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Jennifer Maher

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SOMETHING ELSE BESIDES A FATHER

Reproductive technology in recent Hollywood film

Jennifer Maher

While heterosexuality has long been the assumed ideology of reproduction, the material existence of over thirty-three thousand US children a year born from sperm donation alone attests to a radical disjuncture between our conceptions of conception and how a good many children are actually conceived. Reproductive technologies, ranging from the aforementioned sperm donation to the more complicated processes of egg harvesting, surrogacy, and IVF, can thus be read as subverting our notions of the heteronormative family. As such, assisted reproductive technology evokes widespread cultural anxiety, especially for how it challenges notions of gender, sexuality, and parenthood.

*Not surprisingly, popular culture has stepped in to allay some of these anxieties, and as such it is a productive site through which to examine debates around gender, sexuality, and parenthood. At the very least, the wide market of Hollywood cinema is evidence of the discursive pull of these debates. In an examination of three recent and representative Hollywood films, *Baby Mama* (2008), *The Switch*, and *The Back-Up Plan* (both 2010), I will analyze how they both challenge and reinforce the “socially foundational status of the male–female couple.” Through their (re)deployment of a variety of cinematic conventions, these films attempt to yoke the radical potential of reproductive technology to a conservative ideology incorporating post-feminism and new masculinity that insists on the emotive primacy of the heterosexual couple and its “language of naturalness.”*

KEYWORDS reproductive technology; feminism; race; gender; Hollywood cinema

Introduction

Nearly twenty-eight years ago Linda Williams published “Something Else Besides a Mother” in *Cinema Journal*, an enormously influential essay on feminist film theory and the “woman’s picture.” Her title, of course, is a nod to a pivotal moment in the 1937 film *Stella Dallas* (1937) when Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) pretends to disavow her relationship to her adored daughter Laurel so that Laurel can attain a “good” marriage to a wealthy young man, a marriage Stella’s working class/single mother “excess” jeopardizes. Stella’s performance of maternal rejection (telling Laurel she wants to be “something else besides a mother”) initiates the plot of female sacrifice around which the film functions as a “maternal melodrama,” a sub-genre, according to Williams, invested in “debas[ing] the actual figure of the mother while sanctify[ing] the institution of motherhood” (Linda Williams 1984, 3).

Fast-forward to Hollywood romantic comedies of reproduction in the early twenty-first century and one finds that contentious themes of gender, motherhood, and sanctification have yet to be resolved. For instance, 2008's *Baby Mama*, a commercially successful romantic comedy about a career woman (mis)diagnosed as infertile who hires a working class gestational surrogate, led Ted Baehr of the Christian Movie Guide website to lament that the film "conforms to the libertine America that socialists want to establish—one where career women are free to have babies, with or without a husband" (Christian Movie Review 2008). While *Baby Mama* (2008) in particular has also been justly condemned by the left for its class, sexual, and racial politics, the sorts of cultural anxiety evinced by the figure of the unattached mother, in this film and others, is as pronounced now as it was in 1937, even as the terms of the debate have radically shifted.¹ From recent laws eradicating legal anonymity for sperm donors, to the Obama birth control controversy, to the popular MTV series *16 and Pregnant*, uneasy narratives of procreation (or the lack thereof) are ubiquitous. Whether in 2007's *Juno* and *Knocked Up*, 2006's saga of infertility and paternal heroism, *Children of Men*, or 2012's *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, reproduction—accidental, thwarted, eliminated by environmental disaster, or made possible by American medicine—is a near-obsessive theme.² Indeed, if their presence in popular culture serves as any referent, reproductive trepidations have only increased in the face of technologies able to "circumvent the role of sex in procreation, multiply the contributors to generation . . . and extend the possibilities for conception and pregnancy" (Karyn Valerius 1992, 179). Reproductive technologies, then, present powerful challenges to hegemonic ideologies of kinship, gender, sexuality, and the family. The Hollywood Romantic comedy, a genre not unlike the melodrama, which addresses "the contradictions that women encounter under patriarchy" (Williams 1984, 7) is, I argue, one genre that aims to resolve these contradictions, particularly today when women's relationships to men under patriarchy have the potential to be profoundly reconfigured through technologies of the body. This paper will focus on how popular culture deals with the threat posed by reproductive technology in particular and how it is assuaged via a celebration of liberal humanist bodily freedom (even for women) in tandem with an insistence upon the superiority of the heteronormative family in the face of such freedom. Though I am only analyzing three films here, I do so in order to emphasize how they exemplify larger cultural dialogues around gender, sexuality, and the family evoked by reproductive technologies such as sperm donation. These three early twenty-first century romantic comedies, *Baby Mama* (2008), *The Back-Up Plan* (2010), and *The Switch* (2008), through their narratives of capitalist/post-feminist "choice," their representations of "new" versions of middle class white masculinity, and their reification of biological paternity, work to reassure their viewers of the attractiveness of the traditional nuclear family by reinterpreting the very technologies that challenge its dominance.

