes that Benny often blatantly lied to him, kept secrets from him, or made other mistakes when he was growing up, it is clear that this is a criticism of Benny as a person with human flaws, rather than as a mother who fails to live up to the standards of traditional motherhood.

MOMMY WARS

Placed side-by-side, these four characters speak volumes about what "good" mothering and its acceptable behaviors are considered to be for postmaternal women in their interactions with their adult children, at least as far as television is concerned. Women who are depicted as having been "good" mothers during their childrearing years were white, middle class housewives like Nora Walker and Marie Barone. They internalized an identity of essential motherhood while their children were young and focused all their energies on the well-being of their families. Not coincidentally, the

“hermetic” quality of essential motherhood is most clearly evident and most frequently encountered in the two series that feature these characters.

Mothers who raised their children in working class or upper class environments, like Benny and Emily, respectively, retained more of their individual identities during their childrearing years. In Emily’s case, this is because she had the financial ability to pay for in-home help so she could focus more of her time on outside interests; in Benny’s case, this is because she spent most of her time working outside the home to support her family. Although Emily, who was over-privileged, and Benny, who was under-privileged, experienced and practiced motherhood very differently, they both transitioned more easily into postmaternity than Nora and Marie. However, they were also more likely to be criticized during their postmaternal years by their adult children for the way they enacted their mothering when their children were young. It is also clear in *Gilmore Girls* and *George Lopez* that Emily and Benny’s individual parenting styles and attitudes were very different from what is culturally considered “normal” mothering. As a result, the constraints of essential motherhood they experience as postmaternal women are generally applied by their own adult children or people outside their family structure. Lorelai continues to try to force Emily into a traditional model of motherhood, and although George affords Benny adult reciprocity, his wife often expresses dissatisfaction with the way Benny mothered George, blaming her for George’s occasional emotional insensitivity and inability to express or deal with his own feelings.

Whether or not the women were traditional mothers when their children were young, it is clear in all four series that to be considered “good” mothers during postmaternity, women should not offer any unsolicited care or advice, but should remain “on call” at all times. All four characters are generally free to pursue their own ambitions, as long as they make themselves available to provide care and advice to their children and grandchildren as soon as it is needed. Nora Walker frequently tries to adopt a lifestyle independent of her children, but she is always called back into her caregiving roles, even by non-family members, and also finds herself professionally limited by her traditional maternal history. Meanwhile, Raymond almost always expresses resentment of his mother’s over-attentiveness, unless he sought out the attention himself. When he seeks attention and is denied, he complains.

Of the four postmaternal characters presented, Benny Lopez is the most resilient in terms of her ability to maintain a mutually-enriching relationship with her adult son at the same time she retains a full sense of self, thus “keeping intact [her] shifting and multiple [postmaternal] identity” (Anzaldúa 19). Benny is least affected by the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood because she never adopted essentialized notions of motherhood in the first place, nor does her adult child impose those notions on her. Benny’s was a motherhood of complex necessity, and when George was grown, she had no problems granting him independence or reclaiming her own, which supports Borland’s claim that Mexican American mothers would most likely experience ENS less acutely or not at all. George, perhaps because of his upbringing, also did not internalize

an ideology of essential motherhood. He does not apply such constraints in his interactions with his mother. Instead, he treats her like any other adult he encounters in the world. This is opposite from the way most other adult children interact with their mothers on television. For example, Kevin infantilizes and Nora, Sarah disrespectfully treats Nora as hotel staff, Lorelai provokes and avoids Emily, and Ray regards his Marie as something superhuman and more akin to King Kong than an actual human being (Gullette “Wicked”). Some may look at George and Benny’s relationship and observe a son who has no respect for his mother because he relentlessly pokes fun at her or a mother who is “lazy,” “mean,” and “cruel” (McClelland 102). However, I argue instead that George has so much respect for his mother that he does not lie to her, coddle her, or constantly blame her as other adult children on television often do. Rather, he is able to speak to his mother in the same sarcastic tone he uses with his friends because unlike Nora, Emily, and Marie’s adult children George trusts his mother to be able to verbally defend herself. In other words, he treats her like a person, even if he does not always treat her nicely.

