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**Contemporary Stories of Female Development and the Outer Limits of Maternal Sexuality**  
**in Susan Choi's *My Education* and Amy Sohn's *Prospect Park West***

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**Abstract:** While liberal sexuality has been integrated into contemporary discursive understandings of female possibilities, barriers remain to representing mothers as sexual beings. This essay explores maternal representations in Choi's *My Education* (2013) and Sohn's *Prospect Park West* (2009) that challenge cultural ideals of good motherhood and invite scrutiny of normative paths and goals of female development. These 21<sup>st</sup>-century American novels confront and even embrace active maternal sexuality but retreat at the boundary of the maternal/sexual breast to allow protagonists in contemporary alterations of female stories of development to achieve maturity through acceptance of the ideal of good motherhood. Each novel presents narratives of female development for young women of fluid desires that culminate in motherhood and heterosexual pairings, thus relegating variable sexuality and "improper" desires to phases of youth to be outgrown. Yet, implausible, rushed resolutions and lingering questions at the conclusions of each novel keep alive the challenge of imagining the possibility of alternative maternal identities and sexualities. Reading the novels in this way recognizes a potential queering of the female story of development and of the attendant normative ideological structures it maintains.

**Keywords:** Susan Choi, Amy Sohn, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature, Stories of Female Development, Maternal Sexuality, Erotic Lactation, Good Motherhood

**Word Count:** 8,869 words (9, 418 with endnotes)

In 1990, feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young wrote that "patriarchal logic defines an exclusive border between motherhood and sexuality" because "[w]ithout the separation of motherhood and sexuality, finally, there can be no image of love that is all give and no take" (196). Despite gains over the past three decades in sexual agency and identities secured by feminist and queer activism/scholarship, ideological resistance to revision of the institutions of family and motherhood persists, and the ingrained discourse of naturalness of maternal abnegation conflicts with more recently embraced norms of liberated female sexuality. Mainstream literary representations of mothers, which not simply reflect but also maintain normative social systems, cultural practices, and scripts, remain restrained by the maternal/sexual dichotomy and heterosexist assumptions that are foundational to patriarchal ideologies of good motherhood.<sup>1</sup> In this context, I'd like to consider Susan Choi's *My Education* (2013) and Amy

Sohn's *Prospect Park West* (2009), two twenty-first century American novels that confront and even embrace active maternal sexuality but retreat at the boundary of the maternal/sexual breast to allow protagonists to achieve maturity through acceptance of the ideal of good motherhood.

Both novels contain stories of female development that want to celebrate liberal female sexuality but grapple with the predetermined destiny and narrative resolution of reconciliation with the social ideals of motherhood that wall off sexuality. Choi's *My Education*, literary and well received critically, is a book of passion derailing reason when graduate student Regina Gottlieb falls intensely in love with her mentor's wife, Martha Hallett, also a professor and a new mother. The novel is not *about* mothering. Rather it is, in the author's own words, about "being young and making mistakes," the central mistake being Regina's obsessive, passionate love affair "[w]ith a super inappropriate person" (Choi, "Steamy Novel"). In other words, it is a story of Regina's development but one with maternity at its core. Amy Sohn's popular novel *Prospect Park West* (*PPW*) is pointedly about contemporary motherhood but more readily falls into the literary categories of satire and "mommy lit."<sup>2</sup> *PPW* presents exaggerated character types to criticize socially privileged, ostensibly liberal women as well as their various mothering practices, especially attachment parenting. Each of the four protagonists struggles with ambivalences of motherhood and dissatisfaction in marriage, but the storyline of Lizzie, unhinged as a new mother by a consuming desire for another mother, conforms to the genre of female development stories as she struggles to negotiate sexual and maternal identities on her journey to find a place in her desired social milieu.

By analyzing representations of maternal sexuality in *My Education* and *PPW*, this article aims to make two specific interventions in both feminist/queer studies of maternal sexuality and genre studies of the female story of development. Situated in and informed by motherhood

studies, a broad interdisciplinary field that explores the oppressive and empowering dimensions of motherhood, this work investigates from a literary perspective what Samir Kawash identified as a twenty-first century focus of motherhood studies: how mothers “cannot or will not submit to the norms of good motherhood” (979).<sup>3</sup> Choi and Sohn demonstrate the friction between pervasive ideologies of good motherhood and current receptiveness to female sexual emancipation. Moreover, these novels both conform to and challenge the normative path of development for female protagonists that puts forward marriage and motherhood as the goal of mature womanhood; for in the changing terrain of social and cultural factors that shape motherhood, to become a mother biologically is no longer in itself a fulfillment of maturity. Rather she must be a good mother, happily accepting the ideal of sacrificial motherhood and (re)integration into the social order she upholds. Both novels end with acceptance and devotion to motherhood within the heteronormative family, but unsettling and unsettled endings queer the female story of development by laying bare the coercion involved in this single possible ending. These novels, then, allow us to think more clearly about and potentially challenge the heteronormative bases of the maternal ideal and the story of development, indeed, what “development” even means.

The Bildungsroman is a culturally normative genre that reinforces heterosexist ideologies and systems. Feminist narratologists, such as Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Susan Fraiman, have established that male narrative forms like the Bildungsroman fail to reflect female experience. The conventional Bildungsroman is altered by female writers working within the structure of the genre who highlight disjunctures between it, the ideologies of femininity, and constraints on female social choices, which it cannot reflect without “splintering and counterpointing of narratives” (Fraiman *UW* 140). And though we often consider female stories

of development as ending with marriage and motherhood, another branch of the female story of development, identified by Abel, Hirsch, and Langland in *The Voyage In* (1983), explores women developing later in life, after disillusionment with the domestic realization of womanhood that signals female maturity (7). Such narratives, including notable examples like Chopin's *Edna Pontellier*, illuminate how the project of the Bildungsroman, which aims to resolve the conflict between self and society through a self-determined path seeking options that cultivates one's unique talents and personality, is inadequate to female development. For the concepts of self-determination, choice, and unique talent cannot operate when the only "right" path leads one to the culturally normative ends of marriage and motherhood. As Fraiman argues in *Unbecoming Women* (1993), female stories of development convey "a clearer sense that formation is foisted upon [female protagonists], that they are largely what other people, what the world will make of them" (6).

