

## A Gold Star for Grieving

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### Cindy Sheehan, Military Families Speak Out, and Gold Star Families Speak Out

*Maternal activism is often derided in popular culture and within feminist theory as not being “real” activism. Some contemporary feminist theorists are dismissive of women’s activism and agency when it stems from their identities as mothers, naming it maternalist or “accidental activism.” The work of peace activist Cindy Sheehan and other “Gold Star Mothers” whose children have died while in the military provide complex examples of the rhetoric surrounding appropriate maternal grief and appropriate maternal citizenship. The essay argues that the kinds of maternal grief that are considered publically appropriate are a reflection of what kind of maternal subjectivities are allowed culturally and by the state. Utilizing work by Carole Pateman, Norma Alarcón, Jessica Benjamin, and Gayatri Spivak, “A Gold Star for Grieving” illuminates the discourses surrounding Gold Star Mothers while providing new connections between theories of citizenship, motherhood, and subjectivity. The essay concludes by arguing that limiting maternal agency and subjectivities, either in bereavement or as activists, constrains women’s citizenship.*

The work of peace activist Cindy Sheehan and anti-war organizations such as Military Families Speak Out and Gold Star Families Speak Out (made up of members whose children have died while in the military), provide complex examples of the rhetoric surrounding appropriate maternal grief and normative ideas of mothers’ roles as citizens. The kinds of maternal grief that are considered publicly appropriate reflect the kind of maternal subjectivities that are allowed culturally and by the state. Complicating discourses about public maternal grief are the ways in which mothers who are activists are often derided as over-emotional, as neglecting their children, or as being inappropriately involved in the public sphere. Maternal peace activists, in particular, are often

charged with being bad mothers and being unpatriotic. Furthermore, peace activists who publically air their grief over losing their children to military service open themselves up to charges of undermining their country, the military, and other families who have lost children to war.

In response to this inflammatory rhetoric, this essay challenges the dismissal of maternal peace activists publicizing their grief and the charge that mothers' activism is not radical enough. In contrast to the terms maternalism or accidental activists (discussed below), I use "maternal activist" in this essay to denote mothers involved in activism who nonetheless challenge sexist notions of mothers' capabilities, mothers' place within the private sphere, and an individualist focus on caring for one's own children rather than a broader political agenda focusing on social justice for all people. I do so by drawing on research emerging from the field of Mothering Studies, which argues 1) that mothers' experiences are often not told from their point of view, but rather from the point of view of outsiders or children and 2) there is a difference between the patriarchal construct of motherhood and women's own work performing mothering. While this might not sound revolutionary, E. Ann Kaplan reminds us that "We have very little evidence about the actual nature of mothering work in any historical period, or about the quality of mother-child relations, or how historical mothers 'managed' their institutionally assigned roles" (18). The specific examples of grieving mothers protesting an ongoing war is highly unusual, historian Michael Beschloss explains, since military families historically have not publically protested war, "We're seeing something that really is unusual because military families in history have been pretty much inclined not to do this sort of thing. It's in a way sort of part of that culture. And the fact that they are doing it now shows how deeply many of them feel about the fact that they were never convinced at the beginning of this war that it was the right thing to do" (qtd. in Hochberg). These examples of the maternal peace activists provide us with evidence of mothers who use their status as the basis for a radical political platform.

Sheehan's very public grief over the loss of her son Casey in Iraq in 2004, coupled with leading a protest movement against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, have made her a polarizing figure in contemporary American politics. Rather than providing an overview of Sheehan's career as a peace activist, something that has been covered in recent feminist scholarship, this paper instead examines the rhetoric surrounding Sheehan and other activists associated with Military Families Speak Out and Gold Star Families Speak Out. I do so through the framework of accidental activism or maternalism as a way to think through existing cultural ambivalences about mothers as activists.<sup>1</sup> These two organizations and Sheehan were chosen for analysis because of their high profile in the media and because they define the urgency

of their activism through their familial identities. The discourse surrounding Sheehan makes apparent, I argue in the first section, the contradictions inherent in maternal activism, in both U.S. culture and within feminist theory. The second section demonstrates how Sheehan and other maternal peace activists have challenged negative stereotypes of activist mothers in several ways, but perhaps most innovatively by expanding the definition of a “mother” and maternal activist subjectivities from an individualistic role of taking care of one’s own children to a definition more strongly connected to community-based social justice movements. The essay concludes by arguing that limiting maternal agency and subjectivities, either in bereavement or as activists, constrains women’s citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