Briefly, *Baby Mama*, as already alluded to, centers on a successful career woman ("Kat," played by Tina Fey) who, after finding herself infertile, hires a surrogate and then gets pregnant herself by a new boyfriend. In *The Switch*, the main character Kassie (played by Jennifer Aniston) purchases sperm from a donor that, in a moment of drunken jealousy, her best friend Wally accidentally knocks to the floor and surreptitiously replaces with his own. *The Back-Up Plan* tells the tale of Zoe (Jennifer Lopez), inseminated in a doctor's office only to meet the man of her dreams later the same day. Each of these films, I argue, walks a fine line between lauding women's independence and assuaging the angst such freedom evokes for/in the patriarchal family when a single woman is able to get pregnant on her

own outside of a committed heterosexual relationship. If, as Judith Roof suggests in *Come As You Are*, “[s]exuality functions as the principle of transfer, the logic of a plot of history and power” (1996, 34), then the fact that “sperm can now be manipulated outside men’s bodies, can even be bought and sold like other commodities” (Valerius 1992, 179) means perhaps we’ve lost our (patriarchal) plots, in both a metaphorical and literal sense. And if, as Williams argues, the mother/child dyad threatens the primacy of heterosexual romance, then a dyad borne from technology instead of “one ovulation and one ejaculation” (Valerius 1992, 179) jeopardizes the hetero-romantic social order to an unprecedented degree. Of course, Romantic comedies have traditionally worked to restore order through the primacy of the heterosexual (reproductive) couple. At the same time though, within the framework of what Diane Negra (2006) refers to as a post-feminist ideology of the “managed self,” these films cannot overtly condemn their female characters’ independent reproductive “choices” either, as to do so would endanger Western liberal ideals of desire satisfied through consumption, whether of sperm, medical services, or other women’s labor. Thus, through a variety of plot twists that ironically work to emphasize the limits of female bodily control while still endorsing it to a degree, any challenges to the traditional family imagined to be (temporarily) displaced by the test tube are effectively neutralized. In doing so, Hollywood romantic comedies of the (wonders) of reproductive technology paradoxically function, as does much contemporary discourse, to reinstate the “natural” romance of the patriarchal family.

I’m Not a Feminist (Mother) But . . .

Unlike Stella or other mothers from Classical Hollywood maternal melodramas of the past such as *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) or *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934, Douglas Sirk, 1959) the women of *Baby Mama*, *The Back-Up Plan*, and *The Switch* are not forced to make a tragic choice between their children and their careers. Indeed, all see their desire for a child as something to be fulfilled *in addition to* their satisfying professional lives and the films do not challenge this post-1960s women’s liberation world view so much as co-opt it. What has been sacrificed instead, or at least temporarily, is satisfying couple-hood. All three main characters, Zoe, Kassie, and Kat, feel the tug of their clichéd “biological clocks” (all are in their late thirties; Kassie is forty) and all quite rationally decide on sperm donation and/or gestational surrogacy, framing their decisions through a rhetoric of “choice” that draws on post-1960s US feminism even as it disavows its more politicized implications. As Kassie explains it to her best friend (and the man who will later become the father of her child), “Look, when I was a little girl in Minnesota I didn’t dream of the day I was going to put an ad for a sperm donor on Craigslist but I’m here!” In other words, the films work to reassure the audience that the proactive reproductive moves of successful neo-liberal career women are neither morally corrupt nor socially irresponsible but rather a logical extension of gender-neutral capitalist individualism. Kat’s on-screen narration puts it this way:

Is it fair that to be the youngest VP in my company, I will be the oldest mom at preschool? Not really, but that’s part of the deal. I made a choice. Some women got pregnant. I got promotions. And I still aspire to meet someone and fall in love and get married, but that is a very high-risk scenario. And I want a baby now. I’m thirty-seven.

Kat's choice, represented here rather simplistically as pregnancy or promotion, is framed as a sort of corporate risk-management proposal that jibes nicely with her job as a vice president of an organic food megastore. Similarly, Zoe, in *The Back-Up Plan*, introduces herself to a support group for single mothers by explaining that while she has experienced enough financial success to cash out her stock options and open a small pet store in the middle of Manhattan, "the corporate world didn't feel like the life I wanted to live," before adding that her happiness at work is tempered only by the fact that she "still hasn't found The One." Similarly, Kassie, in *The Switch*, declaims proudly that she has a "killer new job at the network and [she] doesn't need a man to have a baby."

For all of these women, then, choosing pregnancy is akin to choosing their career path, not a decision opposed to it. While one might have delayed the other, they are of the same piece of (white middle class) female entitlement borne of individual gumption, rationality, and hard work. And in metaphoric deference to this worldview, none of them are "punished" for waiting so long either; in contrast to oft-repeated scenarios of dramatic fertility decline after thirty, all three get pregnant quickly and easily: just one insemination for Zoe and Kassie, and "accidentally" with, according to her doctor "a million to one odds" for Kat.³ While on the one hand, then, these films pay homage to a woman's right to her own life and to children when and if she chooses, their emphasis on the fact that all of the female leads would have *preferred* to be doing so in a relationship with a man defuses any radical potential in either say, lesbian parenthood or women seizing the means of (re) production more generally. In fact, the films clearly distance themselves from a social or feminist analysis of gender and reproductive freedom. In essence, the characters' choices, framed as a series of last resorts (literal *Back-Up* plans) owe nearly everything to circumstance and almost nothing to politics. Any gesture towards a feminist movement that may have led to their ability, in the twenty-first century, to choose single or lesbian motherhood is gently mocked as a part of an unfashionable and humorless past when the personal was the political. For instance, when Zoe first attends her "Single Mothers and Proud"⁴ support group, the film takes pains to heighten her dissimilarity from the rest of the women in the group whose stereotypical representations are played for broad satire. The living room where they meet is a "womyn only" space peopled by typecast tattooed butch/femme parents, and later scenes entail a natural water-birth complete with a supportive drum circle and a horrified reaction shot on the part of Zoe and her (new) boyfriend to the unshaven pubic hair of the laboring mother. Nearby in the kitchen (the birth is held at the home of the facilitator of the group) a woman happily breastfeeds what appears to be an eight-year-old child. Similarly, Kate and Angie's natural childbirth leader in *Baby Mama*, after first assuming them to be a (lesbian) couple⁵ effectively undoes any critiques of the male medical model of birth (not to mention heteronormativity) by her overzealous rhetorical question, posed in an affected Daffy Duck sort of voice, "Ok who here is pwaning a natural birth? (All hands but Kate and Angie are raised). And who here is pwaning on using twoxic Western medications to ddrug your baby for your own selfish comfort?" Later in the film, a montage parodies traditional romantic motifs by pairing Angie and Kate to the tune of "Endless Love." While it is undeniably funny because of the way it ironizes the genre, the scenes only work because we recognize that we are firmly in the world of heterosexuality; that a primary relationship between two women who decide to have a baby together is fundamentally humorous and certainly not something to take seriously, personally or politically. A similar second-wave feminist parody occurs when Kassie decides to self-inseminate, and is thrown a party by her hippie friend Debbie (Juliette Lewis). Here the

