Mother and Teacher: 
Subjectivity in "Unmotherhood"

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Women were busy bearing children, busy gathering edible grasses or bulbs. You see, he could have said, his little finger waving, it comes down to biology and destiny. Women have been hampered by their biology. Hampered: such a neutral and disingenuous concept and one that deflects blame.

—Carol Shields
In my early thirties, I once said that if I ever had children, it would be because I had given up on my own life. Like Harriet Malinowitz, Molly Peacock, and René Descartes, I imagined myself, my identity, as finite, a “pinprick” endangered by the demands of others. Now, almost twenty years later, I am the single mother of two young children. Malinowitz’s essay reminds me of my earlier self and of the comic strip character who cries, “Oh, no, I forgot to have kids!” There are places where Malinowitz’s “Unmotherhood” makes me wonder if I should cry, “Oh, no, I forgot to have a life!” How did this thing happen? Was it by choice that I gave up my life—professional, intellectual, and personal? I filled out the adoption paperwork, but did I make that decision freely, apart from social and family forces that define me? What motivated the choice? Did I make a decision based on some desire for actualization, some subject position that I fantasized? I am a different persona from what I would have been without children, but the question remains, did I have children in an effort to make myself into someone specific, someone different from what I would have been had I simply had a career and adult relationships?

I share Malinowitz’s concern with issues around what it means to be a woman and a professional. These identities have long been kept apart, and since we are of the first generation to meld them, it makes sense that we struggle for definitions and vocabulary. Like Malinowitz, I believe that “mother” and “unmother” are concepts laden with ideological imperatives and that are socially manipulated to benefit those other than the women who are thus hailed. I find her discussions of eugenics, adoption, and family helpful in understanding contemporary visions of women. Her sense of the context for women’s decisions is astute. I even accept her liberal or libertarian use of “choice” as unproblematic; after all, I did write a book on intention and do believe that we choose within historic possibilities.

I am motivated to respond only because I hear Cartesian and bourgeois subjects lurking in the background of her discussion of what it means to be a mother. If Malinowitz describes what it means to be an unmother or one type of unmother, she is less clear about what it means to be a mother. Mother is outside the focus of her essay, but, at best, mother is elusive. Perhaps because unmother is open to all that is not mother, while mother is essence, mother cannot be real/read (ah, the Platonic mother haunts us still). To paraphrase (or parody) her on unmother, being a mother usually means that one is misunderstood as a whole, and for a good reason: our existence simply doesn’t figure in public discussion, except by exemplifying lack at its most tragic and
poignant or fulfillment at its most ecstatic (13). Mother adds the “fulfillment” and the “ecstatic,” but in public discussions of motherhood as well as unmotherhood, there is little place for the actual women and their experiences.

I also respond to “Unmotherhood” to draw out the analogy between the feminized acts of mothering and teaching, women’s work. While the relationship between our profession and women’s choices is implicit in the essay, I think that if we ponder that connection and models of subjectivity we understand better how teaching is characterized. Implicit ideas about subjectivity inform a variety of arguments about teaching in the university. I will not draw out the implications for teachers as fully as for mother, but I feel that the gendering of subject permeates discussions of profession in subtle ways as well as in the obvious ways so well acknowledged (see Miller; Schell).

To understand the subjectivities posed against and/or associated with motherhood, we might consider three models of subjectivity. The first is the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am.” This model is implicit in Peacock’s claim: “Being with children, for me, always meant being in a blurred state. Focused on them, hyperaware of their safety and progress, my own inner life receded to a pinprick, and as a self I was lost” (qtd. in Malinowitz 25). Peacock finds that responsibility for others results in a blurring and losing of her self. In the Cartesian model, the transcendental subject is complete in her thinking, in her “own inner life”; the outside world is extraneous distraction. This model posits engagement with others, especially less-able others, as a self-sacrificing activity. Giving is losing, and the self is to be protected from extraneous demands if she is to develop fully. In this model of subjectivity, the mother’s identity requires her to be lost.

