

## Review of Vinson, Jenna. *Embodying the Problem: The Persuasive Power of the Teen Mother*. Rutgers UP, 2018. 236 pages.

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The idea that teenage pregnancy is always already a deterrent to future success for mother and child—as well as a detriment to society and a drain on government resources—is deeply embedded in the modern US psyche; the words “dominant narrative” don’t even quite do justice to the strength of that belief: it seems like fact. And that is why Jenna Vinson’s *Embodying the Problem* is so important. Vinson explores the connections young parenthood often has to poverty and systemic oppression, arguing that “the dominant narrative supports the worldview that positions women, and poor people in general, as responsible for the structural oppressions they face and encourages hostility toward women, particularly women’s bodies” (5). The book battles that dominant narrative by showing how it has been shaped by shaky data and fallacious arguments. The book is intellectually challenging because its wealth of data and well-supported claims force readers to tilt their heads and re-examine the things they think they know about young parenthood.

The preface establishes various linguistic and rhetorical choices Vinson makes. Although she may prefer terms like “young parenthood,” she chooses to both confront and use problematic terminology like “teenage mother.” While Vinson “recognize[s] that the discursive constructions of ‘teenage mother’ and ‘young mother’ function to divide mothering women on the basis of age” and are “loaded terms” with pathologizing potential, ultimately she uses that terminology so she can “speak to those terms, challenge them, and perhaps shift what they mean” (xiv). She invokes Teresa de Laurentis, who argues that “the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it” (qtd. in Vinson, xiv). Further, in most of the book, Vinson inverts the usual adjectival order (see: “Adjectives: Order”) of listing age before color when she refers, for example, to a “white young woman” (xii) rather than to a young white woman, or a “black little boy” (2) rather than to a little black boy. This subtle disruption to expectations makes the reader pause slightly to notice both age and race markers, ultimately enhancing attention to both—an appropriate and smart rhetorical choice in a book on teen motherhood, a

topic for which age is paramount and for which, as Vinson shows, race is often either assumed or elided.

By sharing with the reader her own experiences as a “‘teenage’ mother” (xv), Vinson “make[s] transparent (and valued) the embodied ways of knowing that led to this project” and “demonstrate[s] that [she is] both an insider and outsider to the subjects in this book” (xiii). Her personal stories in the preface and woven circumspectly throughout provide positionality and illustrate her deep investment in “discovering the strategies women use to join the disembodied expert discourses that seek to define who they are and to resist the hegemonic ideologies that silence young mothers’ perspectives” (xv). Vinson explains that “[t]he argument to prevent teen pregnancy functions on the stigmatization and surveillance of young women” (xiv), and shows why those prevention methods are ineffective and how they shame people (especially women) who became parents as teenagers.

Chapter one provides a brief history of the concept of teen pregnancy, tracing back to the 1970s when the term “‘adolescent pregnancy’ was narrated as the beginning of unique social and health problems for young women” (11). Such arguments resulted in legal provision of and federal funding for youth to receive contraceptive services (11). The chapter describes how the public is trained by various images and texts to see “adolescent pregnancy as a problem with women’s bodies” (13) and carefully illustrates how some voices became experts in teen pregnancy while the voices of those teens as experts on their own experiences were not included. Borrowing a line from Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore, Vinson illustrates that “‘women are highly visible containers of blame’” (qtd in Vinson 15). Although the dominant narrative suggests teen pregnancy is reflective of and responsible for a variety of societal ills, more research supports claims that the age at which a woman has a child has no negative impact on “the economy, their own health/future, their children’s health/future, or the sexual behaviors/outcomes of other women” (17). The pattern Vinson identifies within ad campaigns aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy relies on a combination of judgments, inflated and conflated statistics, and enthymematic statements. The “judgmental-phrase-to-misleading-statistic formula encourages viewers to quickly accept the unstated and often contests premises of the claim such as marriage is the marker of good child rearing, all women need/want state-sanctioned male companionship, and teenage motherhood is always the result of consensual sex between teenagers” (3). After establishing this context, Vinson moves to chapters that analyze specific eras, campaigns, and groups of people.