apartment's décor is a deliberate throwback to a clichéd women's bookstore circa 1975, the walls decorated with batik goddess fabric and the apartment littered with conch shells and flower petals; a Venus of Willendorf statue even sits on the cocktail bar.⁶ When the time comes for a toast to the deed, Debbie lifts a glass and refers to Kassie as "Venus," saying, "it's amazing! We're doing it for ourselves!" before Madonna's "Papa Don't Preach" plays and the women start drunkenly dancing together. These set-ups recall Angela McRobbie's descriptions of the feminist straw-woman in *The Aftermath of Feminism*. Contemporary post-feminism, she argues, via a series of self-reflexive ironic repudiations, "take[s] feminism into account by showing it to be a thing of the past" (Angela McRobbie 2009, 16). Like the members of "Single Mothers and Proud," Kat's birth coach and Kassie's supportive female friends are depicted as not so much evil as overly earnest, their irrational investments in second-wave feminist realms of drug-free birth, female empowerment, and implicit critique of compulsory heterosexuality, a series of quaint (if well-intentioned) affectations.

So while none of the main characters are punished for their simultaneous desire for a career and family life (as they would have been in maternal melodramas of the past) they do hew close to what McRobbie terms a series of "post-feminist gender aware bio political practices" (2009, 60) predicated on a general mandate of "self-reliance and individualization through mobilizing notions of human capital" (86). By paying homage to their career success (albeit fleetingly) and satirizing any sort of allusions to the feminist politics that made it possible, the films cement a modern capitalist liberal commitment across genders.⁷ Indeed, the characters' ability to be proactive and get pregnant on "their own" is an integral component of their capitalist agency, not unlike the way assisted reproduction markets itself in the for-profit fertility industrial complex. Writing on IVF, an enormously popular high-cost/low-success rate procedure, Sarah Franklin argues, "[t]he will to take action, to do something, indeed to try everything, is the classically modern mentality . . . Belief in progress, and hope for improvement are defining features of the quest for conception" (2011). As Lealle Ruhl similarly argues in "Dilemmas of the Will: Uncertainty, Reproduction, and the Rhetoric of Control," "[t]he woman who, for classical liberals was 'naturally' (biologically) subjected to her body and its reproductive functions is, in the paradigm of the willed pregnancy" seen to be 'in charge of' these very processes" (2002, 659).

Or is she? In fact, these films would completely founder if women were in charge of their pregnancies. And key to "saving" these women from the lonely spinster state of the willed pregnancy is the figure of the (biological) father and New Man whose presence points to both the limits of female bodily agency and the elasticity of the patriarchal imaginary in containing it. In the end this "'New' Masculinity" reaffirms traditional notions of paternity despite the very reproductive technologies that challenge its primacy.

Who's Your Daddy, I Mean, Your Donor?: "New" White Middle Class Masculinity

In "Lad-Flicks: Discursive Reconstructions of Masculinity in Popular Film," David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill analyze how recent representations of masculinity in Hollywood comedies both undermine and reify male potency. Films such as *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (2005), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Wedding Crashers* (2005), despite their gross-out humor and sexist bombast, also depict modern masculinity as a "difficult biographical project" (David Hansen-Miller & Rosalind Gill 2011, 38) which ends, more often than not,

when their previously immature (if lovable) lead males find their “narcissism . . . resolved through renewed priorities of heterosexual commitment and parenting” (41). Thus proactive fatherhood provides a way to calm, in Negra’s words, fears that “the single man is not taking up his proper place in the world” in the face of “single professional women buying sperm and managing conceptions on their own before losing fertility” (Negra 2006). The veritable repetition compulsion of these masculinity plots (Hansen-Mill and Gill discuss at least ten in the early 2000s points to a wider cultural preoccupation with masculinity, patriarchy, and the family. *Baby Mama*, *The Switch*, and *The Back-Up Plan*, despite being firmly oriented towards a “chick flick” demographic, are no exception.

