



**“BIPOLAR MAKES ME A BAD MOTHER”:
A PERFORMATIVE DIALOGUE ABOUT REPRESENTATIONS OF
MOTHERHOOD**

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Abstract

This essay explores representations of mothers who have bipolar disorder in popular media through a performative and autoethnographic narrative. I examine the television shows *ER* and *Dr. Phil* in regard to their representation of mothers who have bipolar disorder. This critical analysis concerns the manner through which these women come to be constructed as “bad” mothers. The structure of the narrative, like the representations themselves, is intended to be a montage of abutting pieces that come together to create a whole.

Channel 2

In the hospital, visiting hours dictate the course of a day. Whether those visits are calm or chaotic and whether anyone comes provides each 24 hours with a unique marker, its temperature. I would see my then three-year-old daughter and husband through the small window on the door as the sound of the buzzer motivated the desk attendant or a nurse to turn the lock. I feared my daughter noticing that ominous lock, its loud click like the thunder she feared.

We were steered into the same small room where I met daily with my team of doctors. Sitting on the floor, I would attempt to entertain my sleepy daughter with a portable playground of travel size play dough and paper and markers. We cut cookies from the colorful dough sliding it under a chair, now made oven. My husband and I would attempt to talk

amidst our daughter’s chatter and the entire time I would watch the clock not knowing if I wanted to be alone, wanted to be home, or wanted to be dead. When it was time to leave, my daughter would cling to her daddy, sometimes wave goodbye, and sometimes cry. No matter her response, I would force a smile and wave.

Click.

I cried. For 23 days in the psychiatric hospital, I was left to ponder, am I a bad mother? Does bipolar disorder make me a bad mother?

Channel 3

Sitting at a poetry writing retreat breakfast, the woman next to me who had previously identified herself as a psychiatric nurse asks about my research.

“I am writing a paper on representations of mothers who have bipolar in popular media.”

“What popular media are you using?”

“I am going to be looking at the show *ER*. Sally Field played the part of a mother with bipolar for a couple of seasons.”

“That is a great representation of mothers with bipolar. It is very realistic. What an awful illness.”

Channel 4

The ways in which mothers who have bipolar disorder are portrayed in popular media becomes part of my daily lived experience. This is not because I see these portrayals everyday, but because these images and narratives become part of how I see myself and how others view me. Given the pervasive and invasive nature of these representations, there already exists a growing body of literature surrounding repre-

of mental illness in the media and this literature has repeatedly reported on the stigmatizing effects of such popular culture (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Eisenhauer, 2008; Granello & Pauley, 2000; Granello, Pauley & Carmichael, 1999; Link, Struening, Rahav, Phelan, & Nuttbrock, 1997; Rüsçh, Angermeyer & Corrigan, 2004; Wahl, 1995). Therefore, my goals in this essay are not to “prove” that these representations are problematic, but rather to *demonstrate* the experience of being a mother who has bipolar disorder and who *lives* through these representations. A challenge becomes, how can I construct an academic essay that critically analyzes these representations through a performative and autoethnographic narrative. This goal is one that merges first person experience with the performative analysis of popular representations of mental illness and motherhood. More specifically, this essay will construct a dialogue between my watching episodes from the television shows *ER* and *Dr. Phil*, writing about mothers who have bipolar disorder, and my own story. In the end, this is not to suggest that my narrative is the true story and these television shows are false. Rather, how do these narratives and representations come together to form a discourse through which the meaning of being a mother who has bipolar disorder is formed?

Channel 5

My experience of television is like a montage. The constant flickering resulting from flipping through the channels becomes a work itself in which the fragments come together to form a new experience. There is really never “nothing on” when it is recognized that flipping channels is “something.” In particular, the seams become visible and important as one fragment is abutted against another, a piece of a sentence here and the quick flash of an image there.

So, to is the experience of being a mother who has bipolar disorder. What forms my sense of self and meaning to others is this flashing, shifting, constantly evolving montage of images, narratives, experiences, and events. No one television show captures what it means to be a mother who has bipolar disorder, but collectively they create a dominant consciousness that produces meaning. That consciousness does impact me significantly. Therefore, these fragments are not to be taken lightly,

particularly when they become the frame through which others understand me.