### Nothing-But-Mothers and Media Whores

Questions over the propriety of maternal activism exist not only in the culture at large, but within feminist theory as well. Beth Osnes, activist and co-founder of Mothers Acting Up, describes a dominant cultural message this way, “Being politically active and being a good mother are mutually exclusive” (280). In an interesting corollary to idea that good mothers should not be activists, it seems that being a maternal activist and good (radical) feminist are mutually exclusive. Maternal peace activists represent a particularly vexing figure for feminists, given that they at times use essentialist rhetoric of the “naturalness” of peacemaking to women in general and to mothers in particular (Moore 282). Such movements are often classified as a kind of second-class feminism.

As important, some feminists, especially Western feminists, have tended to be rather scathing about women’s activism or sense of agency or entitlement to civil rights based on their status as mothers. Using one’s status as a mother as a basis for activism leaves one open to charges of essentialist identity politics (Antrobus 159). Feminist scholar of global women’s peace movements, Cynthia Cockburn, argues “Instead of speaking for themselves as autonomous women, [mother identified activists] ... seem to be reducing themselves to nothing-but-mothers, to a biological function and a stereotypical role, thereby reinforcing what society already imposes” (210). Women’s activism as mothers has been defined as either “maternalism,” so-called because women are using their sanctioned roles as mothers as leverage in the public sphere, or as “accidental activism,” as when mothers protest public policies that make their traditional private sphere duties difficult, such as providing education or health care to their children. Maternalism has its roots in nineteenth-century social movements that stressed women’s essential difference from men, and found their impetus in advocating for social reform on behalf of women and children (Edmonds-Cady 207). Typical maternalist concerns include advocating

for social services for mothers and children, legal reforms to protect children, and anti-war work.

Sheehan first became a peace activist in 2004 in response to her son Casey's death in the Iraq war. At first, her activism took the form of joining Military Families Speak Out (MFSO), taping public service announcements against the war, and giving interviews to the media. In 2005 she co-founded Gold Star Families for Peace (GSFP), an activist group of family members who lost children through military service, or its aftermath. This group splintered in October of 2005, and another group was created, Gold Star Families Speak Out (GSFSO), which is affiliated with the umbrella organization MFSO, founded in 2002.<sup>3</sup> Sheehan is no longer affiliated with either group and in recent years has continued her activism by running for the U.S. Senate and hosting a radio show in addition to writing anti-war books. MFSO's and GSFSO's activism ranges from asking members to lobby Congress to end the war, to organizing conferences and informational workshops, to giving and receiving support from other military families. The MFSO 2010 Mother's Day Action encompassed all of these anti-war approaches by reminding members of the pacifist origins of Mother's Day, which began by honoring the deaths and casualties of the Civil War. MFSO's One Nation Working Together event in October 2010 with a coalition of anti-war groups is a recent example of a public action by that group.

Media portrayals of Sheehan were sympathetic at first, since her initial activism—publically declaring her mother's grief and questioning the wisdom of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—place Sheehan's activism into a maternalist framework. Joe Klein wrote in *Time* in August 2005

the awkward anguish of Cindy Sheehan has struck a chord, despite her naive politics and the ideology of some of her supporters. She represents all the tears not shed when the coffins came home without public notice. She is pain made manifest. It is only with a public acknowledgment of the unutterable agony this war has caused that we can begin a serious and long overdue conversation about Iraq, about why this war—which, unlike Vietnam, cannot be abandoned without serious consequences—is still worth fighting and why we should recommit the entire nation to the struggle. (Klein)

Sheehan is portrayed here as a *mater dolorosa*—maternal anguish personified. Describing Sheehan primarily as a grieving mother, rather than a political activist, is one example of how news reports are four times more likely to describe women in familial roles and twice as likely to describe women as victims in comparison with news stories about men (Macharia, O'Connor and Ndan-

gam). Portrayals such as Klein's should rightly alarm feminists, since Sheehan is represented here as not having agency, but as merely being a symbol of grief for the nation. Rather than Sheehan herself leading the discussion, Sheehan's pain should spark debate about the war.