While not traditional Bildungsromans, storylines contained within each novel, those of Regina in *My Education* and Lizzie in *PPW*, employ the structure and pattern of narratives of development. As Fraiman suggests, works by, about, and appealing to women can affect our thinking about narratives of growing up because women authors tend to decenter a female story of development by engaging alternative stories of "female destiny" so that "each text is less the telling of one life than a struggle between rival life stories" (10). Choi and Sohn offer such alternative stories to Regina's and Lizzie's in plotlines of *Martha Hallett* and, most pertinent to my reading, *Rebecca Rose*, respectively. By engaging the maternal as part of the female story of development, such alterations of the genre also expose how dominant stories of maturation keep binaries—hetero/homosexual, maternal/sexual, good/bad—in place. The romance plot is essential to stories of development, not only in terms of the female protagonist's story ending in

marriage, but also in the male hero's storyline where "heterosexual adventures" are part of the "world's curriculum" (Fraiman, *UW* 6). Yet, sexual adventure has traditionally been dangerous for heroines, whose sexual virtue (in virginity or marriage) is essential to respectability (*UW* 7, Abel et al. 8). In the twenty-first century, sexual mores for women no longer automatically delegitimize a woman for pre-marital or even adulterous relationships. Rather, I propose, novels like *My Education* and *PPW* illuminate and critique a contemporary cultural boundary: sexual adventure today is more equally available to women until they become mothers because a mother's sexuality must be subordinated to her maternal identity and role, assimilated into a heteronormative family.

The stories of development of young, urban mothers in their twenties presented by Choi and Sohn offer a new perspective on modern female adulthood, but the narrow path and culturally normative destination remain similar. To differing degrees but pulled by expectations of both ideology and genre, *My Education* and *PPW* ultimately reinscribe traditional standards of female maturity. Choi and Sohn push against the heteronormative assumptions of maternal identity by presenting maternal characters pursuing desires that may be deemed socially improper: asserting both their own wants and non-hetero orientation. Yet ideological and generic forces also push back. As Peter Brooks asserts, "the improper end lurks throughout narrative, frequently as the wrong choice: choice of the wrong casket, misapprehension of the magical agent, false erotic object choice;" thus narrative progresses from prohibited improper desires to a legitimate or proper choice that generally "marks the end" of a narrative (104). In *Ways of the World*, Franco Moretti emphasizes the socializing project of the classic Bildungsroman narrative that synthesizes individual selfhood with a "happy acceptance of bonds" (26) by, most often, "the individual willingly limit[ing] his freedom... through marriage" (22). The expectations of

the genre intersect with the heteropatriarchal ideology of the good mother to drive narratives toward accommodation of the maternal character to “proper” desire – sexually and culturally – and “happy acceptance” of marriage that delimits desire. Sodomitical maternity, theorized by Fraiman as the mother’s “access *even as a mother* to non-normative, non-procreative sexuality, to sexuality in excess of the dutifully instrumental” (*CM* 135, italics original), is embraced early in the novels, but frustrates progress in the narrative of development and must be relegated to the past, integrated instead as a stage or “phase” along the conventional path to maturity.<sup>4</sup> Narrative structure must undo sodomitical maternity to reestablish “proper” maternal sexuality as a basis for achieving female maturity and the reconciliation with society necessary for narrative closure.

Significantly, the narrative of development in each novel is forced back on track, and maternal identity pushed back toward more normative identities, through erotic lactation scenes that imbricate the maternal and sexual in each text to ultimately condemn non-heterosexual maternal sexuality as abject. *My Education* and *PPW* both take recourse to the symbol of the maternal breast to establish an outer limit to acceptable sexuality for women. Choi and Sohn reconfigure discomfort with maternal sexuality as discomfort with sexuality that interferes with the ideology of motherhood. Their novels associate lactating breasts and pleasure in breastfeeding, simultaneously sexual and maternal, with non-heterosexuality, compounding cultural anxiety and heightening the need for a border between motherhood and sexuality. Striking breastfeeding scenes in each novel impute same-sex maternal sexuality as a violation of good motherhood and redirect characters and the narrative toward heterosexual and self-sacrificing maternity as the only proper and most appropriate end imaginable for women.

Endings, somewhat rushed and unsatisfying, bring Regina and Lizzie securely back within the fold of the heteronormative family. Nonetheless tensions in the resolutions,

particularly in the parallel storyline of Martha in *My Education*, evoke the dissonance between the narrative discourses of female sexual liberation and of good mothering. Narrative closure that requires passionate female characters to surrender their erotic agency and desires is difficult to accept. I will argue that these vexing endings are double-voiced: on one hand, reproducing conventional beliefs and discourses that posit only one realization of female maturity and good motherhood, but scrutinizing this goal on the other hand. Implausible rushed resolutions and lingering questions at the conclusions of *My Education* and *PPW* keep alive the challenge of imagining another possibility for maternal identities and sexualities. Reading the novels in this way recognizes a potential queering of the Bildungsroman, or female story of development, that challenges the heteronormativity of the genre and the ideological structures it maintains.

### **Sodomitical Maternity and Temporary Mother Outlaws**

Choi and Sohn boldly counter both the denial of maternal sexuality and the assumptive yoking of maternity and heterosexuality in their novels by suggesting mothers should be empowered to seek sexual pleasure -- with their husbands, female partners, or other men. Martha in *My Education* and Rebecca and Lizzie in *PPW* are mothers who experience strong sexual desire and pleasure unrelated to reproduction and unrestricted by normative expectations. These maternal characters, through assertions of sodomitical maternity, raise the possibility of reimaging maternal sexuality and, in doing, so might be considered potential "outlaw mothers." Motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly has drawn on Adrienne Rich's description of herself and her sons as "outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (195), liberated from the rules and rhythms of society while on vacation without her husband. O'Reilly theorizes outlaw mothering as mothering that resists the prescribed choices and modes of motherhood dictated by the oppressive construct of the Good Mother and, instead, seeks to experience mothering as

empowering and fulfilling (2-3). By refusing to deny their own sexual desires and to always put their children first, Martha, Rebecca, and Lizzie challenge the patriarchal ideal of good motherhood and offer potential counter-narratives to the “successful” stories of Regina’s and Lizzie’s development. Of course, Rich’s own story, which ends with her return to the city and to her “own mistrust of [her]self as a ‘good mother’” (Rich 195), attests to the difficulty of maintaining an outlaw approach to mothering without literally exiting society. Choi’s and Sohn’s narratives, likewise, are unable to maintain outlaw mothering and integrate maternal characters into good motherhood as demanded by hegemonic cultural ideals and traditional generic structure.