Chapter two examines how images representing teenage pregnancy helped to establish that concept in the 1970s and 80s. She demonstrates that “there is a historical precedent of using white female bodies in cover stories

to portray teenage pregnancy as a universal problem," which she argues "obscures the United States' problematic history of condemning the reproductive decisions of poor women and women of color" (39). The chapter employs visual rhetorical analysis to read a series of images of pregnant teens and young mothers to understand how they "communicate culturally specific meanings to viewers in a particular social context" (46). Vinson explains that one legacy of Title IX in 1972 is that it grants women the right to stay in school while pregnant, although she also reminds readers that being pushed out of school when pregnant is far from unusual even today. Continued access to education is not always evidence of enlightened views, however, as Vinson illustrates when she finds that some pictures "prompt viewers to support education for (black, low-income) *teen* mothers based on the visual premise that the schools instruct groups of black young women how to behave" (53). Further, she shows that in the 80s, the language surrounding teen pregnancy stood in for race or socioeconomic status, metonymic language choices that veiled various forms of prejudice. The chapter's readings of images are poignant and valuable both for Vinson's argument and for teaching visual rhetorical analysis.

Chapter three focuses on stories that counter the dominant narrative of teen pregnancy, written by women who became mothers in their teens. Vinson analyzes stories from an online social network called *Girl-Mom* and from two edited collections that bring together the stories of young parents. These stories talk back, in Vinson's parlance, to experts who are determined to find negatives stories and frame teen parents who are successful by any standard as exceptions, as anomalous "success stories." The stories by these young mothers resist framing their successes as anomalous. They disrupt the dominant commonplaces that circulate about teenage pregnancy as ruinous to a young woman's life and that of her progeny. Vinson writes from a feminist poststructuralist perspective—rather than showing an interest in why young women became pregnant, she emphasizes how young women tell their stories and what effects those story-making strategies can have on readers, particularly when the stories reveal the structural issues underlying individual "choices" women make. Vinson argues that "personal narratives that explicitly illustrate problems with social structures are crucial to intervening in dominant discourses that obscure the material conditions and social relations that shape young women's experiences of pregnancy and motherhood" (96) The chapter successfully complicates any single or simple narrative for teenage parenthood and obliterates the dominant decline narrative.

Chapter four explores circumstances of the creation of the #NoTeenShame movement, which formed as a response to the #NoTeenPreg ad campaign run

by the Candie's<sup>1</sup> Foundation. The campaign actively shamed teen parents in its attempts to prevent teen pregnancy. The chapter tracks several things, including Candie's #NoTeenPreg advertising; the resulting creation of the group of mothers who formed #NoTeenShame to counter the messages of shame within that campaign; the rhetorical strategies the #NoTeenShame coalition used; and the ways various social media made #NoTeenShame's response possible. Vinson provides statistics that counter those shared in the original Candie's ad blitz, analyzes the #NoTeenShame response, and illustrates the disingenuity of the Foundation as its representatives refused to meet with #NoTeenShame activists about ways to adjust their message that might prevent teen pregnancy without shaming those who had become young parents themselves. Again of significance in this chapter is the notion of expertise; Vinson notes that "the continued use of the #NoTeenShame hashtag suggests that the movement has encouraged other young pregnant and mothering women to similarly recognize that their position as a 'too-young' mother may be a place of authority from which to speak" (133). This chapter provides a window into how social movements can be created, the particularities of social media, and the ways various rhetorics seize opportunities to "shape, and if needed, interrupt [problematic] discourses" (134).

Chapter five spins out Vinson's concept of "embodied exigence," moments when young mothers or young pregnant women can confront the titular "stranger in the street" who hails, questions, and (typically) judges them. Vinson identifies four strategies that women she interviewed have developed when the comments of others about their embodied experiences create an exigence. These four are (1) "walking away," which risks the mother being identified as a rude teen, but is the safest of the four options; (2) "talking back to invasions of privacy," or using societal norms about not intruding to the teen mother's advantage; "(3) "employing humor"; and (4) "educating the stranger with counter-points [*sic*]" (138). This chapter was my favorite because the quotes from the interviewees leap off the page and the situations described are at once so easy to imagine and so hard/sad to fathom. Reading about a young woman transforming her style to counter assumptions or another lying about multiple unrelated children being hers to shock a critical stranger was fascinating, and Vinson's analysis here is equally fascinating. Not everyone will