All three of the films analyzed here, for instance, position their male leads as the bearers of a sort of “alternative” to the hegemonic masculinity of the past, even as their biological connections reaffirm patrilinearity in the face of the “fatherless” conceptions that drive the narratives. While certainly there have always been differences between the investments of men and women, fathers and mothers, in the bodily processes of conception, gestation, and birth, modern reproductive technologies throw these differences into a new kind of relief, one that requires particular strategies of masculine representation that can accommodate themselves to a world where, in the process of conception at least, men (or rather, fathers) are no longer necessary. Without abandoning it entirely, then, masculinity must be somehow rehabilitated in order to not appear obsolete in this new (post-feminist) world order of sperm for sale. As such, the male characters in these films must be seen as retreating from traditional masculinity even as they embody it through their roles as white biological fathers and romantic partners. For instance, Rob, in *Baby Mama*, has given up a high-powered corporate job (like the one Kat still has) to start his own organic juice business. Stan, in *The Back-Up Plan*, is developing his own line of goat cheese while taking business classes at night so that he might open his own organic restaurant. Both, then, are depicted as rejecting from the traditional macho-competitive world of corporate America while still functionally engaged in a neo-capitalist project. While, as “new” men they are shown to be openly critical of corporate grocery store chains and large-scale agriculture, respectively, they find alternatives not through activist work or community organizing but rather through their new roles as small business owners selling boutique commodities such as organic juice and goat cheese. As such, they epitomize a more “natural” nurturing, “earth-friendly,” and even feminine version of masculinity. At the same time, as business owners/capitalists, they are still breadwinners of a sort, even if that bread is organic.

Wally, of *The Switch*, while (still) a successful day trader, is likewise depicted not as a captain of industry but as perpetually insecure and anxious about his place in the world. In fact, Kassie initially rejects him as a donor because of his neurotic tendencies, and the opening scene of the film has an eerily prescient homeless man calling him out as a “beady-eyed man-boy.” At the same time, Wally’s wit and good looks, not to mention his voiceover framing the film, cement him as the romantic lead. So whether through an immersion in the “soft” world of boutique food (Stan and Rob) or via a nattering yet charming self-deprecation of Woody Allen proportions (Wally), the films clearly attempt to reconfigure the masculine for their lead male characters, however clichéd and unsatisfying such depictions might be. In writing about fatherhood in films of the mid- to late-1990s, Yvonne Tasker argues that domesticity has provided just such a means through which masculinity can be reconfigured by showing that men can “[negotiate] the complexities of childcare,” and thus learn to “re-value . . . nurturance, love, and care” against a “working life

that defines and limits [them]" (2011, 179). A similar transformation occurs in these films via a contrast, played for laughs, between a more traditional/failed masculinity embodied by tertiary male characters and the sort embodied by the male leads. And in both *Baby Mama* and *The Back-Up Plan*, the context is also raced and classed, in that our heroes cement their roles as neo-father figures through lessons in domesticated masculinity imparted by Black and working class Others whose tokenized presence in the films' narratives serve as foils to and inspiration for a dominant narrative of "appropriate" white middle class fatherhood.

First, *Baby Mama* offers us surrogate Angie's husband Carl, a working class buffoon addicted to cheap beer who drives a broken down car, cannot keep a job, cheats on Angie, and is alluded to as the not quite-mastermind behind their plot to trick a wealthy woman (Kat) into hiring Angie in the first place. He is full of aggressive bombast and his self-confidence is completely out of proportion to his social power. Played for laughs, Carl, whether he is losing a call-in radio quiz show or threatening that he will break up with Angie and sleep with all of her friends, serves to remind us of how much of a better man Rob (Kat's boyfriend) as a responsible father and business owner, really is. In *The Switch*, Wally is represented in sharp-contrast to the hyper-masculine (and astoundingly vapid) Roland, Kassie's original choice for a donor, who, in addition to teaching "the feminist literary tradition" at Columbia, is Ken-doll handsome and devoted to rock climbing, his family's cabin, and positive thinking platitudes.⁸ While his traditional good looks and perfect physique—he refers to himself as the "prized hog" at Kassie's insemination party—lead Kassie to choose him as a donor, later in the film her by-now six year old son Sebastian (who, at this point, she believes, is biologically Roland's) implicitly mistrusts him from their first meeting. Sebastian quite naturally prefers Wally, who (of course) shares his hypochondria, aversion to sports, and anxious (if ostensibly charming) approach to the world. Like many elements of the film, including the ease with which women in their early forties conceive through assisted reproductive technology, the depiction of inherited characteristics cheerfully denies even the most basic understanding of biology and inherited versus genetic characteristics. Thus, the film "hints" to Wally of his biological connection to Sebastian because of the way they both stand, their propensity to over-analyze whatever situation they find themselves in, and the fact that they both make humming sounds when they eat despite the fact that Sebastian in no way physically resembles either of his blue-eyed light haired parents. When a stranger on the bus remarks how similar Wally and Sebastian look to each other it makes no sense whatsoever. This is especially odd in light of the film's insistence that biology, especially when it comes to fatherhood, is key to kinship and connection. For instance, when Roland talks a reluctant Sebastian into rock-climbing at a gym for his seventh birthday party (Sebastian wanted to have his birthday at the local animal shelter but was talked out of it) and he panics, it is Wally, as his (as yet unknown) biological father, who rescues him from both the immediate situation as well as the sort of traditional man/father represented by Roland's over-investment in macho sports culture.

