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Mother of the Year

Kathy Hilton, Lynne Spears, Dina Lohan,
and Bad Celebrity Motherhood

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"Moms Gone Wild": The Limits of Celebrity and Motherhood

In the August 19, 2007 edition of *The Observer Magazine*, Alice Fisher writes, "The mother/daughter relationship isn't easy, and stardom does little for this delicate bond. Especially when mothers become celebrities off the back of their daughters." In the article, Fisher mentions a series of American and British female celebrities' troubled relationships with their mothers; however, the article focuses on the mothers of a set of intensely famous American young-adult female celebrities who experienced a series of public image meltdowns—arrest, time in jail, alcohol/drug abuse, mental health problems, time in rehab—in 2007: Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and Britney Spears (I use first names in this chapter as a way of avoiding confusion since I will inevitably refer to various members of the same families). Alongside the ambivalent censure and promotion of these three young women as celebrities in the tabloids and celebrity gossip media outlets (such as magazines *People*, *Us Weekly*, *OK*, and *Hello*, as well as online sites such as *TMZ* and *Perez Hilton*) their mothers, Kathy Hilton, Dina Lohan, and Lynne Spears have been strongly criticized in the media for not raising their daughters "well" and for not taking immediate corrective measures when their troubles began. The critiques of the mothers' past and present parenting skills are invariably founded on the public perception of their most egregious crime—pushing their daughters toward celebrity in order to gain celebrity status (and money) for themselves. All three of these mothers have been accused of "cashing in" on their daughters'

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fame, by starring in their own reality TV shows (Lohan and Hilton) or authoring a book (Spears) thereby capitalizing on their roles as mothers of female celebrities. In these accounts, their apparent selfishness is the manifest sign of their bad motherhood and transgressive femininity, both of which can engender only more of the same in their daughters. . . .

During the Summer/Fall of 2007 *The Observer* article mentioned above was not the only mainstream news media piece in the UK and US to pick up on this refrain within the celebrity news sphere. In June 2007, the actor Jamie Lee Curtis wrote a blog on *The Huffington Post* entitled, “Mom. It’s Not Right.” She writes, “The sad paths of the three most popular young women—privileged but from varying backgrounds, talented, beautiful and spectacular—have ended in prison, rehab and mental illness. I hope their mothers are worried sick and wondering, ‘What could I have done differently?’ And our culture should be asking the same question too” (Curtis). In July of 2007 *The New York Times* reported on the mom-bashing of these women in an article titled “Sometimes Mothers Can Do No Right,” taking a more balanced approach to mother-blame than Curtis’s blog: “No one is saying that parents are blameless when it comes to their children’s risky behavior. . . . But the amount of derision directed at mothers seems out of proportion” (Jesella). However, in November of 2007, *Vanity Fair* published an article titled “Moms Gone Wild,” which appears to be, though it never states as much, a rebuttal to *The New York Times* piece. The *Vanity Fair* tagline declares, “Sure mothers always get blamed for everything. But—as a look at the women behind Paris, Lindsay, and Britney reveals—if your child is your meal ticket and career booster, it’s hard to be the parent she needs” (Newman, 176).

The final phrase of the preceding line points to two cultural issues raised by the

widespread critique of the mothers of young female celebrities: first, that a woman’s identity as a mother and as a working person are perceived to be mutually exclusive, as opposed to the masculine ideal in which having a job means being a good father; and second, that the mother continues to be seen as the proper primary caregiver and parent to children. The “problem” with Kathy, Dina, and Lynne is that they have made motherhood and career the same thing. Consequently, according to the narrative of bad celebrity motherhood, that means they are not filling the idealized role of the “parent [their daughters] need.” The young women’s other parent, their fathers, play their part in the narrative by filling three different roles: Rick Hilton rarely materializes in the media, and when he does he appears to be a largely ineffectual former playboy; Michael Lohan has been generally dismissed as a “lost cause” and, more recently, as a religious freak; and Jamie Spears was hardly seen as an element in his daughter Britney’s life until January of 2008 when he became conservator of his mentally ill daughter’s life and estate, performing the role of father-savior in the narrative of her downfall. All three types of celebrity dads reinforce the narrative of celebrity bad motherhood. However, the cultural desire for the return of the father to save his daughter articulates western culture’s ongoing need to control disruptive femininity (in this case signified through both the daughter and mother) through an image of an authoritative but kinder and gentler patriarchy, filling the role of the “parent she needs.” . . .