Choi develops in Martha Hallett a rare literary character: a sexually assertive mother who refuses to sacrifice her sexual self entirely to the maternal and thereby queers heteronormative motherhood. She is an outlaw mother by nature of her personality, as characterized by Choi, but is neither immune to nor dismissive of the expectations of good motherhood. Rather she attempts to live up to the ideal but inevitably fails, capitulating to her sexual self. Martha’s sexual history is the stuff of legend and gossip at her college. As readers, we learn that “Martha had pursued her carnal interests since the age of thirteen with no small number of women and large numbers of men” and shortly before Regina’s arrival on campus Martha was “rumored to have an affair with gay male assistant professor of French history” (Choi 117, 37). Her sexuality is not labelled, except perhaps as fervent and reckless. Martha is a highly sexual woman but is also a new mother aware of the conflict between these two identities. She attempts to find a compromise by enforcing the maternal/sexual divide but nonetheless struggles to find space and balance between separate maternal and sexual lives. When she meets Regina, she is already floundering in the throes of new motherhood and the loss of self she experiences with it. She is in an unfulfilling

marriage, on leave from her academic teaching, and stalled in her research. In addition, the cultural expectations of motherhood also demand stricter sexual adherence to marital fidelity and heteronormativity than had marriage alone. Marriage, in her case, was non-traditional in eschewing monogamy. In a meeting with Regina intended to foreclose the possibility of an affair, Martha explains her sexual past as something that, as a result of becoming a mother, she has outgrown. “[T]hat chapter is closed,” she insists. “I’m married. That’s what marriage is about; you work this crap out. Recommit. I have a child” (Choi 65). While marriage is the ostensible reason not to pursue the mutual attraction, the contradiction of previous infidelities makes clear that Martha’s argument rests on the demands of motherhood, not of marital fidelity; “I have a child” is her closing statement. This statement suggests that Martha recognizes the cultural imperative to discipline her maternal sexuality.

Despite her determination to commit to mothering, Martha is “not, by her nature, maternal” (Choi 103) and depends on the expertise of her nanny, whose disrespect she earns by so willingly abdicating control over her child’s care. More damning, Martha cannot long deny her passion for Regina and soon succumbs to a torrid affair that further diminishes her maternal standing in the eyes of her husband, nanny, and eventually her lover. Martha has not only taken a lover, but a same-sex lover at that, exhibiting culturally suspect maternal morality. Most egregious is that Martha divides her time between her lover and her child, absconding for hours a day with Regina. Regina’s youthful mistake is falling in love with a “super inappropriate person,” but the same could be said in reverse.

With the exception of her romantic entanglement with Regina, which she keeps separate from her public life, Martha remains governed by orthodox attitudes and obligations in relation to parenting and adulthood in general. Regina, in the first and longer section of the novel

centered on this relationship and period of her life, is governed instead purely by passion. Because young and childless, she is free to throw off convention and the judgment of others. She is still *becoming* and not only can but should have adventures she can learn from on her path of development. As reviewer Emily Cooke notes, “For Choi, the novelistically productive problem is in the differing life stages of the two women” (Cooke). Regina, fully engrossed in Martha at the expense of her studies and friendships, dreams of a vague future together; Martha, as the adult/mother, dismisses the possibility and insults Regina’s naiveté:

Come on, Regina. You ‘love’ me, you want me to come set up house? You ‘love’ me, you want to be Joachim’s other mommy? You want to pay half my mortgage? [...] I want you here too [...] I want that even though it’s insane, and my life goes to pieces if we get ourselves caught, I still *want* it. Can’t that be enough? (Choi 95)

Martha cannot as easily disentangle from relationships, responsibilities, and attendant judgments. She must compromise, finding sexual pleasure in the moment and in private, separate from her social world. When visiting New York City or out among locals whose world even in the same town is far distant from Martha’s set, she eagerly flaunts her sexual claim to Regina, daring others to see. However, within view of those associated with her college, she obscures. While Martha is protected by her white, middle-class, professional “respectability,” she knows it is tenuous. If deemed sexually deviant, she could be labeled a bad mother and lose not only her precious “respectability” but, with a divorce impending, also risk losing custody of her son to his father. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, in the introduction to *“Bad” Mothers* (1998), argue that in addition to race and class, culturally influenced judgments of maternal sexuality

that deviate from the contemporary ideal have directed judicial determinations of fitness of mothers and best interests of the child throughout the latter half of the twentieth century (10).

Ultimately, after a year together as a couple, when Regina pushes Martha to publically affirm their status as a couple, Martha definitively ends the relationship. She not only stands Regina up after inviting her to a departmental social event but also has sex with Regina's best friend and former lover Dan Dutra (called Dutra), a deliberately unforgivable betrayal. Regina is devastated, but in terms of plot, a break from Martha is necessary for her to continue on her path of female development. Regina must learn to redirect her "improper desire" toward "proper desire," as demanded by society and the genre of the Bildungsroman, in order to grow up. She must learn from her mistake but also from Martha's. Martha serves not only as "super inappropriate" sexual choice but also as maternal double – a model to follow or reject, foreshadowing the conflict Regina will have to contend with in her own future to shape the kind of mother and woman she will be.