Rob, the juicer, who will come to be the father of Kat's child in *Baby Mama*, has less screen time than either the male leads in *The Switch* and *The Back-Up Plan*, but still, care is taken to show him at least once with his older son from a previous relationship. Indeed, the fact that he is already a father is what seals the deal when Kat begins to fall for him, as his emotional investment in his existing son provides reassurance that he is an at least partially "transformed" (new) man. Unlike Rob, in *The Switch*, Wally has had no prior experience taking care of children, but this will change, however, while Kat is off on a romantic weekend with Roland at his family's cabin. She calls Wally in a panic from a payphone to ask

him to pick up Sebastian, who has lice, from a friend's house. The resulting montage of Wally cleaning, caring for, and comforting Sebastian serves as proof of his ability to prioritize (he must leave an important business meeting to pick Sebastian up) as well as his mastery of the practical demands of paternity, not just the biological ones.

In addition to these depictions of improved paternal masculinity in the face of reproductive technology, both *Baby Mama* and *The Back-Up Plan* include male characters who can only be described as "Magical Negros," Spike Lee's term⁹ for a minor character whose narrative purpose revolves around expanding the emotional or critical apprehension of the white lead, and the two characters here fulfill such a role completely, specifically rooting for the reinvention of traditional white masculinity via paternal responsibility and caring. Oscar, in *Baby Mama*, is a wise-cracking doorman whose performance of Black masculinity consists of snappy one-liners about children he has sired with women he is no longer involved with (he teaches Kat the term "Baby Mama" early in the film to refer to Angie). While Oscar is full of advice about relationships and children, we never see him with his own (indeed, in traditional "Magical Negro" style he *has* no life of his own), though his helpful advice to and commentary on those of the privileged white people he works for continues throughout the film. Similarly, in *The Back-Up Plan*, after Stan panics at the ultrasound appointment when he hears the news that Zoe is having twins (and at the sight of blood on the ultrasound wand), he runs smack into his own Magical Negro at a local park. Here an African American father of three, listed in the cast as simply "Playground Dad," cracks open two juice boxes and reassures Stan of the rewards of parenting, despite the hard work and financial drain. While I do not mean to minimize what is a pretty unusual characterization in mainstream Hollywood film—a caring and nurturing Black father who is neither a criminal nor absent from his children's lives—unsurprisingly, by the film's end when Zoe and Stan have a party to open Stan's new restaurant for all of their friends, "Playground Dad" is nowhere in sight.

From Sperm Donor to Father Figure: Old Paternity in a Brave New World

Most pressingly though, beyond simply embodying a "new" sort of post-1990s masculinity of nurturing fatherhood, *Baby Mama*, *The Back-Up Plan*, and *The Switch* must also account for new forms of procreation and parenthood that implicitly call the traditional family into question. Indeed, the films' plots hinge upon the fact that while contemporary cultural norms depend on the heterosexually bonded-nuclear family, such dependence "does not necessarily mirror women's real lives, which are complexly interwoven with technologies that are transparently *not* natural" (Franklin cited in Ruhl 2002). As such, assisted reproduction resides in a tenuous rhetorical space, with one foot in a discourse of nature—of course every woman longs for a family—and the other in medical technology. For assisted reproductive technology to be palatable enough for the mainstream, its rhetoric must be constantly (re)mobilized onto the nature side of the equation and away from its sci-fi dystopian connotations. Thus assisted reproductive technology is often framed within a discourse that reiterates it as simply "a 'helping hand' assisting nature to progress as it was meant to do" (Franklin cited in Ruhl 2002).

In other words, rather than being seen as a perversion of the natural order, reproductive technology, as is demonstrated in these films, is packaged as a path through which to make mothers when Mother Nature needs a little help. In discussing the increased

popularity of IVF in her recent essay, "Transbiology: A Feminist Cultural Account of Being After IVF," Sarah Franklin describes it as a "technology that has become *second nature*" (2011). Reproductive desire, then, in the context of heteronormativity at least, is often framed as a given, the culmination and legitimation of a "natural" human drive, the "baby carriage" punctuating the rhyme of "love and marriage." Like Lee Edelman's work on reproductive futurism and the ways in which the figure of the Child legitimates heterosexual desire and heteronormative culture (Edelman 2004),¹⁰ Roof also argues that sexuality's position as licit or illicit depends on its reproductive use; its intelligibility revolving around the "de-pathologization of perversions . . . [with the] production of the sexually normal individual" as one "who passes through the various stages of perversion on the way to a reproductive future" (1996, 36). Though all of the female characters in these films begin their journey to parenthood outside of the heterosexual bond (indeed, without heterosexual sex, in other words, "perversely") by the films' end all celebrate pregnancies conceived with the men they have fallen in love with, assuring us that, despite their embrace of reproductive technology, they are still "sexually normal individuals." Such endings then, illustrate how the romantic comedy of (assisted) reproduction reconciles the "natural" desires of women to bear children to a technology that presents the potential of parenthood without patriarchy. While we live in a world that has witnessed unprecedented redefinitions of kinship—including sperm banking, gestational surrogacy, gamete and embryo transfer, transnational adoption, open domestic adoption, and the outsourcing of fertility procedures and surrogacy—such redefinitions are counterbalanced through a simultaneous tightening of discursive and legal control of such kinship relations via anti-gay marriage activism, the chipping away at abortion rights, and new legal mandates against anonymous sperm-donation in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK.