In this chapter I provided a brief look at some contemporary examples of how postmaternal characters continue to be affected by the ideology of essential motherhood and how the application of that ideology takes on a “hermetic” quality. I focused on characters who maintain close relationships with their adult children as a way to narrow the scope of my analysis, and more importantly, as a way of illustrating the key role that adult reciprocity, or lack thereof, plays in promoting or negating the development and

maintenance of a postmaternal self-identity. As the preceding analysis demonstrates, the “hermetic” quality of essential motherhood is evident in postmaternal women’s lives when they continue to internalize the ideology of essential motherhood, when their adult children continue to apply the ideology of essential motherhood to their relationships with their mothers, or both. A mutually-enriching relationship of adult reciprocity between postmaternal women and their children is integral to women’s abilities to develop as complex, dynamic characters. Without receiving adult recognition from their children, “hermetic” motherhood continues to be reproduced in postmaternal characters’ lives, even as they attempt to break free of the construct. Without affording their children that same kind of adult recognition, “hermetic” motherhood is likewise reproduced.

CHAPTER IV

NEXT SEASON'S LINEUP

As with any scholarly endeavor, certain limitations exist in this work. Perhaps the most important limitation, or at least the most important to me, is similar to the limitations of other scholarly works on the topic of postmaternity. In chapter two I highlighted the lack of more scholarly attention to nuanced postmaternal experiences in works by Gullette, Dillaway, and Green, which all focus on the experiences of educated, white, middle class postmaternal women. One original goal of this work was to intervene in this trend and conduct a more inclusive inquiry. However, the general lack of diversity on television, combined with the scope of analysis, proved that goal very difficult to achieve. Although I was able to address the implications of ignoring the experiences and perceptions of more marginalized groups of postmaternal women and focus some attention on class differences, I was not able to comparatively discuss other differences, such as race, sexual orientation, ability, and so on, to a very large extent.

“SECOND-CHANCE” BABIES AND VAMPIRE MOMS

The brief exploration into the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood in the previous chapters primarily focused on how postmaternal characters on television are affected by the ideology of essential motherhood, as illustrated through their interactions with their adult children. However, this is just one way to study the “hermetic” power of essential motherhood in the media. While the previous chapters focus on postmaternity, a

character does not have to be postmaternal in order to be affected by “hermetic” constraints of essential motherhood, and there are many more avenues of research to pursue. For example, the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood can also be observed in the trend on television to introduce a later life pregnancy into a show.

Although Maude chose to terminate her pregnancy rather than pursue a second round of motherhood, far more TV moms opt in. Later life pregnancies often occur unexpectedly just as all or almost all of the children reach adulthood. With the end of her maternal years nearing, the character usually stands to lose her purpose on the show. Rather than developing the character in new directions, I argue that writers instead take the easier route of bringing a new baby into the family to preserve the woman’s maternity. This is a practical manifestation of “hermetic” motherhood.

Examples of this practice are not difficult to find. Many of the iconic family shows of the past thirty years qualify. *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*, *Step By Step*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Seventh Heaven*, and *Boy Meets World* all employed this technique. For instance, *Boy Meets World*, which aired between 1993 and 2000, tells the story of Cory Matthews’ coming of age from his first kiss in middle school through the first several months of his marriage to his childhood sweetheart, Topanga. Throughout the seven seasons, Cory’s mother Amy is almost always home if the kids are home, and if one missed the subtle lines of dialogue about her job, it would be easy to mistake her for a housewife. At the end of the fifth season, Cory is graduating from high school; his older brother, Eric, has finally moved into an apartment with friends; and his little sister,

Morgan, is old enough that she does not need as much direct care anymore. Amy's main role as the caregiver in the family is on the brink of evaporation, and her character could follow any number of paths as her maternal practices evolve and she transitions into postmaternity. The show's writers could have sent her back to college full time, enabled her to take a bigger professional role in the family business, run for local office, or pursue some other new or abandoned ambition. However, developing Amy's character in this way would defy the established construct of traditional motherhood laid out for her since the beginning of the series. Instead of exploring any of the infinite possibilities available, which would show that rediscovering one's self at the conclusion of childrearing is inevitable, necessary, and ordinary, the writers instead introduce another baby into the family, thus solving the problem of what to do with a traditional TV mom who is about to be, as Gullette puts it, "out of a job" ("Inventing").

Although this trend of "second-chance" babies is a common one, it is important to note that there are some exceptions. For example, Roseanne and Dan Conner of *Roseanne* decide to have another baby when their new small business significantly improves their quality of life. More recently, Tami Taylor, Coach Taylor's wife and high school guidance counselor on *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), gets pregnant when her then only child Julie is finishing her junior year of high school. In this case, the baby functions to complicate, rather than to prevent or end, the new professional life that Tami pursues when her daughter's departure from the family home becomes eminent. As with

the examples provided previously, it is important to note that these examples are the exceptions to the “hermetically” scripted style of motherhood on television.