With a more exuberant tone and less earnest style than Choi, Sohn similarly contradicts expectations of maternal asexuality and turns several ideals of motherhood on their head, at least initially. The text begins with Rebecca Rose's afternoon masturbation during her toddler daughter's naptime. Foiled in her plan to masturbate to a Polanski movie in the living room by open shutters and a man working on the façade of her brownstone outside the window, Rebecca retreats to the bedroom intent on reaching orgasm before her daughter awakens. Discovering her vibrator's batteries are dead, she must decide whether to pilfer the batteries from the mobile her daughter needs to sleep. She does. She puts her sexual needs above the needs of her daughter. Yet before she comes, she is interrupted by her daughter's cries. Rebecca's aggressive and unapologetic sexuality is liberating, but motherhood counterpunches: "it was with great

reluctance and considerable irritability at the many ways motherhood had ruined her life that Rebecca [...] removed the double A's from the vibrator, and replaced them in Abbie's mobile" (11). The scene is amusing; Rebecca, both outlandish and relatable; and the conflict between maternity and sexuality is thus established at the onset of the novel as is the expectation that maternity must take precedence. Sex is significant in the lives of the protagonists of *PPW*, but maternal sexual pleasure must always be secondary to the needs of the heteronormative family.

Through the intersecting storylines of Rebecca and Lizzie, Sohn aggressively asserts the centrality of agential and pleasurable sexuality in maternal lives, though as the novel progresses, sodomitical maternity becomes untenable. In Rebecca, first and foremost, Sohn suggests with some compassion the potentially intense need and desire for sex among women, including mothers, and counters the stereotypes of preoccupied mothers and sex-starved fathers. Rebecca's husband, Theo, so caught up in fatherhood, has deprived her of sex in the year and a half since their daughter Abbie's birth. Rebecca, who has always had a powerful sex drive, is resentful. She considers divorce but is unprepared for the social consequences for her and her daughter: financial hardship, social ostracism, difficulty dating again, lack of emotional security for Abbie. "Surely the repercussions of divorce would be worse than the repercussions of a sexless marriage," she concludes (100). Instead, she resorts not only to regular masturbation but also, desperate for human touch, to a kiss with her friend Lizzie, and active attempts to attract a neighborhood dad. Sohn seems to suggest that twenty-first century marriage need not be so morally rigid. Like the mutual understanding that allowed for infidelities in Martha's marriage in *My Education*, Theo may have tacitly granted Rebecca permission to have an affair when, years earlier at a dinner party, he asserted he wouldn't mind if she cheated on him, provided it was sex without emotion (7). At first Rebecca interpreted his dispensation as a joke, but in her now

sexless marriage, she reconsiders. Eventually she catches the interest of Stuart Ashby, movie star husband of another protagonist, and they begin an affair. Rebecca feels renewed by being desired, not having to share attention with her child, and having her sexual needs fulfilled. She begins considering divorce again, imagining a new life and family with Stuart. This shift in meaning of the affair is met by a shift in plot whereby Stuart returns to his wife and Rebecca realizes she is pregnant with his child. Infidelity was tolerable in the world of the novel until it threatened the stability of the heteronormative family and the patriarchal line it maintains. A return to sexuality contained within marriage and a proper social role performing greater devotion to mothering becomes necessary for Rebecca to maintain her social standing and comfort. She must now turn her efforts to seducing her husband after seventeen sexless months to convince him and the world that the child she is carrying is his.

Through Lizzie O'Donnell, another of the novel's four protagonists, Sohn expands the terrain of maternal sexuality to reflect a heterogeneity of maternal sex lives, desires, and practices. Formerly in a long-term lesbian relationship and community, Lizzie is now married to Jay, a male Afro-Caribbean musician. Lizzie rejects social pressure to conform to a "label;" instead Lizzie's sexuality is personal and idiosyncratic, not centered on her husband. "She had an entire private sexuality that had nothing to do with Jay and even though sex with him was good, it felt distant from the scenarios she imagined while they were doing it, which usually involved some combination of women, men, and wolves" (Sohn 50). Though humorous, such a description of sexual fantasy is one of the novels most positive contributions to an acceptance of the reality of sexual desire that may or may not translate into behavior. That Lizzie would go from a same-sex relationship to a heterosexual one is, in this light, not difficult to understand. Lizzie represents a contemporary young woman with overlapping and fluid desires that are not

gender (or species!) specific. Nonetheless, labels are unavoidable. Lizzie, herself, teaches Rebecca the “hasbian” nomenclature in revealing her past with her partner Sarah. And when Rebecca becomes aware of Lizzie’s attraction to her, she thinks, “It was obvious [Lizzie] was still a lesbian” (185). Rebecca’s assertion reflects the dominant cultural tendency, despite greater tolerance of sexual difference, to understand only monosexualities (i.e. hetero or homosexual) – with no contemplation of complexity, variability, or fluidity. Robyn Ochs calls this common attitude toward multifaceted sexual desires “biphobia,” a belief that bisexuality does not exist as anything other than a transitional stage on the path to homosexuality (217). Interestingly, the novels I’m discussing differ from this assumption to cast the phase as one of sexual experimentation in the process toward settled heterosexuality and heteronormativity, with motherhood its most potent marker. Rebecca even notes the opportunity she would have had to “experiment” and be “bi” in college, had she been interested (Sohn 49). Fluid and fluctuating desires are associated with experimentation or blinding passion, like Regina’s for Martha, and these are presented as sexual adventures young female students may pass through on their development toward the more proper ends of marriage and motherhood.

In the narrative present of the novel, Lizzie has accomplished these ends; however, she is in danger of reverting to “improper” desires. Lizzie’s same-sex relationship with Sarah, a fellow student in her Gender and Genre class at Hampshire College, was most fulfilling until the impetus to mature manifested in the form of maternity. Together for years beyond college, Lizzie ended the relationship not because she stopped loving Sarah but because, at age 27, she “got hit by this uncontrollable desire to have a baby” (Sohn 48); Sarah didn’t. As for Martha, so too for Lizzie is maternity the defining factor for meeting a socially-constructed standard of female maturity. The split between Lizzie and Sarah is not a result simply of diverging life paths but,