What might be most under-analyzed in all of these cases, and what, to some extent, the romantic comedies (and popular culture itself) discussed here must salvage, is the symbol of patriarchal power and political autonomy par excellence: masculinity and the male body. Thus, much of this counterbalancing discourse on reproductive technology focuses on sperm donation for its implicit threat to patriarchy in its widest sense. In "Monstrous Genealogy of Assisted Reproduction" Karyn Valerius writes:

While a woman's property in herself has been a hard-won right established only relatively recently, a white man's property in himself is foundational to liberal democracy. The idea that a man's sperm is alienable makes visible the conventional rather than natural status of the autonomous male body that provides the material referent for the abstract individual of liberal democracy. (1992, 180)

And while most commercial sperm banks require the intercession of a physician,¹¹ there is no doubt that viewing sperm as a commodity "in the hands of" individual women radically undoes traditional notions of the male body as inviolable. To disentangle a part of one's body (semen) from its "material referent" (masculinity, liberal democracy) is nothing new for the female-embodied, as endless debates over abortion rights, mandatory sonograms, fetal rights legislation, the sterilization abuse of poor women and women of color, and ever-expanding global markets for prostitution and sex work attest.¹² And while, like egg "donation" and adoption services, sperm banks mobilize a rhetoric of financial gain as well as altruism—the online Known Donor Registry's website's slogan is an Emerson quote, "[t]he only gift is a portion of thyself"—the corresponding cultural unease with sperm

donation, especially anonymous sperm donation, continues unabated, pointing to, I argue, wider concerns over the future of masculinity itself. Some of this criticism comes from the children of insemination themselves and some from the consumers of the process, though nearly all critiques center on the theme of “origins.” While the individual emotional weight borne by the children of sperm donation and/or their parents is important to think through, it is also essential to challenge the idea that such a desire comes from a “natural” place of curiosity and a basic drive for connection, as much of the rhetoric about sperm donation, at least at the level of popular discourse belies such easy interpretations.¹³

Like the rather serpentine plot twists and gendered depictions in the romantic comedies I discuss here, popular culture in general works overtime to domesticate the potential of reproductive technology to disrupt hegemonic notions of masculinity and kinship. For instance, a recent *Newsweek* cover (October 10 and 17, 2011) features a naked white baby with its thumb in its mouth, its head partially obscuring the magazine’s logo, floating against a white background to the right of the words, “You Got Your Sperm *Where?*: How To Get Pregnant Fast, Cheap—and In Public.” Obviously trying to draw in readers with its connotations of salacious public sex at cut-rate prices, the article continues in the same vein inside, where the full title reads “The Coffee Shop Baby: Meet A ‘Donorsexual on the Web—And He’ll Service You Anywhere” against an image of computer mice whose cords resemble the tails of sperm cells, in marked techno-contrast to the facing image of another seemingly befuddled white infant, the representational epitome of all that is “natural” and good in the world. The article, which frames longing on the part of donor-offspring and their parents through an idiom dependent on unstated gendered assumptions of (political) rights and (personal) intimacy, extols the “natural” over the “scientific,” however much this distinction in the world of reproductive technology is impossible to maintain. The author writes, “in lifting the fog around infertility, doctors have moved nature’s most intimate act deeper into the lab and created a population of prospective parents—gay, single, and married—who crave a more human connection” (Tony Dokoupil 2011, 47). What is “natural” and “intimate” (i.e., procreative, heterosexual sex) has been “moved” by scientists out of the foggy bedroom and into the clear white light of the laboratory. It’s only the rebellious donors and recipients who are subverting the dominant medical paradigm of white-coated anonymity, meeting informally through the web and exchanging “natural” material referents in, of all places, the bathroom of your local Starbucks.

While the *Newsweek* piece is clearly more interested in courting controversy—the vast majority of sperm donations are not taking place in this manner and the fetish sub-group of so called “donorsexuals”—men who define their sexual preference as procreative—is tiny. Yet the text suggests how seemingly unstable patriarchy/masculinity is in the face of assisted reproductive strategies, and how desperate we are to make it less so.¹⁴ One solution to such instability is to re-invigorate the role of the (genetic) father as the romantic rom-com does. But even in a genre as hackneyed as this *Newsweek* cover-story, the writer and the interviewees frequently conflate terms such as “donor,” “parent,” and “father,” blurring the distinctions between a biological tie, a social relationship, and one’s role as, essentially, a service provider, as they do in wishful-thinking sentences such as: “Many women also believe their *donor* conceived children have a right to know their *fathers*” (Dokoupil 2011, 46).

Such a collapse is no accident, according to Lisa Jean Moore, author of *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man’s Most Precious Fluid* (2008, 11). She argues that the fact that sperm can be

manipulated outside men's bodies and thus used to conceive a baby with little to no relation to its originator has "ironically, given more power to women than to men" (11). Pushback from a variety of quarters, has, not surprisingly, followed, with this official response from the public interest group Comment on Reproductive Ethics (CORE) for instance, being representative of the more conservative stance:

This whole idea [sperm donation and purchase] must be vigorously resisted and men must see this initiative for what it is—yet another attack on their role in society. The male must not be reduced to a vial of anonymous sperm, and the rights of children to enjoy real fathers must be protected. (Moore 2008, 11)

Not surprisingly, outcries from neo-conservative Father's and Men's Rights movements, like the Christian reviewer incensed by *Baby Mama* at the beginning of this essay, are even more concentrated in the target of their rancor, arguing that sperm donation is just one more example of our woman-dominated culture under the sway of fanatical feminists and lesbian avengers intent on destroying men in general and fatherhood in particular.

