Response Essays

The Personal Is Rhetorical: Ethos, Politics, and Narrative

Julie Drew

What to do with Harriet Malinowitz’s difficult, provocative essay, “Unmotherhood” (JAC 22 [2002]: 11–36)? Reading it, I felt challenged, but I also felt irritated and angry, offended and humiliated—and more than a little disconcerted that her essay has produced such a reaction. Malinowitz has not pulled any punches about motherhood, as evidenced by her extended list of demeaning terms discovered on anti-child, anti-mother listservs, as well as by her own use of one of those terms. She also offers readers plenty of her own adjectives, describing motherhood as dull, prosaic, drudgy, and pedestrian, for starters. Choosing motherhood may also be, according to Malinowitz, either a sellout of more radical (not to mention compelling) ways of living, or the result of false consciousness.

At first, I felt an overwhelming desire to tell a different story about motherhood and mothering; I wanted to counter her personal narrative with mine, a revelatory contest in which the best ethos wins—but I am uncomfortable with that reaction and with the agonistic terms in which I’ve articulated it. This essay has invited me, as a woman with children, to occupy a particular position in responding—a position supported by ideology and public opinion—but I really don’t want to speak from there. Middle-class, heterosexual, married white women who choose to bear and raise children don’t need defending—not here, and not by me. We enjoy a privilege and a security through our affiliation with middle-class, heterosexual white men that Malinowitz does not, and certainly that is part of the problem that she identifies. I am defensive, but with that acknowledgment I hope to move past mere defensiveness and explore the
issues Malinowitz raises (that is, the construction of desire and identity), and indeed what my reaction might suggest about those issues as well.

I have come to value the ways in which Malinowitz provokes me into acknowledging that the figure woman-as-mother, as both an institutional practice and a patriarchal ideal, is still sacrosanct, perhaps even unassailable in its normative power—and that this power has undoubtedly affected my life and choices. But I also read Malinowitz’s monolithic construction of motherhood as at least partly false, and in some significant ways depoliticized, to the detriment of her own and much feminist political work. I am also reminded by this essay that the fact that the personal is political—as a feminist rhetorical strategy no longer the exclusive province of feminism—cuts both ways.

Malinowitz is right to frame her discussion of unmotherhood and motherhood in terms of desire and choice and to couch these terms within a larger understanding of identity and ideology. Her brief archaeology of “choice” explores the ways in which hegemonic forces work to construct women’s desire for babies and, more generally, for a role as nurturer; parts of her personal history help us to remember and recognize in our own histories the passing on of baby-love, of babies as the ultimate objects of desire for women. Her narrative also situates the author as a self-proclaimed outsider courageous enough to reveal herself in order to effect change. But if Malinowitz achieves an at times thoughtful and critical look at the construction of motherhood, she also naturalizes her own desire for unmotherhood.

Malinowitz appears to assume that desires that do not reflect the dominant ideology are somehow not ideological—that “outsider” means outside of ideology. She argues that the desire for motherhood is constructed by hegemonic forces; she does not make a similar argument for unmotherhood—indeed, she suggests that a “lack” of desire for motherhood signals the absence of such forces, or at least their failure. This view is especially apparent when she takes such great pains to detail the ways in which she was hailed into the mommy cult through her relationships with her mother, other women, and the larger media culture, and yet reports that she somehow managed to resist that interpellation, becoming instead her true self, a self with real desires. But we live in a world of competing ideologies and complex, contesting (albeit unequal) social forces, and I doubt that Malinowitz has escaped in the manner that her essay suggests. To be outside the dominant ideology is still to live in an ideological structure—a structure whose meaning depends on a negative relationship with the dominant structure.
Malinowitz suggests that her own desires regarding children are far less culturally manipulated, and a whole lot more authentic, than others': the "true reason I don't have children," she states, is that "I just don't want them" (25). The idea that her desire not to have children is based solely on a conscious "horror" of the tedium of childrearing, and a preference for a life filled with interesting intellectual pursuits (the two are apparently mutually exclusive) is not complicated enough and, indeed, seems to set her outside of the consequences of her own experiences, despite the personal narrative structure of the essay, which clearly intends to suggest a relationship between experience and desire. She argues that her desire for unmotherhood exists despite hegemonic forces but because of nothing—it just is.

There's a kind of purity to her story, and an extended notion of an unconflicted self that is very appealing: she is brave, unwavering; not so everybody else. Historically, she points out, those whose choices don't allow them a mainstream identity have "appropriated" the "beliefs and images" that identify the true American citizen in order "to bolster their own status as citizens." This strategy, according to Malinowitz, is common of "outsiders seeking a place at the table" (28). Such a strategy might indeed be about a place at the table—which is often about reform rather than revolution, not the wholesale sellout suggested by Malinowitz. It might also be about accommodating one's conflicting desires to embody radical political convictions while raising children in the middle class. Contradictory? You bet. Do most thoughtful people struggle with such contradictions? I believe so, and I'll wager Malinowitz agrees, which is why it's so hard to understand why she sneers at same-sex parents going public with their lives by charging that "... queers are now in the vanguard of the cultural trek back to the fifties" (24). It is at least possible, maybe even probable, that the deliberate, public linking of queer with middle-class mom irrevocably alters both subject positions (not to mention their stereotypes and public reception) in ways that might be a move in the direction Malinowitz wants to go.