Public actions by Sheehan and other activist groups such as Gold Star Families for Peace, such as attempting to enter the Pentagon to meet with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in early 2005 and the 50-city Bring Them Home Now Tour in the Fall of 2005, led to intense media criticism. Members of MFSO were accused of undermining the war effort and of lending aid and comfort to the enemy (Hochberg). Mothers like Laurie Loving who spoke out publically with MFSO were belittled as being just "terrified mothers" (Rose).

In 2005, Bush administration officials noted that Sheehan's status as a grieving mother meant that she needed to be handled "very carefully" (Carney). However, once Sheehan set up Camp Casey (a two-acre base camp near then President Bush's Texas compound) in August of 2005, media coverage began to change. Sheehan's shift from a grieving mother asking to meet with President Bush to a political activist occupying land near his vacation home, meant that she could be attacked as "just another voice in the debate—easy, in other words, to neutralize" (Carney). Sheehan and her coalition might still have been framed as maternalist by political opponents as well as the media, but with the added twist they had embraced a kind of malignant maternalism more concerned with their own political power rather than mourning their lost children. "Sheehan SHAMELESSLY exploits the death of her son for her 13 [sic] minutes of fame" as one conservative blogger wrote in September of 2005 (Geller).

Much of the criticism of Sheehan as an individual focused on her as a bad mother, rather than on her critiques of foreign and military policy. In *Not One More Mother's Child*, Sheehan writes with indignation of being told repeatedly to "go home and look after your kids," arguing that no one ever told George Bush to go home and look after his children (118). The book *American Mourning* went so far as to suggest that Casey joined the army because the Sheehan's house was unclean (Moy and Morgan 63). Cynthia G. Franklin and Laura E. Lyons note of the almost 1.3 million Google results for "Cindy Sheehan and Iraq": "The volume of commentary on Sheehan is excessive and excessively personal and nasty" (237, 238). Much of this commentary focuses on accusations of Sheehan as a bad mother, as well as on sexist slurs, such as ugly, fat, bitch, whore, and cunt (Franklin and Lyons 239). My own Google search of Cindy Sheehan and bad mother returned 24,000 hits. The top result was a blog that created the "World's Crappiest Mother Poll" and listed Sheehan as one of the choices, along with mothers who killed their children such as

Andrea Yates and Susan Smith (Simon). Sheehan led the reader votes in the comments section.

In May 2007, Sheehan decided that she could no longer be involved in the peace movement (she later changed her mind and continued her work as an activist, and later ran a brief campaign for Nancy Pelosi's Senate seat). Her essay explaining that decision was published in the recent anthology *The Maternal Is Political*, and was titled, "Good Riddance, Attention Whore," giving prominence to two phrases commonly used in conjunction with her activism. Sheehan states that she has been labeled "a radical," ironically not for being too leftist, but for calling both Republicans and Democrats to account for funding and continuing the War on Terror ("Good" 260). The conservative organization Gold Star Families (GSF) released a statement in response to Sheehan's choice to leave the movement, stating, "We are very pleased to hear that Cindy Sheehan is ending her disgraceful campaign to discredit the United States military and the heroic men and women in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Steinhauer and Marshall). Predictably, GSF accuses Sheehan of undermining the troops. From the perspective of sexist expectations that mothers concern themselves with the private sphere and upholding normative decorum, it is interesting that GSF couched their condemnation of Sheehan as "disgraceful," as if chiding Sheehan for not being more circumspect and ladylike in her grief.

Sheehan's refusal to work through the two party system has a link to her refusal to conform to the two dominant cultural norms of a grieving military mother that I believe also mark her as radical. Mothers involved with GSMSO also violate norms for the bereaved military mother. These two norms consist of either private grieving or a more public grief that continues to support the nation's militarization.