More often than not, Hollywood rom-coms such as the ones I discuss here have to reckon with a mainstream audience not necessarily as rabidly conservative or alarmist as CORE, yet also both familiar with and apprehensive about such radical changes in the configuration of the family. Thus the narratives need to accommodate reproductive technology to an ideology that is liberal when it comes to women's "choices" and conservative in its view of (new white) masculinity's role in the "natural" family. The role of the masculine subject becomes highly important in this respect, as these representations must redeem masculinity through and for traditional fatherhood without the benefit of traditional masculinity itself. In doing so they balance out the reproductive freedom evinced by female narrators who attempt to get pregnant on their own, with the "blessings" of the old-fashioned biological body, epitomized here through "accidentally on purpose" pregnancies that take "a vial of anonymous sperm" and turn it into a "real father." So even while the films appear at first to celebrate alternative ways of creating families outside the heterosexual/patriarchal contract, any cultural apprehension about what this means is ultimately ameliorated through a narrative that restores order through the vehicle of the pregnant woman whose body the female characters (happily) don't have as much control over as they think they do.

In order to achieve such restoration and avoid the technophobia of articles such as "The Coffee Shop Baby," the films travel a complicated narrative path that marks out men as something "other" than gamete resources, even if this is the place from which they start. To do so, *Baby Mama* technologically updates the "mistaken identity plot" whereby Angie pretends to be pregnant with Kat's child only to learn that she is actually pregnant with Carl's. Kat, upon realizing this fact, appears to make do with her baby-less state and befriends Angie despite the scam she meant to perpetrate upon her. It is only when they are both in the hospital (Kat gets sick after visiting Angie and her new baby daughter) that Kat finds out she is indeed pregnant, this time with the baby of her new boyfriend Rob, despite being told earlier that her odds of conceiving naturally were a million to one. *The Back-Up Plan* ends with Zoe and Rob pushing her twin daughters, red-haired and thus coded as adamantly NOT his biological children, in a double stroller. While this would seem to make the film the most alternative and progressive, at least in respect to parenting as a social rather than biological identity, in the very last five minutes of the film on said stroller

walk, Zoe throws up in a trash can and she and Stan exchange a look of panicked joy: she is pregnant again, this time in the way she wanted to be in the first place: with the biological child of the man she loves.

Such last minute reversals that lead to happiness for all differ somewhat from *The Switch*, where the main male character's biological connection to his best friend's child is clear (at least to the audience) early on. Interestingly, this film demonstrates perhaps more so than any of these three the insidious nature of a patriarchal reclamation of reproductive choice framed as true love and the ideal family. Again, as briefly discussed in my opening, the plot of the film is set in motion at Kassie's insemination party, when a jealous and drunk Wally discovers Roland's (the donor's) sperm in her bathroom cabinet and accidentally knocks it into the sink, only to realize his mistake and replace it by masturbating into the cup with the only material available—her bathroom copy of a magazine with Diane Sawyer on the cover—an emblem of declawed feminist possibility if there ever was one. The scene is interesting for a number of reasons. Taken from an short story by Jeffrey Eugenides published in the *New Yorker* in 1996, the filmmakers amend Eugenides' original character, who originally quite purposefully and vengefully replaces his rival's sperm with his own. In *The Switch*, though, Wally is drunk, and, in a rather stunning reversal of the usual gendering of date rape narratives, claims to have no recollection of the event until his memory is jogged years later after meeting Sebastian. Internet discussions of the replacement ejaculation scene have gone back and forth over whether what Wally does should be considered rape since Kassie has something inserted into her body (Wally's sperm) without her explicit consent. In the film's universe however, the scene removes Wally from responsibility while allowing his implicit connection to Sebastian to be emphasized. Wally's biological connections to Sebastian are therefore presented as "obvious" to the viewer who already knows what has happened while his mother remains clueless for most of the film. Sebastian, meanwhile, sees in Wally the father figure he has spent the entirety of his young life searching for. (Kassie leaves New York soon after Sebastian's birth to be closer to her parents in Minnesota, but returns to New York six years later for work and seems to have forgotten their very existence.) We can only assume that Kassie's parents (Sebastian's grandparents), are but a paltry imitation of the real thing: a real family with a (biological) father.

The father as absent presence is further dramatized when Kassie asks Wally to meet Sebastian for the first time—at this point she has no idea of his parentage, nor, ostensibly, does he—and asks him to bring Sebastian a gift. She suggests a picture frame, as Sebastian collects them. Wally, rushed at work, tears out a picture from a frame on his desk but quickly realizes his mistake when Sebastian rejects it, informing Wally he only likes new frames for the stock photos they contain; he leaves the paper-thin images in the frames because they provide him with a soothing narratives of family togetherness and completion. When Wally tucks him into bed in a later scene, he (and the camera) gaze across the wall at Sebastian's collection. "This is Mr. and Mrs. Owen and their two kids," he says to Wally, continuing with an imaginary genealogy that connects all the frames/images to a mythical universe of ideal two-parent families. By the time he asks Wally, "What's your Dad's family like?" Wally's hoarsely whispered response ("My father left when I was very young") cements their emotive bond. Wally, who *is* Sebastian's father, will now *be* Sebastian's father after he confesses his subterfuge to Kassie and thereby intercepts Roland's public proposal of marriage. Kassie, after first slapping him across the face in horror and shock, comes around and marries him.