Channel 6

“Bipolar makes me a bad mother because my kids, my kids hate me” (transcript, March 7, 2006, p. 7). Cathy, one of the two “guests” on the *Dr. Phil* episode “Extreme Highs and Lows” was a mother depicted as abusive to her two teenage sons. Generally, this segment focused on Cathy being a “bad” mother. She is most often referred to as a “mother” and even at one point a “moody mom” rather than as a “person” or a “woman.” The segment focuses on her relationship with her sons and her “getting help” is framed as a way to prevent her from losing her children. Therefore, an episode that is described as “taking you inside the mind of a man and a woman living with bipolar disorder” largely communicates that there is a link between bipolar disorder and being a “bad” mother (transcript, p. 2).

Channel 7

Does bipolar disorder make me a bad mother? This is a question that I have been taught to ask myself from the representations of mothers who have bipolar disorder that I experience in popular culture. When I was discussing the possibility of becoming pregnant with a psychiatrist, he cautioned me by saying, “remember Andrea Yates.”¹ I live in the fear that somewhere in me lurks a bad mother who will present herself at first quietly and unknowingly. The bad mother is a specter that haunts my mothering, keeping me never quite comfortable with who I am out of fear of what I could become.

However, I often wonder if the bad mother isn’t just that, a specter, a ghost, and a goblin, as fictitious as Rapunzel’s beautiful long strands of hair. While the world is most definitely filled with abusive and neglectful mothers, perhaps the “bad” mother is a category from which the “good” mother is born. Perhaps, without having a group of mothers to call “bad,” we can’t find a way to call another group “good.” It is easy

1. Andrea Yates killed her five young children in 2001 by drowning them in the bathtub. She had severe postpartum depression and psychosis.

to simply take all mothers who have bipolar disorder and place them in the “bad” mother category recognizing no variety among them, assuming that an illness automatically transforms a woman into a “bad” mother.

Sander Gilman (1988) raises a similar issue about the representation of mental illness more generally. Part of the impetus for portraying characters with mental illnesses or having them on talk shows is about making “visible” the “invisible” or as Gilman (1988) explores such representations mark a cultural desire to “see” disease. Gilman suggests that it is through this visualization that people are able to protect the boundaries of their own presumed normality via the solidification of an us/them binary.

Channel 8

Episode: “The Visit”, *ER*, 2000

Abby’s mother, Maggie, enters the ER wearing a cardinal red dress carrying a bag of bagels and juice. She asks for her daughter who works in the ER, but when Abby is told that her mother is there to see her, she denies knowing Maggie.

Will my daughter deny knowing me?

The hospital staff calls “psych” and a man who works at the main desk in the ER refers to Maggie as a “nut job who thinks she’s Abby’s mother.”

Who will teach my daughter the word “nut job”?

When Abby’s mother learns that her daughter denied knowing her, she goes on a tirade throughout the ER screaming her daughter’s name until finally Abby greets her reluctantly, “Hi Mom.” At other times she calls her mother by her first name, Maggie.

Staring at the screen, I no longer see a mother and daughter, but a daughter who mothers her mother.

Later, another doctor asks Abby, “How long has she been bipolar?” “Since I was a kid.” And suddenly everything has a name—bipolar. Her nonstop speech, flamboyant dress, extroversion is now named bipolar.

“Mommy are you going back to the hospital?”

“Mommy, Mommy are you going back to the hospital?”

“I hope I never do.”

“Never?”

“I can’t say never, but I hope that I don’t go back.”

“You might?”

“I might, but I will always come home.”

“Why did you go to the hospital?”

“Mommy was sick.”

“What sick?”

“Mommy’s head was sick.”

Why am I not saying the word?

“Mommy has bipolar, sweetie. The sick in Mommy’s head is called bipolar”

We pull into the driveway.