“Spare a Thought”: Moralizing Celebrity Motherhood

The public scandals and private problems of Paris, Lindsay, and Britney have been

widely reported and thoroughly documented in various popular and celebrity news outlets. In the summer of 2007, their scandals seemed to reach a peak as Paris served a jail term for violating probation for her driving offences, Britney was in the midst of divorce proceedings and gave her mother a letter demanding that Lynne stay away from her young sons, and Lindsay was arrested for drunk driving and possession of narcotics for the third time. Through these episodes, Kathy, Lynne and Dina came under much public, and often vehement, censure for not being good mothers to their daughters. The criticism did not wane throughout the year and went on in to early 2008 for Dina and Lynne.

Dina's reality show, *Living Lohan*, which showcases her younger daughter Ali's initial attempts to secure fame, aired through the Spring of 2008, generally receiving bad reviews. Dina has been criticized for "pimping" Ali to celebrity culture for her own gain. Britney's younger sister Jamie Lynne, who gained her own fame as the eponymous protagonist of Nickelodeon's pre-teen girl power show *Zoey 101*, maintained a good-girl image throughout the early stages of Britney's scandals. In December of 2007, she, and her mother, announced her shock, unwed pregnancy at the age of sixteen—a turn of events that strongly clashed with her star image.

The scrutiny of Lynne increased in January of 2008 when Britney refused to hand over her children after a custody visit, and then locked herself in a bathroom, resulting in her being taken away in an ambulance and put under a psychological hold in hospital. Of all the celebrity magazines *Us Weekly* was most blunt in its blame for the troubles of the Spears daughters. Its December 26, 2007 headline declared, "Destroyed by Mama, Shame on Lynne Spears, Sold Pregnancy for \$1 million. Let Jamie Lynn live with Boyfriend. 'She treats her girls like a piggybank'" (*US Weekly*). . . .

Johansson argues that celebrity culture stimulates "debate" about moral and social issues. Within the discourse of celebrity motherhood, there is some debate over the moral and social issues of mothering as a complex individual and communal experience. Most often, the discourse participates in the moralization of motherhood, removing it from any wider social or political debates and placing the responsibility for society's moral character on mothers, keeping within a long western cultural tradition of making women the guardians of society's honor.

I return now to Curtis's *Huffington Post* article as it exemplifies the moralizing of motherhood through female celebrity scandals within the media. That Curtis is a (second generation) celebrity herself as well as a mother, and that she writes in the most visited political blog on the web, only adds weight to her criticism and concern: she is someone who knows about fame, and she is dissecting it in a "serious" news context rather than within an entertainment news context. Curtis writes, "I am in no glass house. I understand only too well the pitfalls of maternal amnesia and denial" (Curtis). However, the piece never evokes her own experience of fame as an actor or what it was like to grow up as a celebrity daughter; instead she invokes only her own motherhood. . . . Moralizing the scandals of Paris, Lindsay, and Britney, she suggests that their stints in jail and rehab are just the celebrity version of what she calls a "national epidemic." For Curtis the troubles of these three young women exemplify a national disease of "omnipotent children running amok or sitting amok as they watch TV and play electronic games and shop on eBay." For her, the problem is over-indulgent "PARENTING."

Significantly though, Curtis speaks directly to and *only* to mothers: "Can we take the wrenching sight of Paris asking her mother, 'Why?' and ask it of ourselves? . . . Wake up, Mothers, and smell the denial

[sic]. . . . Instead of pointing to the cultural and political complexities of contemporary female subjectivity, Curtis speaks down to her audience (mothers) and assumes a stance of moral authority, established through her own success in surviving life in a celebrity “glass house.” . . .

On Mothers Day of 2006, the *ivillage* gossip blog posted an entry title[d] “Celebrity Moms from Hell” that began, “While you reflect on the warmth of your mom this Mother’s Day, I think you should spare a thought for stars like Jennifer Aniston, Drew Barrymore and Lindsay Lohan, whose mothers ain’t exactly June Cleaver” (“Mothers Day”). The post features female stars’ mothers who “cash-in” on their daughters’ careers for money and/or fame, and asks the users, “Tired of seeing Britney’s mom, Lynne, on the red carpet?” Several of the posters respond vehemently like these below:

These are obviously mothers who didn’t have their chance at fame so they are doing it through their daughters now (“Mothers Day,” post by jacks, May 9, 2006 2:52 PM) [sic].