Like the other films discussed here, *The Switch* ends very differently than *Stella Dallas'* final shot of masochistic maternal fulfillment through sacrifice. Each one, in contrast, ends

with a celebration involving multiple friends and family members—Zoe and Stan at the opening of his restaurant with their twins in tow, Kate and Angie at a birthday party with their mates (Angie has chosen to stay with Carl, who, we can assume, is at least partially redeemed by fatherhood), her mother, and even a brief appearance by Oscar the doorman, and Kat and Wally hosting Sebastian’s seventh birthday, centered around the animal shelter theme he asked for the previous year. Such happy endings would never have been possible without the theme of patriarchal completion at the heart of all of these films, even as they begin with its very opposite. I argue, however, that like Sebastian’s “empty” picture frames, the father remains both a fantasy of masculine embodiment and a cultural ideal of familial completion. So while reproductive technology, specifically sperm donation, can be seen as the fulfillment of the threat introduced in *Stella Dallas*, of “[w]hat happens when a mother and [child] . . . take one another as their primary objects of desire” (Williams 1984, 5), such potential is continuously and effectively checked via a popular culture’s reassertion of the figure of the (white biological) father, a man adamantly *more* than his sperm, especially for the post-feminist woman who, even with a career and a baby is (still) essentially *nothing* without him.

NOTES

1. A good example of a progressive critique of *Baby Mama’s* class politics is Dana Stevens’ review in *Slate* (April 24, 2008).
2. This is by no means an exhaustive list of even mainstream Hollywood films, not to mention the rapidly proliferating genre of pregnancy reality television, with ten shows currently airing in the US, according to my count, including a new series entitled *My Teen Is Pregnant and So Am I*.
3. Kate is told early in the film that a problem with her uterus will make it impossible for her to carry a child. The film, true to Hollywood form, has her conceive just a few weeks after dating her new boyfriend (all the while assuming, erroneously, that her gestational surrogate is carrying the product of Kate’s egg and an anonymous sperm donor).
4. The group is a clear parody of “Single Mothers by Choice” (SMC), founded in 1981 by Jane Mattes, LCSW. Their website describes the group thusly: “Thousands of single women, predominantly in their thirties and forties, have joined us since that time and remain with us as they strive to be the best parents they can be. Our primary purpose is to provide support and information to single women who are considering, or have chosen, single motherhood. Our members meet with one another all over the United States, and in Canada, Europe, and beyond. We network with each other and share information and resources about donor insemination, adoption, and parenting at local levels and/or through our lively online discussion forum and newsletters” (www.singlemothersbychoice.org).
5. In *The Switch*, Kassie too claims that her six-year-old son Sebastian thinks she’s a lesbian because “the only other mothers he knows with seed guys for fathers are lesbians.”
6. It bears mention, though it doesn’t make for a particularly interesting argument, how unrealistic these films are in their treatment of the process of trying to get pregnant in your late thirties. When pregnancy is achieved, in all of the films, there is never a mention of the potential of miscarriage (announcements are made often and early), and all of the inseminations “take” with the first try. (This is slightly more complicated in *Baby Mama*, but both women get pregnant very quickly, by—spoiler alert—“natural means.”) I discuss this

“accidental wanted” pregnancy as a trope in all three films more explicitly later in the paper.

7. For a cogent discussion of mothers as consumers, see JanMaree Maher’s excellent essay, “Eggs in Many Baskets: Juno, Baby Mama, and the New Intimacies of Reproduction” in *Feminism at the Movies*.
8. I can’t help but think that somehow, somewhere someone is playing a joke on the film with the throwaway line through which Roland introduces himself to Wally. In response to Wally’s surprise at Roland being married (he later gets divorced and dates Kassie), Roland tells him that as a professor “of the feminist literary tradition” at Columbia, he has a hard time paying his bills and so has gone into sperm donation on the side.
9. In 2001, Spike Lee, while discussing films with students at Washington State University and at Yale University, said he was dismayed at Hollywood’s decision to continue using the premise; he noted the 2000 film *The Legend of Bagger Vance* now used the “super-duper magical Negro”^{[3][4][5]} (Wikipedia).
10. Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke UP, 2004.
11. The well-known exception to this rule is the nonprofit Sperm Bank of California, which will ship to a home but still requires a medical consent form—though this can be from a licensed midwife as well as a doctor.
12. This is not to minimize the existence of sex work on the part of men. The vast majority of male prostitutes, however, exist for male rather than female clients.
13. At this stage at least, there does not seem to be anything similar happening in the popular media about people searching out their egg donors.
14. The term “donor” itself is a misnomer here, as apart from renegade web-based free sperm sites, no professional sperm or egg bank takes “donations”; men and women are paid (at vastly different rates) for their genetic material and the process of extracting it. For a fascinating account of how the language of advertising for egg and sperm donors relies on radically different gender codes of labor and selflessness, see Almeling (2011) *Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm* by Rene Almeling, University of California Press, (2011).

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Jennifer Maher is a Senior Lecturer in the Gender Studies Department at Indiana University, Bloomington where she teaches courses on gender and popular culture, feminist and queer theory, and contemporary memoir. Currently she is working on two larger projects: gender and the representation of the teacher–student relationship in popular culture, as well as assisted reproduction and the (hetero) familial narrative in American film. She has published in a variety of scholarly and popular presses and is a frequent contributor to *Bitch: Feminist Response to Popular Culture*. E-mail: jemaher@indiana.edu