“Good” (queer) mothers and “bad” (queer) mothers: Contested representations of polygamist women in popular culture

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ABSTRACT: The common assumption is that polygamous families are inevitably heteropatriarchal (bad) thus could be neither feminist nor queer (good). In this paper, I wish to blur the distinction between good mothers and bad mothers, as well as that between good queers and bad queers, which underlie popular representations of polygamy. My focus will be on recent portrayals of fictional and real-life suburban women who have careers, drive their children to school in minivans, and attend block parties while practicing plural marriage in HBO’s Big love, TLC’s Sister wives and the memoir Love Times Three. These representations of modern polygamy normalize childrearing within queer kinship structures, persuading us to view (some) polygamist mothers as good (queer) mothers. At the same time, as I also argue, the normativity of suburban polygamy is purchased at the expense of erecting a good polygamist/bad polygamist dichotomy that caricatures rural polygamists as the barbaric Other who cannot be entrusted with the care of children. We should, I suggest, resist this wholesale vilification of rural polygamist mothers and the raids on rural polygamist communities that remove children from their mothers’ care.

SPEAKER BIO: Dr. Shelley Park’s research and teaching interests include Feminist Theory, Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Studies and Motherhood Studies. Dr. Park recently published "Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families", with SUNY Press. She has also published work in various professional journals and anthologies on topics such as recovered memories of abuse, feminist therapy, transracial adoption, queer families, cybermothering, women in higher education, and multiculturalism in the academy. Her current research focuses on mothering within queer, postmodern families. Courses she regularly teaches include Feminist Theory, Family Values, Philosophy of Love, Freedom and Justice, Philosophy in the News and Ways of Knowing.