The “hermetic” nature of motherhood is also often depicted in very literal ways that require almost no inference at all. For example, an analysis of cinematic or literary depictions of “hermetic” motherhood would necessarily include Stephanie Meyer’s four-part *Twilight* series. As the mother figure to a group of teenaged vampires, Esme Cullen, a vampire herself, is the literal embodiment of “hermetic” motherhood. Esme never ages, her family never ages, and her sole responsibility as caregiver is never-ending. In this way, Esme’s maternal practice and identity allow her to embody the immortal, though undead, figure of The Maternal. The literal manifestations of “hermetic” motherhood can also be seen in animated series like *The Simpsons* (1989-present), *South Park* (1997-present), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Family Guy* (1999-present), and *American Dad* (2005-present), all of which depict families and towns that remain largely unaffected by the passage of time. On *The Simpsons*, the longest running of these series, Marge Simpson and her family, including young children Bart, Lisa, and Maggie, have not aged a day in the twenty-five seasons that the series has been in production.

PREVIOUSLY, ON . . .

In the previous chapters, I provided an overview of studies on postmaternity, which largely consist of theories put forth by Margaret Morganroth Gullette and the qualitative studies her work inspired. I argued that stretching the boundaries of motherhood studies by theorizing about and researching how motherhood is experienced

longitudinally will promote a more holistic understanding of motherhood that dismantles the conflation of motherhood with femininity, fertility, youth, and primary care. Only by constructing an understanding of what it means to mother and to be a mother across all intersections of race, class, age (both of the child and the parent), etc., can a truly holistic vision of motherhood come into focus. I described how postmaternal women continue to be affected by the ideology of essential motherhood, and I explored depictions of postmaternal women on television as a way of demonstrating how essential motherhood takes on a “hermetic” quality in women’s lives. By analyzing the relationships between postmaternal characters and their adult children in *Brothers and Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *George Lopez*, I demonstrated that a key to overcoming the “hermetic” quality of essential motherhood is a mutually-enriching relationship in which parent and adult child recognize each other as adults and equals.

My analysis of contemporary postmaternal characters shows that intersections of race and class are extremely important in the depiction of postmaternal women on television. Additionally, several themes emerge in the way television often portrays postmaternal women. In the television shows I examined, they all struggle to be recognized as the people they are, rather than the mothers they were. How these characters are/were judged as “good” or “bad” mothers reinforces the standards of traditional motherhood by harshly judging mothers who did not define themselves entirely by their children during their childrearing years. Women who were acceptable mothers during their childrearing years but continue to perform traditional motherwork

for their adult children are also portrayed negatively. No matter what kind of mother she was or what kind of woman she is, each character is confronted by the “hermetic” nature of essential motherhood in unique ways and to varying degrees. Those who were not so mystified by motherhood during their childrearing years are criticized for their guiltless individualism, no matter how successful they were at raising and launching their children. Those who internalize the ideology of traditional motherhood are criticized for their inability to break from their roles as caregivers, even as adult children in need call them back to those roles.

The self-centeredness exhibited by an adult child when a mother “express[es] sentiments that differentiate [her] from a doormat,” (Rebecca West, qtd. in Charlton, n.p.) a nurse, or a housekeeper, juxtaposed with the resentment they exhibit when their mother ask for or require support themselves, is evidence of a lack of mutually-enriching reciprocity in relationships between postmaternal characters and their adult children. Achieving the ability to recognize and interact with each other as adults, as Gullette and Rich both note, is vital to a mother’s ability to transition into postmaternity. Adult reciprocity, the dismantling of “hermetic” motherhood, and the incubation of an anti-sexist, anti-ageist understanding of postmaternity must all begin with a deep exploration into the fluidity of motherhood over time.

“You make me feel like my life is over!” It is clear now why my mother erupted with these words a decade ago. She had come to the completion of childrearing, but still felt the pressure to live up to the ideals of essential motherhood; however, with no more

dependent children at home, that was an impossible standard to meet. As I have argued, the mainstream cultural understanding of motherhood needs to evolve in a way that acknowledges and embraces the truth my father pointed out to me recently: “From the first time you hold your baby in your arms, its life is forever pointed away from you.” I approached this topic as an adult daughter who wanted to give some voice to her own mother’s postmaternal experience, but that is not the true benefit of this work because as I mentioned, my mom turned right back to her book, moved on, and eventually forgot. The true benefit of this work resides in making a proactive intervention into the dominant narrative of motherhood, not as a daughter engaging in analysis and reflection, but as a woman looking forward to her own possible futures.

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