instead, of their shared conviction that maternity and lesbianism are incompatible. Sarah viewed lesbian mothers as “tools of the patriarchal hegemony” (49), while Lizzie “had expected motherhood to make her forget about women, as though procreating with a man would turn her straight forever, but it hadn’t” (50). In choosing to become a mother, Lizzie sets aside lesbianism as an erotic possibility to achieve the traditional markers of fulfilled womanhood, performing good mothering via a particularly intense form of attachment parenting, still breastfeeding after a year and a half. Yet, often alone with her son Mance as Jay travels to numerous gigs with his band, Lizzie experiences motherhood as less satisfying than expected. Lonely and desiring intimacy, she finds herself uncontrollably drawn to Rebecca after Rebecca, a little drunk and having just learned of Lizzie’s sexual past, flippantly “decided to have a little fun” and kisses her (58). Rebecca thinks little of this episode, but Lizzie spirals into what is depicted as an obsessive, heedless, juvenile crush akin to Regina’s. Unlike Rebecca or Martha, Lizzie never considers the repercussions of not conforming to the expectations of good motherhood. Ironically, because Lizzie is a character on the margins of the social world of the novel, she is more vulnerable than any other character because divergence from the cultural norm is more harshly punished in lower-status mothers and “respectability” harder to maintain.<sup>5</sup> Lizzie’s class status lags that of the Park Slope moms, and her mixed-race family lives beyond the borders of Park Slope proper, in the more working class, previously Black, and now racially diverse Prospect Heights. Nevertheless, Lizzie yields to passion with little fear of social consequences.

Both novels approach maternal sexuality as a natural feature and poignant aspect of women’s lives and non-hetero-female sexuality as a permissible form of sexual exploration in one’s youth, but social and generic norms require a realignment with heteronormativity after childbirth. Discomfiting scenes of orgasmic breastfeeding reinstate for characters and readers a

limit to permissible female sexual license and demand retreat to more intelligible maternal identity. These scenes signal that “perverse” sexuality and consequently “bad” motherhood lies at the intersection of maternity and non-heterosexuality, an intersection that in both novels can be located at the maternal breast.

### **Erotic Lactation**

In an eroticized scene of breastfeeding in *My Education*, the “super inappropriate” nature of Martha and Regina’s relationship is founded on sexuality’s encroachment upon the sacred ground of the maternal breast. The maternal breast, most specifically represented by the lactating breast, is a powerful cultural symbol of the ideals of selflessness, purity, and care associated with the good mother. Feminist scholars from diverse fields ranging from philosophy to anthropology to cultural studies have explored the extensive cultural and social work directed at regulating the maternal breast and breastfeeding in order to preserve the sexual/maternal dichotomy.<sup>6</sup> The sexual breast belongs to the lover; the maternal breast belongs to the baby. By blurring this culturally ingrained distinction, Choi evokes discomfort, even abjection, by exploring the place where boundaries break down. After making love one evening, Martha leaves Regina briefly to tend to Joachim’s evening routine. Regina intrudes upon the domestic scene of mother, nanny, and child, asserting the demands of sexuality. Her presence and its effect of rankling Martha disturb Joachim and result in a refusal to nurse. Frustrated, Martha retreats with Regina. Victorious in regaining her lover, Regina embraces Martha, who winces in pain. Her shirt is wet with milk. Regina, impulsively and against Martha’s initial wishes, suckles a hard, hot breast eliciting moans of pleasure and a sudden release of milk.

[...] her hot milk filled my mouth. It queasily tasted of vegetation, and of her, but mostly and sickeningly like itself, but I was so hungry for the taste it obscured, of

her flesh, that I gulped it down just to get past it, and past it, and past it, until her soft breast moved and squelched, deflated, underneath the harsh probes of my tongue. (Choi 86)

Regina's disgust for the messy, leaking maternal body is evident. She finds both the maternal breast and its milk sickening and wants only to "get past" them to a singularly sexual breast, what she describes as Martha's "flesh," "obscured" by the milk. Regina acts to reestablish the strict separation of maternal/sexual breast but instead solidifies what Young describes as the "functionally *undecidable* in the split between motherhood and sexuality" (198). The lactating breast inescapably is simultaneously maternal and sexual.

Martha's orgasmic pleasure from Regina's suckling decisively effaces the boundary between maternal and sexual. Her pleasure is both sexual and maternal, resulting from Regina's sucking at erogenous nipples and from the release of hormones and the relieved pressure of hardening milk in her breasts. Martha "groaned in relief and then grabbed my head literally by the ears, and forced the other hard breast in my mouth. 'You sick thing,' she gasped when I was done" (Choi 86). The very real pain of engorgement may morally mitigate Martha's enjoyment of Regina's suckling; still, Martha's final words confirm a sense of violation. Her flippant comment, "You sick thing," presents both Regina's willingness to defy the maternal/sexual divide and Martha's own doubly inflected pleasure as kinky. This undermines both characters' recognition of their own pleasure, reestablishing the separation of maternal and sexual. The novel contains other sexually charged oral scenes in which the lovers "fe[e]d on each other" (90), but these scenes do not threaten the priority of sacred motherhood because they do not involve breast milk. Maternal sexuality can be explored and embraced, the contradiction suggests, but to "transgress the precarious boundaries of the good maternal body," as sociologist Cindy Stearns

writes, “is to risk being labeled a bad mother and/or sexually inappropriate or deviant” (322). In other words, a good mother may seek sexual pleasure from another, even another woman, but she may not give her maternal body – i.e. her lactating breasts – to anyone other than her child. In this scene, Martha’s affair with Regina crosses over from a risqué exploration of maternal sexuality to a violation of the ideological sanctity of motherhood. By crossing this line, Martha and Regina, together and individually, are cast as sick. The word “sick” occurs twice in the passage, in reference to Martha’s milk and to Regina for drinking it. This repetition reinforces a sense of that act as diseased, corrupt, morally or emotionally unsound. And because the act is between two women, the violation of maternal sanctity is entwined with a threat to the heteronormative assumption of maternity.