Outside on a park bench with her coworker and friend Dr. Carter, Abby describes her childhood with her mother. She says, “She sold cosmetics, but she would get fired all the time.” Carter asks, “what about your Dad?” Abby responds:

He split when I was seven, couldn’t take it. She’s an artist. And when I was little and she was manic it was fun because we would do stuff like camp out in the living room ... actually, really camp out with tents and stuff. We painted the walls of the living room once—this yellow landscape. And then

And, then suddenly everything would change and she would start screaming and crying. Erik took the brunt of that because he was much more of a rebel than I was...and then she would get depressed and just go to bed for weeks. So, by the age of ten I had figured out how to scam meals off the neighbors so that Erik and I could eat. ... She won't take the drugs. She likes it when she is manic. I can't do this again. I'm not strong enough.

We are eating frozen pizza and broccoli.

"What did you do at school today?"

"Played."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Noodles."

"Did you eat the salad?"

"The Salad Dressing."

Later in the episode, frustrated with her mother, Abby gives her an envelope of money so that she can catch a train back to her home and her mother begins to sob. Abby responds, "Don't start that again. I can't have you here. I told you that last time. I can't do it anymore." We are reminded of cycles, of histories and patterns. At the end of the show, Abby meets her mother at the train station and asks, "Where's your coat? You look like you are freezing to death." Her mother again sobs, "Sorry, all right, I'm sorry. I ruined everything I know. I ruined everything and I hurt you and your brother so much. I'm sorry. You have every right to hate me. Of course you hate me. Please don't hate me. Please don't hate me." Abby replies, "I don't hate you" and she embraces her mother's head against her chest visually and physically reversing the typical roles of mother and daughter. Her mother continues, "You are my angel, my angel. I never meant to hurt you. When you were born you were just this little baby. You were the answer to all my prayers. And I thought to myself, I'll be okay now, I'll be okay because you're here. And I held your

your little hands and I loved you. God, I loved you. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

I almost didn't have any children because I was convinced. Bipolar would make me a bad mother. When I experience depression, this message returns to me ... see you are a bad mother and I think like Maggie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Channel 9

While researching this topic, I looked for books about mothers who have mental illnesses and was struck by how these texts also focused on the "bad" bipolar mother. For example, the book, *My Parent's Keeper: Adult Children of the Emotionally Disturbed*, by Eva Marian Brown (1989) chronicles the psychological problems experienced as a result of growing up with a parent with a mental illness. The book describes the ways in which children come to parent their parent(s) and the psychological and social repercussions for doing so. The book describes these children as having "a frightening childhood" (p. 2), damaged self-esteem, and a tendency to gravitate toward abusive relationships as adults. The author describes parents who leave toddlers stumble into danger and captures this collective group of parents using the term "disturbed," i.e., "a disturbed parent." These parents are not much unlike Maggie from ER. She too is a parent represented as needing to be parented by her children and who has a history of being neglectful.

While *My Parent's Keeper* focuses on both mothers and fathers, *Daughters of Madness: Growing Up and Older With a Mentally Ill Mother* by Susan Nathiel (2007) specifically examines the role of the maternal. This book is based on interviews with daughters and organizes these narratives into chapters that represent the child's lifespan: "Early Childhood," "Middle Childhood," "Adolescence," "Young Adulthood," "Adulthood." Like *My Parent's Keeper*, *Daughters of Madness* also depicts the mother with a mental illness as a problem for the child. Nathiel

describes these mothers in the following:

The mentally ill family member can be expected to deny that anything is wrong, to be insulted if anyone implies that something bad might happen, and actively fend off help if it's needed. In this, it's like having an unpredictable alcoholic in the family, either conspicuously absent at every family function or the focus of anxiety if present. (p. xviii)

My Mother's Bipolar: So What am I? by Angela Grett (2006) presents a similar representation of the mother with a mental illness. Like *Daughters of Madness*, the author is the child of a parent with a mental illness. Also common to *My Mother's Bipolar: So What am I?* are its repeated negative accounts of a mother who has bipolar disorder. In the conclusion, the book urges its reader to move toward acceptance. "The sooner you can accept that your mother/father is not capable of being emotionally supportive, the sooner you can create a stronger support system for yourself" (Grett, 2006, p. 124).