I believe that Malinowitz’s own model of subjectivity is closer to the bourgeois subjectivity critiqued by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment. In trying to understand why the bourgeois subject so willingly partakes in its own subjugation, the Frankfurt School developed telling models of subjectivity and resistance. Horkheimer and Adorno’s Enlightenment subject seeks to find his or her self and doesn’t simply turn inward to private thoughts, but rather turns outward to the knowledge gathering of experience, a process of “consistent self-affirmation” (43). Once the burden only of kings, the multiplication of objects and powers now requires the administrative attention of all people (42). The subject turns out toward objects and others, but the other here is nonidentity, the material forms surrounding the subject (see Smith 57–60). In his or her adventuring appropriations, the subject gathers experi-
ences with otherness as a means of finding the self, but the basis of relationship is alienation. As Horkheimer and Adorno write, people “pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power” (9).

Given this model of subjectivity, it makes sense that Malinowitz would posit mothering as a form of self-actualization. Mothering here is a purposeful making of the self; one engages in the child to make one’s identity. One mothers for the purpose of finding one’s self, one’s best self. While the mother is not as isolated as a Cartesian subject, her subjectivity is formed purposefully, by choice, in constrained ways, ways of filling a life. In keeping with Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique, Malinowitz characterizes her father as “hunkered down in a solitary trench of books” and her mother as “baby-enthralled” (19). They both are outward looking, but in alienated ways that are containing the subject in a metaphorical space.

The model of a bourgeois subject suggests that one has mobility and the ability to appropriate—or at least to be open to—possibilities. Hence, Malinowitz writes that she has an extreme lack of interest in children’s culture and an unwillingness to engage it; in refusing the value of children’s culture (any children’s culture?), she closes off the possibility of finding identity there (25). When she writes of her fantasies of motherhood, she writes that she “never had to forego anything in my own life to deal with a toddler’s ear infection” (22). It is a revealing line in that it shows the distance between living and dealing with the other in this model of subjectivity. Dealing with an ear infection implies forgoing life rather than engaging life; for Malinowitz, it represents dealing with inappropriate objects rather than the objects of her self-actualization. Still, I suspect that ear infections could be useful to the Enlightenment subject. The object, ear infection, could lead to the self-actualization of a doctor or a nurse. That is, for the Enlightenment subject, the intellectual activity of science and reason is life, as life here connotes the planned and rational life of the mind and an act that leads to self-actualization.

Is the nurturing, responsible subject engaged in life only if she is pursuing self-actualization? Are her acts ethical only if they are reasoned and driven by rules? These are not Malinowitz’s concerns, but the Enlightenment subject raises such concerns. The constraint on the life of the Enlightenment subject is that all relationships and experience lead to a formation of identity of the self in the world and against the other as object. It does not offer a dialectical or integrating relationship with the world and the other. The subject engages others for the purpose of
creation and understanding. Sara Ruddick, when she writes of the intellectual work of mothering, is responding to the assumptions of Enlightenment subjectivity.

As a mother, I find that neither the Cartesian nor the Enlightenment model describes my subject position in this role called "Mama," a powerful interpellation invoked frequently by my daughters. Instead, I suggest that the practice of mother presumes a dialogic, intersubjective, and passionate model of subject. The child’s call is crucial to the development of identity, but not in a way that is ordained or driven by the mother, the child, or society. The call both commands recognition and evokes, through the interaction, ethical ways of being for the mother and child, and even for society. Emmanuel Levinas offers a model closer to my sense of identity. He writes that our relationship with the other, with alterity, is the start of identity, truth, and representation (language is always from someone, to someone); he sees our relationship with alterity as identity and the subject-matter of ethics.