In *PPW*, Sohn confronts readers with a more troubling breastfeeding scene. The first sign of Lizzie’s untenable sexual non-conformity (as contrasted with her fluid sexual orientations and fantasies) may be her professed sexual excitement in breastfeeding: “Breastfeeding aroused her, [...] it excited her a little to catch cute single girls staring at her breast then looking away” (Sohn 50). Sohn is not addressing the erotics of parenting, to use the phrase coined by Noelle Oxenhandler, or unmasking a truth of mothering (that it is common to experience physical pleasure experienced during breastfeeding however much that fact has been silenced, and shamed, and even punished). Rather Lizzie experiences sexual excitement in the display of nursing breasts; such flagrant subversion of the codes of decorum culturally surrounding public breastfeeding is jarring. The vigilant policing and self-policing of breastfeeding practices documented by scholars like Cindy Stearns and Pam Carter attest to the social insistence on preserving the maternal “purity” of the lactating breast and protecting the properly demarcated good maternal body. Moreover, pairing this exhibitionism with same-sex desire, or in this case a

desire to be desired by another woman, imputes perverse desires to both maternal sexuality and same-sex sexuality.

The crucial scene that erases any question of the novel's stance on the intersection between same-sex desire and maternity occurs when Lizzie uses her sleeping son's sucking to assist in masturbation after being turned on and then rejected by Rebecca:

She went into the bedroom and stood in front of the crib for a long time, staring at Mance's face. She lifted him out of the crib into her bed, lying down, facing her. He stirred and she slipped her nipple into his mouth. As he sucked, she got warm. She wriggled her hand down her pants and touched herself, thinking of what it had felt like to hold Rebecca for those brief moments. (Sohn 184)

In *My Education* inescapable pleasure results from the undecideability of the maternal/sexual breast. In *PPW*, Lizzie deliberately employs the maternal to excite orgasm. Her son becomes an unwitting substitute for a sexual partner. Her act is not simply questionable ethically like Rebecca's affair, nor self-interested like Rebecca's taking the batteries from her daughter's mobile to power her vibrator: Lizzie's deed approaches incest, one of the greatest taboos of our society. Her pleasure, not Mance's feeding, is the purpose. She uses her son as a masturbatory object, a substitute to fill the void of Lizzie's denied desire for another woman. In a culture that so vigilantly polices breastfeeding to maintain a good maternal body, this scene reads as intentionally casting Lizzie's blurred maternal/sexual body as abject and demanding disavowal. And yet, Sohn mitigates Lizzie's transgression by a conviction of insisting that no harm was done to her child, allowing her, and her story of development, to escape this low point and move toward a reconciliation with heteronormative maternity. "She would have felt weirder if Mance

seemed to have any idea,” Lizzie thinks, “but he was sucking selfishly, as narcissistic as his father. Her orgasm was angry and fast. After she came, Mance fell asleep, just like a man” (Sohn 184). What is described as Mance’s male narcissism and selfishness precludes any potential awareness of (and therefore injury) from Lizzie’s pleasure and desires, just as Martha’s engorgement does in *My Education*. Both are thus eligible for redemption as mothers if they renounce sexualities that threaten to undermine sacrificial – selfless and heteronormative – maternity.

### **Unsettling and Unsettled Endings**

These scenes foreshadow the conclusions of both novels, which give way to the pull of the heteronormativity and the restoration of good maternal body with properly demarcated boundaries. Sohn and Choi both use the trope of obsession and passion as characteristic of youth to explain how improper desires may be overcome in achieving female maturity. *My Education*, centered for two-thirds of its length on the relationship between Regina and Martha, then jumps fifteen years into the future to Regina’s adult life. Having prospered as a writer of popular fiction and married with a son named Lion, Regina has, by all outward measures, matured. Most reviewers, recognizing the familiar literary and cultural script, describe this trajectory from a fervent, impossible love affair deemed impossible to a suitable marriage and devoted motherhood as a natural, inevitable “coming of age.” *Booklist’s* review, for example, asserts that the final section allows “Regina to view the consequences of her actions from a decidedly more mature perspective” and that Choi “captures the heady romanticism that infuses a youthful love affair before the responsibilities and realities of adulthood set in” (Huntley). The reviews predominantly accept and reinforce the unspoken logic that same-sex desire is an effect of

youthful indiscretion. I propose that Choi more specifically locates maturity in the embrace of maternity.

Post Martha, Regina continued to resist maturity in the form of a settled commitment with long-term partner Matthew until she is awakened to the urgency of life-bearing and her putatively natural responsibility to procreate by the 9-11 attacks on New York City. She renounces youthful abandon, a decision which requires her to not only forsake her “shameful bereavement for Martha” but also to embrace motherhood: “as if doing a striptease, I saucily threw out my birth-control pills. It was a trading of the murky infinite for the well-lit and limited” (Choi 266). Regina accepts the conventional, choosing the “well-lit” path, that is, the intelligible scripted female narrative, over the “murky infinite,” alluding to her lingering desire for Martha. Her commitment is symbolized by throwing off contraception and inviting maternity. Her passion is redirected – from lover (Martha rather than Matthew) to her son and the new child she is carrying. Passion, once her *raison d’être*, now pales and seems sullied beside maternal devotion, yet this new zeal is not enough to fully reconcile Regina to her destiny, it seems, because in the final section of the novel, she must confirm her commitment before the birth of her second child by attempting to also restore Martha to the fold of society. Regina discovers that the life of her old friend Dutra, with whom she has intermittently been in contact, has fallen into disarray. He has relocated to California and she worries about his well-being. Also having coincidentally encountered Martha’s ex-husband, she learns that Martha’s academic career deteriorated and she is now living on a secluded farm, also in California, with a now-teenaged Joachim. For unstated reasons, Regina seems convinced that bringing Dutra and Martha together will set things right, so she flies across the country to orchestrate a meeting. The rationale is

vaguely based on the entangled sexual relations of the past, an implausible revelation that Dutra has long loved Martha, and a presumption that both Dutra and Martha are unhappy.