None of the moms would win any prizes. They are self centered, hangers on. It’s sad how many of these parents sell their kids for a buck or two. I would much rather be poor as a church mouse and have my kids love and respect (“Mothers Day,” post by PepperAnn60, May 10, 2006 7:51 AM) [sic].

These mothers all have one thing in common, no shame/no pride—it’s a pitiful sight for any nice young teenager to want to look up to one of these celeb types. It’s really scary the image these mothers and daughters portray. It’s not just a shame, it’s a disgrace . . . everyone of them (“Mothers Day,” post by Scared, May 10, 2006 11:22 PM) [sic].

It is important to note the 2006 date of these entries, as they appeared long before any of Paris’s, Britney’s, or Lindsay’s most serious public scandals. At this time, the narrative of bad celebrity motherhood constructs these women as deficient mothers because they are “hangers on”—in other words, they appear to use their daughters’ success to indulge their own desires for fame, money, and access to celebrity spaces (i.e. the media). Writing in 1994, Gamson called these kinds of celebrities “peripherals” and suggested that concern with them by celebrity watchers was atypical. My research on the *ivillage* gossip blog and other celebrity gossip website[s] suggests that this is no longer the case, that at least in the case of mothers who become famous because of their famous daughters, the “disdain toward the ‘peripherals’” has become a regular feature in the consumption of celebrity news (Gamson, 165). In Negra’s terms, these mothers are attempting to claim their value as subjects in a highly mediated postfeminist culture, in which youth, glamour, and fame have come to dominate the public image of female subjectivity.

The second comment cited above assumes that the mothers do not have their daughters’ “love and respect,” which could be guessed at only in the few cases when the female celebrities make public statements about their mothers. The significance in the statement, however, is in its iteration of the ideology of “new momism,” which Douglas and Michaels compare to Betty Friedan’s well-known articulation of the “feminine mystique,” the difference being that “the new momism is not about subservience to men . . . it is about *subservience to children*.” (Douglas and Michaels, 209, emphasis in original). The mothers to whom the post is directed are seen as self-indulgent mothers rather than self-sacrificing mothers—according to the

comments. The association of motherhood with self-sacrifice has a long history, but it has become particularly virulent in postfeminist new momism as the discourse elevates and makes examples of those mothers who are perceived not to be prioritizing their children and thus challenging the conviction that motherhood is inherently self-fulfilling and an essentialized form of subjectivity. . . .

"Momagers": Celebrity Mothers/Celebrity Pimps

Three months after Jamie Lynn Spears announced her pregnancy (famously the story was sold to Britain's *OK Magazine*, reportedly by Lynne), *Us Weekly* ran the front page story mentioned above in which Lynne Spears is accused of engineering her daughters' success for her own gain. It suggests that Jamie Lynn's teenage pregnancy was Lynne's fault for "put[ting] her in situations she didn't want to be in [and] letting her live with her boyfriend" while Jamie Lynn was forced into a public life: "[Jamie Lynn] never cared about celebrity . . . she preferred Kentwood [Louisiana]" (*Us Weekly*). Additionally, the article suggests that Lynne forced her youngest daughter to sell her story of teenage pregnancy to *OK* so that her mother could have the money and that, meanwhile, her sister Britney was not told about the pregnancy before the magazine came out because Lynne did not want to lose the exclusive fee. On the *ivillage* gossip blog, one user's response to this news was simply, "Lynn Spears is a Hollywood child pimp" (FireZoey).

Multiple users refer to Kathy, Lynne, and Dina as Hollywood pimps of their own children; others use the familiar term "stage mother." By figuring these women as stage mothers, the users draw on the classed view of childhood beauty pageants as tastelessly sexualizing young girls. Their rebukes

construct the mothers and daughters as inhabiting a transgressive femininity (which evokes inappropriate class behavior) that uses sex to get ahead, situated in opposition to the middle-class femininity that hides and protects its young girls' sexuality (see Karlyn, 77 and Walkerdine).