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1 The Candie's Foundation seeks to prevent teenage pregnancy through abstinence-only education; the Foundation grew out of the Candie's brand, which makes shoes and clothing, mostly sold at Kohl's. I searched for but could not find an origin story for the name "Candie's," which looks for all the world like a plural with a misplaced possessive apostrophe, but apparently is not.

agree that bald-faced lies fit seamlessly into the “employing humor” category, but seeing how such lies are actually employed by those cited allows the reader to understand that choice. Vinson’s concept of “embodied exigence” as “the socialized recognition of [a young, parenting or pregnant] body as a problem demanding a response” (147) is compelling and generative. Using samples drawn from each of the four tactics she identifies in this chapter, Vinson created a handout of possible responses to common comments and hostile questions for workshops she conducted with teen parents and parents-to-be at the Boston Summit for Teen Empowerment and Parenting Success (STEPS). This chapter in particular accomplishes the goals of making theoretical and rhetorical sense of seemingly random acts, demonstrates one way to take scholarship public, and will work well in a variety of scholarly and pedagogical contexts.

The conclusion reveals that while teenage pregnancy rates have been steadily declining since they peaked in the 1950s, “there is a real fear that increasing public awareness” of that ongoing decline will reduce or end “funding for existing programs that provided low- or no-cost contraceptives, foster youth development, support young parents, or educate youth about sexual health” (177). That we must keep the public ignorant of such information in order not to keep another segment of the public ignorant of other information is the ultimate irony, and an important element of what Vinson’s book offers: not only a thoughtful rhetorical analysis of myriad rhetorics surrounding the embodied exigence of a pregnant or mothering teen, but also a spotlight on the antics and absence of logic in how the US handles sex education and reproduction in general. Vinson’s goal is to use rhetorical analysis to “join the chorus of young mothers, activists, and feminist scholars in calling for an end to the ongoing stigmatization of young parenthood” (171). While the societal pressure to stigmatize and judge cannot be fully remedied by one scholarly text, this book will change and challenge perspectives, open minds, and help make the broad conversation about young parenthood more accurate and respectful.

Overall, the book, with a wide range of methodologies, interviewees, and text types under consideration, is a strong contribution to feminist work in the field. Vinson’s perspective is clear throughout, and when looking at public texts, she invites readers to examine the same material to see if their analyses match hers or what other perspectives they might offer. My quibbles with this text are few and minor: I see in some places a tendency to over-rely on extant work to anchor the analysis when the analysis itself is actually stronger than the framework, and occasionally at the paragraph and sentence level I found myself craving less pattern repetition and more elegant phrasing, but

these small issues amount to personal preference and do not detract from the scholarly and pedagogical value of the work.

*Embodying the Problem* engages with theory in an accessible way, carefully guiding readers toward an understanding of the theoretical context in both how she sets up and concludes her analyses. This book will be a valuable text in a graduate or upper-level undergraduate class on reproduction, women's studies, health rhetorics, rhetorics of age, and/or rhetorical or qualitative methodology.

## Work Cited

"Adjectives: Order." *Cambridge Dictionary*. *Dictionary.cambridge.org*. 16 June 2018. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/grammar/british-grammar/about-adjectives-and-adverbs/adjectives-order>.

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## About the Author

**Kim Hensley Owens** is Associate Professor of English at Northern Arizona University, where she directs the University Writing Program. Her scholarship focuses on rhetorical agency, embodied rhetorics, rhetorics of health and medicine, and pedagogy. Recent publications include articles in *College English* (2018) and *Present Tense* (2018), both of which explore various rhetorical contours of an ethnic studies program in Tucson, Arizona that was outlawed from 2011-2017. Her book, *Writing Childbirth: Women's Rhetorical Agency in Labor and Online* (Southern Illinois UP, 2015), examines how pregnant and birthing women's rhetorical agency is constructed, thwarted, and/or (re)gained through various types of personal interactions, institutional imperatives, and genres of childbirth writing. Other publications include articles in *Composition Studies*, *Computers and Composition*, *Enculturation*, *JAC*, *Pedagogy*, *Rhetoric Review*, and *Written Composition* and chapters in various edited collections.