Upon first visiting Martha, Regina experiences a resurgence of her youth. On the flight over she thinks, “My youth was the most stubborn, peremptory part of myself” that requires “a stern vigilance” (Choi 281), which nonetheless gives way to her desire to be with Martha. They make love but agree not to allow it to “mess up” Regina’s life. Regina is now the socially respectable and successful as a woman and mother. Unlike Martha who tried to negotiate a balance of maternity and sexual agency through separate realms, Regina will return to her husband and child and shut the door on her desire for Martha by pairing her with Dutra, a parallel of Martha’s own strategy years ago. Regina convinces Martha to join her and Dutra for dinner but deliberately delays her own and Joachim’s arrival. Eventually Regina sends Joachim in to join the couple at the table and, never entering herself, smiles through the glass window at the vision of the potential nuclear family she has assembled. This is the final image of the novel before Regina drives off to the airport. Yet such closure is discordant with the most compelling story in the novel, the relationship between Regina and Martha, and inconsistent with Martha’s character. One pleasant dinner with a man she used once upon a time is unlikely to lead to a major life alteration. If Regina believes she has forged something it is because she needs to believe that her reconciliation with social norms of good motherhood is the only proper ending. Martha’s storyline, which is not one of development, is not bound by the same narrative conventions, and the attempt to foist this ending on her, too, strikes a false note within the internal logic of the novel. Choi seems not to share Regina’s conviction; in fact, her choice to return to Martha at all in the novel suggests a desire to provide a counterpoint to Regina’s life path and female destiny.

In *PPW*, Lizzie's attraction to Rebecca, despite her awareness of Rebecca's disinterest and desperate need for attention, is similarly cast as immature and irrational, something to be outgrown. After some playful flirting and a goodbye kiss, clearly insignificant to Rebecca, Lizzie foolishly and obsessively pursues her. She doesn't find her way back to the dominant script of female development until she is definitively rejected and shamed by Rebecca. Having discovered Rebecca's relationship with Stuart, Lizzie desperately plans to ensnare Rebecca through a sense of adventure into a foursome with neighborhood soft-swingers who advertise on the parenting discussion board. She "had it all figured out": "she was going to try to get Rebecca drunk enough to make out with her. Maybe she could even get Rebecca to come back to her apartment [...] and make love to Rebecca in her own bed" (Sohn 243). Lizzie's calculations prove absurd. Rebecca agrees to go to the meeting as a lark but continually makes evident her disinterest, in both swinging and Lizzie, before a decisive departure. Rebecca shuffles off to her far more normative extra-marital male lover, and Lizzie, dejected, finds herself "[t]wenty minutes later [on the couple's] king bed between them, not sure what she was doing there but lacking the will or perhaps the energy to leave" (258). She passively succumbs to a sexual encounter that holds no pleasure for her and later leaves her feeling ashamed. Like her masturbatory breastfeeding, this sexual encounter is directly related to foreclosed "improper" desire that threatens to obstruct Lizzie's reconciliation with the "proper" desires necessary to resolve her story of development.

Rather than further distancing her from good motherhood, this experience forces Lizzie to accept that her desire for Rebecca must be forsaken. Later that night, she confronts Rebecca and is left in tears after being dismissed by her as a "dyke" who "only got married because [she was] too afraid to be a lesbian mom" (Sohn 272). To contradict this depiction, Lizzie must recover the signs and status of hetero female maturity. From this point, the novel rushes to

resolution with a series of events culminating in reestablishment of Lizzie's heteronormative family. Unexpected events give way to Lizzie bonding with the mother-in-law whom she previously held at arms distance; their new understanding encourages Lizzie to leave Mance with his grandmother regularly, resulting in free time to devote to her own interests. More remarkable, Jay's band serendipitously gets a high-paying local job on a late night show, eliminating the need for travel, and thus both alleviating her loneliness and elevating their class status. All is set right: "Lizzie had been lost for a long time, and Rebecca was just the worst of it. She felt clearer, new, or at least more calm about her life, and she wanted the feeling to last" (356). Same-sex desire rendered her "lost" – misguided from the norm as a mother. Like Regina, she closes the door on her past desires and devotes herself to motherhood and family.

Similar to Regina, whose resolution was confusing in regard to her motivations, Lizzie's ending is implausible and rushed. Jay's new job is a deus-ex-machina solution that may alleviate the conditions of motherhood and marriage that initially drove her to seek fulfillment elsewhere but does not address the sexual awareness Lizzie gained and the sexual concessions she accepted at the end. The language of "lost" and "found" is vague and clichéd, suggesting a search for an explanation Lizzie can use to disregard both her previous discontent and her real desires. Jay's new job will bring financial security, but it won't eliminate the challenges of being a mixed-race family nor necessarily grant her greater acceptance in the still higher-class Prospect Park mom scene. Her reconciliation to society and Regina's, in denying their sexual fluidity, is determined not by sovereignty of character but by social constructs and judgments related to sexuality, class, and mothering that govern contemporary American culture and by literary conventions that govern stories of female development.

We might understand these unsettling conclusions through Rachel DuPlessis's concept of writing beyond the ending. Writing beyond the ending, DuPlessis expounds, "produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised" (5). The neat, predetermined endings for Regina and Lizzie illuminate the ideological values and literary conventions that shape the conclusions, but lingering questions and doubts about these endings are evoked when juxtaposed with unsettled endings for Martha and Rebecca. These alternative storylines, with different resolutions, (or lack thereof) keep alive a productive discordance that allows "repressed elements" necessary for narrative closure in traditional literary forms to remain present in the "shadows" (DuPlessis 7). By bringing the narratives back to Martha and Rebecca, Choi and Sohn respectively are writing beyond the conventional endings of Regina and Lizzie. Both authors, bound by genre, complete their stories of development in line with the expectations of the Bildungsroman. Perhaps discontented with the compromises and limitations involved for both story and character, each chose in their final pages to return to the alternate female plot and destiny, of Martha or Rebecca. This choice makes evident the element of coercion implicit in the female Bildungsroman and suggests possibilities for maternal lives and identities that exceed those presented in the endings afforded Regina and Lizzie.

For example, though *My Education* ends with Regina peering in at the tableau of a heteronormative family that she has arranged, we don't know what Martha's fate is. She could become involved with Dutra, I suppose, but consistency of character and the trajectory of her narrative provide more reason to believe Martha will return to her farm and life on her own terms. While Regina's narrative is one of development, of becoming, Martha's has been one of unbecoming. Martha, divorced, long divested of her career, and living on a rural farm with

Joachim, has continued to have lovers, both male and female, but has not engaged in another serious relationship. She has effectively withdrawn from society, and Joachim is planning to leave her to join his father. By the hegemonic standards used to judge women, she has failed. However, if we consider that Martha has chosen her lifestyle, chosen failure by these standards, we can reread her refusal to conform as a subversive form of success via Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure. She has claimed permanent outlaw mother status, even though it comes at the cost of withdrawal from society. She no longer attempts to compromise to fulfill dominant standards of progress and respectability. By choosing to fail at these standards, she critiques the standards themselves; failure to conform to heterosexist and heteronormative criteria can be considered success in the refusal to maintain limited and self-sacrificing ideals of maternal identity. In Martha's rejection of heteronormative models of sexuality, maternity, and maturity and the lack of closure to her narrative, Choi keeps alive the potential for queer maternal identities.