The non-profit organization American Gold Star Mothers (AGSM) embodies this latter more publically acceptable type of grief. American Gold Star Mothers formed in 1928 as a support group for mothers who had lost a child in combat. AGSM initially volunteered in veterans' hospitals, and more recently continue to advocate for veteran's issues. They view themselves very differently than GSFSO whose first stated purpose is to "end the occupation of Iraq" and only secondly to offer support to anyone who has lost a military family member since 2001 ("About"). AGSM's website frames these mothers' involvement as a kind of accidental activism. Several mothers' personal stories emphasize that it is their children who are heroes, not them. AGSM's incoming president Ruth Stonesifer's writing on the AGSM website underlines her son's greater importance as well as her accidental activism. Stonesifer states, "I am a firm believer that my son's death as he served his country made him a hero, not me" ("Home"). Stonesifer emphasizes that her leadership is not

something she chose, but was thrust upon her because of her grief over her son's death, "I had this great safe plan mapped out for my life. I was going to be in my basement making quilts for grandchildren and avoiding the world. However the world slapped me upside the head just after the events of 9/11" ("Home"). A conservative blogger captures the way Sheehan is perceived to be the opposite of the son/hero and mother/appropriate griever binary: "Mother' Sheehan can either have her son remembered as a victim ... or a hero. She's choosing to push victimhood. On the other hand, in this scenario, there's only room for one hero" ("Darkly"). The critique of Sheehan as putting herself above her son and as benefitting from his death is common, and so it is interesting to see the efforts the members of AGSM put into making sure they do not give that impression.

### **Redefining Motherhood through Radical Maternal Activism**

The difference between the activism of AGSM and many of the women involved in ending the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan exemplifies what Peggy Antrobus, Caribbean transnational feminist activist and co-founder of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), calls the uneasy relationship within global women's movements between women who are "mobilized on the basis of motherhood and the political virtue of women's values" and those who are "concerned about the price women have always paid for this kind of 'essentializing'" (159). In other words, there is always a danger for women when they base their claims for reform on an identity, such as being a mother, which has links to essentialized notions about all women. The peace activists discussed in this essay encourage us to reconsider why a maternal identity is dangerous and possibly discrediting to anti-war activists.

As the previous section discussed, many negative characteristics are attached to women who use their maternal identity as their primary reason for their peace activism. Sheehan, GSFSO and MFSO peace activists frame their right to speak and protest in terms of their familial identity. They do this in spite of the mocking of maternal activism as too emotional, or unseemly in public. For example, GSFSO member Karen Meredith argued in 2005 in a speech before the American Friends Service Committee that both mothers and fathers should speak out against the war, but that the public would be more receptive to hearing calls for peace from mothers:

As long as the human costs are hidden, this country cannot begin to heal. The mother's voices will end this war, they have to; and the father's can too, but it's mostly the mothers they will listen to... Imagine, for one minute, my sense of peace knowing that my speaking out might



end the war one day earlier and possibly save the life of one of the pro-Bush, pro-war families. Their loved ones will come home because I raised my voice to question this war. (“Impassioned”)

Meredith’s writing does not necessarily invoke a essentialized idea of mothers as naturally more peaceful than fathers, but she does suggest that mothers must lead this movement because they are more credible witnesses to the destructive nature of war.

Sheehan’s writing, in particular, uneasily straddles a line of maternalism and maternal activism. She insists that her activism be taken seriously as a political critique while occasionally invoking a sexist norm of the “good” grieving mother as a shield against criticism. “How can anyone question a mother-in-mourning’s motives, when all she is doing is trying to save other mothers from the same gut-wrenching experience,” Sheehan pleads (*Peace* 142). This is a rather disingenuous description of Sheehan’s activism in 2004 and 2005, given that her political agenda called for Bush’s impeachment on the ground that he lied to the American people. That year Sheehan travelled to London to be part of the Downing Street Memo hearings. These hearings were convened when evidence surfaced that the intelligence that weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq (justifying the invasion) and been faulty and possibly fabricated.

Nevertheless, Sheehan’s, MFSO and GSFSO member’s actions and writing testify to agency in their maternal activism, rather than an accidental activism. In contrast to Joe Klein’s description of Sheehan’s grief as her most important contribution to the national debate over the war, Sheehan emphasizes her previous activist work as leading her to create this protest. “Many people think that I just fell off the pumpkin truck in Crawford on August 6 and got involved in the anti-war movement,” Sheehan writes, but in reality she was already scheduled to be a featured speaker at a Veterans for Peace convention in Texas when she decided to protest at Bush’s vacation home in Crawford, Texas (*Peace* 133). Sheehan writes extensively in her autobiography *Peace Mom* of the importance of MFSO, Veterans for Peace, the non-profit Crawford Peace House, and the activist group Code Pink to the success of Camp Casey.