Channel 10

Episode: "Sailing Away," *ER*, 2001

Abby receives a call from her ex-husband who was contacted by a hotel manager in Oklahoma stating that someone needed to come and get Maggie or pay her hotel bill. She had been traveling with a truck driver who left her at the hotel and didn't return. Abby flies with Carter to the hotel in Oklahoma with the plan to drive Maggie back to Chicago.

The admittance nurse sitting next to me is trying to be patient. My voice rises as I speak into the phone, "Can you please try to find my husband. He was working out in the weights area.

I am going to the hospital. I need to speak with my husband." I explain over and over as I am passed through a rhizome of phone connections that I am going to the hospital and need to speak with my husband. Once I'm on the unit, it will be difficult to call him.

Finally, he comes to the phone.

"Honey, I'm going to the hospital."

"Okay."

"I'll be on the third floor. Can you bring me some things?"

I imagine him thinking, "Here we go again."

When they arrive at the hotel, the hotel manager has to unlock the door and let them in because Maggie refuses to answer the door. Maggie hasn't eaten for days and she lies on the bed next to a beer bottle with her feet at the pillows and winces as the light from the open door reveals her depressed state. "Mom?" "Hi Abby."

I rock my daughter and sob, unable to read her bedtime story.

In the next scene, Maggie sits covered in sweat and grime from not having bathed for over a week. Abby carefully undresses her mother who says nothing unless asked a direct question and then only painfully short and forced answers. We then see Maggie sitting in the tub in a fetal position clutching her face in her hands as Abby gently moves the washcloth over her body. The scene is quiet compared to Maggie's manic introduction in the previous episodes. This Maggie is silent and visibly broken, more dead than alive.

*I can feel the weight of this washcloth and
the pull of a bed when talking is painful.
Biweekly doctor's appointments, hospitalizations, medica-
tions. ... no, no, no.
But I say yes and Maggie says no.
Eyes staring at the gavel: guilty/not guilty.*

At a hotel on their way back to Chicago, Abby rushes to hang up the phone when she realizes that her mother is missing. She finds her standing on the balcony of their hotel room.

Is she going to jump?

Maggie talks to her daughter and the night, "Do you see that family down there. There are two little boys fighting by the pool. Do you see them? I think that must be their parents over there having a cocktail. I watch people like that for hours. People doing their market-ing, tying their shoes, just doing routine things that probably bore them to tears. I think how lucky they are. They have ordinary lives."

Abby interrupts, "You could be like them ... yes, if you took your medication." Maggie says, "I tried. I did everything I could think of. I got married, had two kids. I tried to fool everyone that I was just like them. God, why did you come Abby?" "Because you needed me." Maggie pauses and then says, "There is no one here to save."

"Mommy, go back to the hospital."

My daughter greets me.

"Mommy, are you going to the hospital?"

My daughter asks.

I dream of ordinary lives too.

On the car ride that follows the next day, Maggie steals sleeping medication from a convenient store and overdoses in a roadside bath-room. When Maggie walks out of the bathroom she says to her daughter, "Thank you for coming." She falls asleep in the back seat of the car as Abby and Carter unknowingly continue the trip to Chicago only to later discover that she is unconscious. Maggie is rushed to the hospital where her health continues to decline and the episode ends with Maggie recovering, but still unconscious.

*Suicide is a specter that hovers in the crevices and cracks of
our home. It terrifies all of us. We know it is part of the ill-
ness and that it comes from somewhere, but we still live in a
haunted home.*

Channel 11

I can hear the lock click behind me as I close the door. My daughter runs ahead of me with her baby carriage and I continue to remind her to watch for cars even though it is a fairly quiet road. She periodically stops to adjust the baby doll she calls Mei Mei so that the doll will not fall to the pavement. She is an attentive mother for her four years although she will later enjoy watching Mei Mei fall from the swing. The earlier part of the day was not so quiet as tantrums and whining were thick and heavy. I could feel my frustration like a dry heat, my throat parched. It is at those times that motherhood is not so romantic anymore. I temporarily forget the joyful feelings of anticipation I had when walking into Babies R Us stores prior to our daughter arriving home. I like to think that this is more the reality of motherhood. Days are filled with good and bad moments and bipolar disorder makes me neither a good nor bad mother.

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