In *PPW*, too, Rebecca's alternate storyline and unsettled resolution serve to undermine Lizzie's more conventional ending. Ostensibly, Rebecca is restored to good motherhood and disciplined sexuality at the end but less securely and less positively. Inspired by her success caring for Lizzie's son and her own daughter for one day, Rebecca develops a new perspective on the prospect of her pregnancy and raising the child as Theo's. This second child, she feels, could be hers. She resurrects her relationship with her husband and a new happy family formation, on the surface. Nonetheless, she does not stop fantasizing about Stuart and is plagued by fears of birthing a red haired child, who would out his/her extramarital paternity. Rebecca's renewed motherhood and commitment to the heteropatriarchal family are built on a foundation of lies and anxiety. Unlike Martha, Rebecca recommits to the heteronormative norms of good

motherhood, but she is fully aware that it is only a veneer that could easily be torn away. In writing beyond the ending for Rebecca, Sohn also scrutinizes the supposedly successful resolution and development of Lizzie.

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*My Education* and *Prospect Park West* are novels of different styles that likely appeal to distinct audiences, or perhaps to similar readers but for different reasons. Nonetheless, both disseminate comparable messages about female sexuality and maternal identities in our current moment. Assertive, pleasure-oriented, non-reproductive female sexuality is embraced, but only to the point where it encroaches upon the patriarchal claim on maternal sexuality. Both novels present narratives of female development that culminate in motherhood and heterosexual pairings, relegating variable sexuality and “improper” desires to phases of youth to be outgrown. And the lactating breast emerges as a sensationalized limiting case for acceptable maternal identities and sexuality. In the literary imagination of both Choi and Sohn, of both high and popular culture their novels represent, these ideologies continue to exert powerful limits on transformative possibilities for mothers despite celebrating more liberating views of female sexuality pre-maternity. Even so, by offering alternative plots and destinies for maternal characters and writing beyond the ending, Choi and Sohn reveal queer capacities even within the shadows of traditional narrative forms and push up against stubborn ideologies of heteropatriarchal maternity.

By identifying heteronormative paradigms in narrative and exposing the way dominant stories and genres – like stories of development – keep binaries in place, we can also begin to explore how these narratives may be turned to queer ends. Such explorations of possibility and

multiplicity in and of female stories, I hope, enable us to think more clearly about the pervasive and stubborn ideal of good motherhood so that we may begin to rewrite not only the endings but also the singular normative path and measures for female maturity. So we might eventually extend the emerging freedom for women in our contemporary culture to decide how to live and love to women who are mothers.

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<sup>1</sup> Sacrificial mothering has been essential to the cultural construct of the good mother since the mid-twentieth century; motherhood scholar Andrea O’Reilly explains that this ideal, a response to historical and societal changes (such as women’s increased social and economic independence), asserts the tenets of sacrificial mothering as “natural to women and essential to their being,” insisting that mothers should be full-time, primary caregivers whose practices center upon the needs of their children (5). O’Reilly identifies these characteristics as central to “custodial mothering,” which she identifies as the dominant discourse of sacrificial mothering from 1946-1970s as well as the basis for “intensive mothering,” which emerges from it in the 1970’s and 80’s and emphasizes “quality time,” enrichment, and expending immense energy and money in childrearing.

<sup>2</sup> According to Heather Hewitt, “mommy lit” has been used since the 1990’s as a label to describe a wide range of books that explore “the ‘real’ experience of motherhood honestly, without sentimentality or idealization or judgment, from the point of view of the mother” (121) but also situates it as an outgrowth of chicklit: “the story of Bridget Jones after she got married and had children” (119). In mainstream culture (magazines, reviews, and blogs), the postfeminist, wry, materialistic, and escapist characteristics of chicklit are also emphasized, sometimes in derogatory ways, in books categorized as mommy lit. See Hewitt, “You are Not Alone” in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (2006) and “Chick Lit, the Sequel: Yummy Mummy” by Lizzie Skurnick in the *New York Times* (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Kawash’s article “New Directions in Motherhood Studies” (2011) in *Signs* offers an excellent survey of the history and major areas of inquiry in the field of motherhood studies in North America.

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<sup>4</sup> In *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (2003), Fraiman critiques a cultural and scholarly erasure of maternal desire in feminist and queer scholarship. She coins the phrase sodomitical maternity in her reinterpretation of the primal scene from Freud's Wolf Man in which the mother's engagement in anal sex invokes, not coded gay sex fantasy through the son's perspective, as queer theorist Lee Edelman proposed in *No Future*, but rather the mother's "access *even as a mother*" to non-normative sexuality directed by her own desire and will (*CM* 135, italics original). Fraiman argues that, as a sign, the mother's anus "might represent the most unthinkable pleasure of all" (136). The mother's anus, of course, is metaphoric and metonymic of maternal sexuality that disregards the reproductive imperative, heteronormativity, and expectations of maternal selflessness, however enacted.

<sup>5</sup> See "*Bad*" Mothers: *The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*. Eds. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Pam Carter explains in *Feminism, Breasts, and Breastfeeding* that there are complex sets of rules that developed alongside breasts' association with "public sexual pleasure": "rules about who should see them, when, what they should look like, who should suck them and where" (121). The implications for breastfeeding are obvious, and Carter's book, through interviews with mothers in the 1990s, explores breastfeeding experiences and practices in relation to modesty and sensuality developed through complex negotiation of the public/private space of the home as well as in public. In contemporary times, we continually witness social uproars flare up over public breastfeeding and the insistence upon "modesty" to protect the maternal breast from the sexual gaze.

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