Malinowitz appears to see in herself an unconflicted, fully cognizant, socio-political consistency that others ought to be living up to. This is reflected in her very understanding of women's statuses (there seem to be just the two) regarding children: motherhood, which is supported by dominant ideology, by history; and unmotherhood, which is suspect, vulnerable, and punishable. I think we can grant this, at least in its most general sense, to be true: we live in an undeniably "pronatalist" culture. But the validity and utility of this binary comes seriously into question if
the figure of the middle-class, hyper-educated unmother-as-outsider is set against the single, welfare mother-as-insider, for example, or the illegal immigrant mother-as-insider. These mothers are far from revered, far from safe, and their material realities force us to acknowledge that race and class cut the categories of motherhood and unmotherhood in ways that are too important to ignore if we are interested in cultural citizenship and the extension of the most basic human rights, let alone privileges.

The political usefulness and ideological worth of the universal categories of motherhood and unmotherhood are shaken by the particularities of these other women’s lives; at the same time, individual experience or the particularities of minority groups are less likely to be heard and even less likely to have any political leverage without an affiliation with some universal, some shared social value (human rights, freedom, choice, dignity, for example). As Ernesto Laclau argues, in order to extend rights to others, we must extend the logic of the universal value behind those rights. Malinowitz appears to agree; she notes late in her essay that feminists need to avoid “the pitfalls of purely identity-based and single-issue politics” (32).

Locating that balance of universal with particular for optimum political utility presents no small degree of difficulty. The personal is political, but this does not mean that to deploy that rhetorical strategy is necessarily or exclusively a liberating move, that power relations are not being obscured by the authenticity implied in personal narrative. On the other hand, whether or not authenticity obfuscates power relations depends on whose experiences and subjectivity is being authenticated. Whether authenticity—in the existential sense—really exists might not be as important as whether or not its story has the rhetorical power to do cultural work. For example, consider Frederick Douglass’ narrative attempts to authenticate his experience and subjectivity, authenticate that he is a human being capable of occupying the privileged cultural domains of those whose humanity is assumed. His rhetorical use of an authenticating narrative has very different social and political value—and, therefore, should be judged very differently—than, say, that of a bootstrap narrative told by a wealthy white man. Douglass’ narrative reveals power relations and context because it seems authentic, because it claims the right of authenticity, because, when you read it, he seems to be a being capable of authenticity. In other words, authenticity is a hallmark of white male privilege and power. They are the true humans—Douglass takes that singular status away from them, through narrative. There-
fore, to position oneself as capable of authentic subjectivity, whether it exists essentially or not, could be a radical rhetorical act that challenges the status quo. It says, "I am human, normal, worthy; human rights apply to me."

Malinowitz's essentialist narrative achieves some of that: in the context of a "pronatalist" culture, her narrative insists that her experience as a lesbian unmother is authentic and worthy of subjecthood. Ultimately, whether using narrative to authenticate experience and subjectivity obfuscates power relations depends not on the issue of essentialism but on whose experience and subjectivity is being authenticated, what power relations we are considering, and whether other frames of reference are used as well. Malinowitz's narrative works, but only to a degree: her at-times uncritical use of an authenticating narrative limits the power of her argument and its ability to make connections to others.

Malinowitz's narrative—as her story, as evidence of the act of making herself known and vulnerable, and as an insistence that her story is one that should be heard—is rhetorically successful. But her contention that her choices are based on natural desires formed by a true self, outside of hegemony, while everybody else is being duped or selling out may limit her opportunity to affiliate herself with the women whose familial lives she finds so tedious—an affiliation that might serve to make choice itself easier and safer for all women, rendering the social consequences of women's choices—of women making choices—less punitive.

But that's my read. I have not been able, after all, to respond to this essay as other than a white, middle-class woman raising two sons; this essay bothered me both because Malinowitz seems to view my life with derision and condescension, and because she said out loud some things I quietly worry about. And that may indeed have been her strategy all along—not to create for herself a place at the table, but to build a different table altogether, where the terms of the debate are hers from the beginning and where I have to get comfortable with it, rather than the other way around.

I'd like to see us move past this moment that has lasted decades too long, in which the culture at large feels it perfectly natural and right to debate, decide, and pronounce whether (and when) women ought to have children or not and what their professional lives ought to look like in relation to those choices; I imagine that Malinowitz would agree. The fact that we aren't even close to closing that chapter, despite the promise of the 1970s, should afford us a glimpse of how powerful the cultural figure of the (white, middle-class, heterosexual, married) mother remains.
Malinowitz's aggressive posture, matched by my own defensiveness, has not dispelled "the collectively damaging idea that each condition—motherhood and unmotherhood—profoundly negates the other," but perhaps insisting on such a dialogue, no matter how uncomfortable it might be, is a productive way to begin (32).

University of Akron
Akron, Ohio

Feminist (Un)motherhood: Reigning Rhetorics of Mothering Inside and Outside of Academe

Eileen E. Schell

As someone in the throes of recent motherhood, I find myself identifying with many of the claims Harriet Malinowitz makes in "Unmotherhood" even as I have crossed the line into motherhood. In particular, I identify with her analysis of the cultural interrogation of "unmotherhood." Just as unmothers face queries about whether they should have children, whether they are fulfilled, and whether they will have someone to care for them in their old age, those of us who mother in this culture face queries and judgments about whether our parenting skills are adequate, whether we are "fit" enough or good enough to be mothers, or whether we can continue to have careers and pursue other endeavors. As Ariel Gore argues in The Mother Trip, women who mother are subject to a suffocating array of discourses and assumptions: "The world tells us we are too permissive, too controlling, too chaotic, too old, too young, too square, too whacked, too poor, too extravagant, and everything in between" (17).

Inspired by Malinowitz's interrogation of the cultural stereotypes of unmotherhood, I will explore, from my vantage point as a feminist academic who recently became a mother, some of the cultural stereotypes that pregnant women and mothers face.

Malinowitz argues that unmothers are subject to stereotyping and cultural "misunderstanding." Unmothers are often portrayed in the media as "single career women with ticking biological clocks" or "infertile