The classed sexuality of the celebrity stage mothers and their daughters also evokes the insult "white trash" from many of the celebrity blog consumers. On the *ivillage* gossip blog, one user responded to Dina's comment, "Scarlett Johansson goes to clubs and no one cares about it, but if Lindsay goes to a club it's world news!" with the following post: "Both are sad white trash—Dina is a typical example of what's wrong with parenting aka hollywood style—both are well past there use by dates! (sic)" (natalie). The regions of the United States from which the mothers come also corroborate the view of them as white-trash in this discourse. On the celebrity gossip blog *prettyboring.com*, the blogger specifically calls Dina, "Long Island white trash" (prettyboring). Dina and her two youngest children live in North Merrick, Long Island, while the Spears are from a small town in Louisiana. Calling the Spears white-trash draws on the most common stereotype of the term: rural, poor whites of the South.

The term "poor white trash" first appears in the 1830s, and in both the pre- and post- Civil War South referred to whites who were considered lazy, dirty, sexually promiscuous, genetically defective, and inferior to Blacks and Indians. The contemporary stereotype is of the Southern "redneck." Long Island as a signifier of white trash depends on the distinction between "old money" and "new money." North Merrick is on Long Island's south shore, an area defined by working class and "new money" communities; the north shore is known for the old money of the long established New England elite. Long Island white trash conjures an image

of the newly rich who join together a lack of cultural capital with the new found status of wealth. The stereotypical image includes those who vulgarly flaunt expensive, gaudy purchases, such as big gold jewelry, clothes, and ostentatious house decorations that lack a “refined” taste. In both cases, white-trash is often most easily summed up in the image of a woman with “uncontrolled” consumption practices, exhibited through sexual promiscuity or “excessive” material goods.

Calling Kathy, Dina, and Lynne—women who currently have substantial access to money—“white trash” succinctly condemns them for perceived inappropriate behavior within the socio-cultural expectations of those who are wealthy and white. For example, the *Vanity Fair* article suggests that “Hilton observers all have their favourite story about Kathy’s curious lack of appropriateness,” including Kathy’s finding humor in Paris’s *Saturday Night Live* skit—which made fun of her sex-tape scandal—while attending the taping of the show with Paris’s teenage brothers. Clearly, this incident is meant to be understood as an obvious transgression of white, middle-class morality and behavior (Newman, 177). And while Lynne’s white-trash credentials seemed to solidify with the announcement of her teenage daughter’s pregnancy—a significant failure for a woman who claims to be a Christian at a time in America when conservative Christian values further circumscribe middle-class morality—Dina’s white-trash behavioral problems, for many celebrity watchers, are found in her apparent attempts to appropriate the limelight from her children. . . .

Ultimately, the moralizing of race and class implied in the white-trash slur hinges on a need to police inappropriate female behavior. In her article “‘Too Close for Comfort’: *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif,” Kathleen Rowe Karlyn states, “for working-class girls, glamour and sexuality

are realistic vehicles toward greater social power, through work or attachment to more powerful men” (Karlyn, 77). The implication is that they “sell” their sexuality in some way whether that is through “marrying up” or through performance as a sexual object. The *Vanity Fair* article “Moms Gone Wild” notes that Kathy Hilton was told to marry for money by her mother, “Big Kathy,” who herself married four times. The early-heights of Britney’s pop music success caused some cultural consternation as her performance in videos for songs like “Baby One More Time” featured her sexualized school-girl uniform. At the age of seventeen she was playing what Karlyn refers to as the “nymphet,” the sexually interested and active young girl who intends to seduce the middle-aged, middle-class male (Karlyn, 72). I would argue that the only thing more threatening to middle-class femininity and “family values” than the nymphet is the nymphet’s stage mother. . . .

Class snobbery toward the stage mother remains because of the conflation of middle-class family values with perceptions of appropriate femininity. The soccer moms of the 1990s have [become] the security moms of post-9/11 America, and protecting their children, especially their daughters (whether that be from pedophiles or terrorists), has become the current signifying feature of middle-class motherhood (for more on this topic see Douglas and Michaels, as well as Faludi). A version of this female figure has made headlines again with Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin proudly calling herself a “hockey mom,” a figure which, in a convention speech joke, she likened to a bulldog with lipstick. Any suggestion that a mother might not be properly protecting her daughter or, worse, putting her daughter in harm’s way, borders on the criminal. The young beauty pageant winner or aspiring child actress has an appearance of availability that implies vulnerability and

the idea of a mother acquiring financial or other gains from her child's success appears to parallel the pimp who makes money off of prostitutes. The stage mother is seen to be "pimping" her daughter, as the *ivillage* poster would have it.