In addition to insisting on their right to be part of the public sphere debate over the war, Gold Star Families for Peace and Gold Star Families Speak Out took one of the most potent symbols of military grief and turned it into a critique of the Iraq war. The Gold Star is a traditional military symbol representing a family member who has died during military service. Sometimes family members wear a gold pin issued by the military, or sometimes they display a small banner bearing a gold star in their home or on their front door. Despite



this long-standing tradition, many Americans are unaware of the significance of the gold star.

Some family members of soldiers killed since 2001 feel that their loss and their grief were marginalized through the Bush administration's efforts to keep a lid on media coverage of casualties. Peace activist and Gold Star Families Speak Out member Karen Meredith writes, "Very few people have actually met a Gold Star Mom. It is important that people know what it feels like to be in my situation" ("About"). Maternal peace activism insured that Gold Star mothers' perspectives were on the public agenda and put a face to the mothers who had lost children in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

GSFSO mothers and Sheehan politicize their grief by using it as a platform to call for political change. In a 2008 article, Sheehan comments that Memorial Day is always a "double-whammy" since it is also her son's birthday. Sheehan asks her readers to transform Memorial Day from being "grief-soaked" to a national day of peace. She charges us to "look into the face of grief" and recognize that Memorial Day is not a day to celebrate nationalism and patriotism, but rather a day to acknowledge the thousands of families who have been torn apart by war. "We need to rededicate our lives," Sheehan writes, "to opposing war and unbridled presidential power so that Memorial Day is not grief-soaked for thousands more families to come" ("No"). Sheehan further connects her family's grief to that suffered by Iraqi families during the war. In making this cross-cultural connection to other mothers and other children who have died, Sheehan practices maternal intersubjectivity—linking her well-being as a mother with the well-being of other mothers and children.

Maternal activists' anti-war resistance reshapes our ideas of what a mother is. Sheehan, like many contemporary maternal activists, insists that she can define her maternal practice herself rather than being constrained by patriarchal notions of motherhood. In 2006, Sheehan promoted the idea of the "Matriot" as a complementary identity to that of a patriot.<sup>4</sup> In defining this term, Sheehan claims that we are all linked by having been born of a mother, and that if our mother's care of us has been nurturing, that both men and women can use this model to critique and protest militarism. Sheehan writes, "A Matriot loves his/her country but does not buy into the exploitive phrase of 'My country right or wrong.' (As Chesterton said, that's like saying, 'My mother, drunk or sober.')" ("Matriotism"). Using her perspective as a mother, Sheehan argues that a Matriot would not send her children, or anyone else's children to war. Sheehan frames herself and other Matriots as ready to do battle for their children:

[A Matriot] would march into a war herself that she considered just to protect her child from harm. Aha! Matriots would fight their own

battles, but take a dim view of having to do so, and would seldom resort to violence to solve conflict! Patriots cowardly hide behind the flag and eagerly send young people to die to fill their own pocketbooks. (“Matriotism”)

Matriots protect their children from male-defined notions of patriotism that would send them to their deaths.

Many of the maternal peace activists advocate for a public and community-based social justice mothering practice. While not recognized as such, I argue that this reframing of public maternal subjectivity stands at the forefront of the maternal peace activists’ accomplishments. Celeste Zappala, a well-known member of GSFSO, wages weekly anti-war protests in Philadelphia. Zappala has continued to do so even after President Obama announced the troop draw down in Iraq. Zappala argues that her political actions have a more expansive meaning than a protest over her son’s death. “It’s not joyfully that I can say the war is over, because it isn’t,” Zappala notes, “The consequences will go on forever. They’ve changed the name, but our people are still in danger and there are still going to be people injured or dying” (Pompilio). Sheehan concurs that women can and should make social justice claims from their positionality as mothers by expanding private acts of mothering into a public sphere communal activity: “I believe what I am doing is for my children, and for the world’s children” (*Not* 118). She elaborates, “We as mothers need to stop buying into the load of misogynist crap so that our children need our constant presence in their lives so that they can thrive and grow.... What we as moms need to stop doing is giving our children to the military-industrial war complex to be used as human cluster bombs” (*Not* 119). Thus, maternal peace activists call not just for government or foreign policy change, but for mothers themselves to change their vision of caretaking.