Levinas has written of the primacy of response to another person. According to Levinas, before any philosophical understanding of subject position, we experience sociality or otherness, the face-to-face encounter with the other. This encounter with the other is "an experience in the strongest sense of the term: a contact with a reality that does not fit any a priori idea, which overflows all of them" ("Philosophy" 59). Inherent in this encounter is the imperative of response. The face—defenseless, naked—exposes my freedom to the judgment of the other and so demands of us a response; in and of itself, it is a resistance to me. Furthermore, there is no escape from this imperative; even in failing to respond, there is a response. Hence, the "I" is never anything but the response to the other, and so the self lacks integrity and closure. "I" is always open to others. In this model of subjectivity, the subject’s abilities to act are from and for the other ("No" 145–47). In subjection to the other is subjectivity. In Levinas then, living from and for the other is not pathology, enthrallment, martyrdom, nor actualization, but the state of being human and the basis of ethics. Ethics precedes rules, and ethics is inherent in our first meetings.

What does this model suggest about the subject of mother? Primarily, it recognizes engagement with children—not as enthrallment by an inferior, demanding cultural group, but as one of the primary acts of mind, one that acknowledges the primacy of both face-to-face contact and emotional rather than rational relationship with the other. The response of mothering is simply a normal activity of subject formation. Human
subjectivity is formed in and only in engagement with the other. This model of subjectivity does not require a defense of mothering as a rational, thinking act; the model diminishes acts of reason over acts of (com)passion and, in doing so, shifts the epistemic basis of knowing. Nonpropositional thinking reappears as a basis for going on, not simply as a tacit understanding.

Intimacy as the basis of ethical action exists in other theories, such as the care ethics of Carol Gilligan or Confucius (see Lyon), but Levinas’ focus on the initiating encounter is unique. While care ethics often has an implicit hierarchy (gender for Gilligan; gender, age, and class for Confucius), Levinas allows us to understand human subjectivity and justice outside of hierarchy. The other has an essential vulnerability that we engage. That is, through Levinas I escape the thorny binary of career and motherhood. My identity is my identity formed in responsiveness to alterity, without hierarchy. The weakness and weight of my child is simply the weakness and weight of the human.

Now, I fear that I’ve already taken on too large a topic for a simple response essay. I know I have used Malinowitz’s analysis of unmotherhood to advance my own analysis of motherhood. Even so, I do want to connect the models of subjectivity to teaching. Exactly because teaching, especially the teaching of composition, is such a feminine enterprise, it is useful to understand how the model of Enlightenment subjectivity still dominates the work of English departments. Sometimes the Cartesian model lurks behind representations of an elite individual thinker (researcher) besieged by dependent, needy, marginal people (students), but more often we are shown our subjectivity under the Kantian model. In dismissals of the intellectual work of teaching, especially the teaching of beginning students, teachers are characterized as simple folk who believe they can make the world in their image; arguments for the intellectual work of teaching respond to Kantian assumptions. Sometimes, to the benefit of the institution, teachers are portrayed as seeking actualization as the effect of teaching and, hence, do not have intellectual, economic, or humanistic needs to concern the university. Because their work is not as rational, scientific, or knowledge-driven as the work of researchers, subjects hailed as teachers are seen as lesser subjects. Paradoxically, exactly because they are portrayed as bourgeois subjects seeking actualization through teaching, committed teachers are at risk of becoming alienated from their students and subject matter.

Like Malinowitz, I fear the diminishment of the life of mother or unmother. Our patriarchal history and language does not give us any
shortcuts to validating women's choices. It is hard to find ways of speaking women's identity. The Carol Shields epigraph that began this essay demonstrates how a simple word like "hamper" hides a history where half the population hid from responsibility, alterity, and the human condition. When Molly Peacock writes of a "saving no" to having children, one that "leaves room to create the rest of life," she diminishes my life as a womb, a body part (qtd. in Malinowitz 33). She might not mean to diminish a room with children, but she does. To describe our very valid choices, we need to be hypervigilant of the history of our words and concepts. In this school year, in this year of mothering, I am going to remind myself of Levinas and a subjectivity of engagement, and I will speak of my life in his terms. Levinas offers us a model of subjectivity that will allow mother and unmother both to be conceived as engaged in alterity and fully ethical in life. For Levinas, life is "to be for the other, to respond to the other, to love!" (Poirié 55). It seems a healthy way of envisioning my sisters.

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Works Cited


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