It is widely known that both Lynne and Dina have been stage mothers and official managers of their children's show business careers. All of Dina's children are Ford models (Lindsay signed with the agency at the age of three). Britney auditioned for *The All New Mickey Mouse Club* at the age of eight. Kathy Hilton participated in mother-daughter fashion shows with her two young girls in the late 1980s and, according to the author of *House of Hilton* (Oppenheimer), she nicknamed Paris "Star" from infancy and told her that "she would be bigger than Marilyn Monroe, bigger than Princess Di" (Newman, 177). As the *Us Weekly* cover story suggests, the perception is that these mothers have pushed, if not forced, their daughters into show business careers in order to make money off of them, and the gossip blog users suggest that they do so to relive the youths that they gave up to be mothers, making an inappropriate spectacle of themselves and their daughters.

"Bad Karma": Patriarchal Anxiety and Bad Celebrity Motherhood

As 2008 has progressed, the media narratives of Britney, Lindsay, and Paris have transformed from "girls gone wild" to stories of them as young women transformed. What is at stake in the narratives of their "wildness" and subsequent transformations is the transgression and restoration of white, middle-class femininity, as rescued from a vampiric, aging, white-trash matriarchal femininity. Kathy, Lynne, and Dina rarely benefit from their daughters' transformation narratives; Britney, Paris, and Lindsay, have,

respectively, a father, a boyfriend, and a best girl friend who have been given some credit for their "good" behavior (there is not space here to comment on the rumored lesbianism of Lindsay). Still, their mothers maintain a media presence.

In the summer of 2008, two media events involving Kathy Hilton, Dina Lohan and their daughters featured briefly in the mainstream news. The first was John McCain's presidential campaign ad comparing Barack Obama's celebrity status to Paris's and Britney's, thus associating Obama with the public image of the young female celebrities as vacuous and immature. The second was the CNN reporter Anderson Cooper's comment regarding *Living Lohan* while filling in on the *Live with Regis and Kelly* morning talk show. Chagrined at his inability to stop watching the series, Cooper said, "I can't believe I'm wasting my life watching these horrific people." He went on to say, "Then there's this seemingly nice 14-year-old girl, who looks to be about 60. She allegedly wants to be a singer, and/or actress slash performer of some sort, strip tease person, I don't know. I say that with love and concern (sic)" ("Cooper/Lohan"). Paris made her own comic video retort to the McCain ad that has been largely applauded, but which I will not spend time on here.

What I want to note is that both Kathy and Dina responded succinctly and publicly to McCain and Cooper. Kathy responded with a post on *The Huffington Blog*, calling the ad a "frivolous waste of money" (Hilton). Dina responded to Cooper saying, "People are just cruel! . . . This is bad karma for him" (Lohan).

I would argue that the McCain ad and Cooper's comments are expressions (by two representatives of white, middle-class patriarchy), of the cultural anxiety over the availability of individual success within capitalism to "inappropriate" members of American society. McCain's ad is the most pernicious with its further racist implications that Obama's image of black success is also inappropriate. Cooper's

comments and his apparent “obsession” with *Living Lohan* exhibit the contradictory impulses in the anxiety over who rightfully has access to privilege in America (contradictions which are not insignificantly exemplified by Cooper’s own celebrity heritage as the son of Gloria Vanderbilt).

Unsurprisingly, several blog user comments on Kathy’s and Dina’s responses suggested that their daughters were only getting what they deserve from more “respectable” members of the public. These comments show that mothers like Kathy, Dina, and Lynne will be closely scrutinized for using their daughters to promote themselves, but that when white men with political and cultural authority use these young women for their own self-promotion, a strong critique of their actions is not forthcoming within the media, except by the mothers of the female celebrities. For contemporary white, middle-class patriarchal society, the value of the discourse of bad celebrity motherhood is the ways in which it works as a distraction from the class prejudice, racism, and sexism that circumscribe the American promotion of capitalist individualism.

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