The tension surrounding mothers’ abilities to make social justice claims as mothers is not just a problem for feminist theory. It has deep roots in how citizenship is conceived. Modern citizenship and duties such as voting, holding office, and serving in the military were constituted as specifically male, in contrast to women’s service which would come from being good mothers. Carole Pateman’s work discusses the incorrect perception that in attempting to gain citizenship rights first wave feminists wanted solely to be equal with men. In fact, early proponents of women’s rights wanted “both equal civil and political rights, and that their difference from men should be acknowledged in their citizenship” (Pateman 17-18). Thus, women historically have demanded civil and political rights based on claims to equality with men, but also based on a claim of difference from men through their “service” and knowledge as mothers. And this is where it gets tricky. If citizenship was designated as the province of

men from the French Revolution on, motherhood was designated as the way women could participate in public life through republican motherhood.

Claiming a voice as a citizen and a mother is difficult, since mothers have not been traditionally counted as a political constituency (Reiger 318). Instead, mothers have been expected to embody and perpetuate the nation while not being active citizens. All female activists, from radical feminists to socially conservative women's groups, then, are caught in a binary that Pateman describes as one that "continues to oscillate between 'difference' (maternal thinking should be valued and brought into the political arena) and 'equality' (citizenship not motherhood is vital for feminists)" (21). The binary between equality and difference, Pateman reminds us, is usually framed as an open question about whether gender and gender specific experiences such as mothering should be considered pertinent to politics and social change. Instead, feminists focus on a different issue: "how to subvert and change the manner in which women have already been incorporated, and so to transform the relation between 'equality' and 'difference'" (Pateman 27). Considering the roles mothers like Cindy Sheehan, Karen Meredith, and Celeste Zappata play in the public sphere, whether through activism or transforming acceptable modes of grieving, it might be possible to have both equality of political participation and recognition of difference in mothers' experiences of loss.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude this essay by taking up Pateman's challenge. I propose to outline some theoretical problems stemming from terming all mothers' activism as second class regardless of the nature of their agenda. First is the *a priori* assumption of a western individualist subject that can be summoned at will to stand in for the second-class identity of the mother. As Norma Alarcón explains, the individualist subject (a self-sufficient individual adult) of Anglo-American feminism is not universal (363). Alarcón argues that "reconfiguring the subject" of feminist theory is necessary in order to explore the difference between women (357). Philosopher Patrice DiQuinzio postulates that western feminist ideas depend on an individualist subject demanding individual rights that cannot be reconciled easily with mothers' communal demands for rights such as healthcare and childcare. Challenging the hegemony of the individualist subject and the role that subject has historically played in allocating citizenship rights allows us a better understanding of constraints of the activism of radicals such as Cindy Sheehan and conservative groups such as American Gold Star Mothers.

Second, in concert with Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity, I am not sure that describing mothers as autonomous

subjects matches the living experience of many (but clearly not all) mothers. The material and psychic interrelationship between the mother's and child's well being gives lie to the idea that mothers *should* speak and act as autonomous subjects in order to create social change. Instead mothers might strategically choose to speak for themselves and others, or not. I do not mean that women should not have individual civil rights such as citizenship, but rather that when theorizing about liberatory processes for women, assuming an individualist subject may be exclusionary. As Benjamin notes, "Denial of the mother's subjectivity, in theory and in practice, profoundly impedes our ability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects" (31). The rhetoric surrounding Cindy Sheehan, such as that she should relinquish the public sphere, experience grief without anger, and take care of her children as her primary activity stems from a cultural ignorance or willful blindness that mothers have diverse subject positions. Indeed, it is a denial that women have the right to be maternal citizens.

Thirdly, if a subjectivity needs to be individualist to be emancipated, that comes with some strings attached, as Gayatri Spivak notes. Spivak bridges Cockburn's fears of maternal activism as essentialist and Alarcón's discussion of feminist individualism, cautioning against the "individualist" subject making of western feminism precisely because it does so through two narratives: "domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as 'companionate love'" and "the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social mission" (244). So Cockburn's and others' calls for individual independent subjectivities as the basis for activism or agency or empowerment draws from a long line of Eurocentric subjectivities defining themselves through and against the colonized subject. Requiring an individualist subjectivity as the basis for activism marginalizes the public work of many maternal activists.

So where should we go from here? The distinction between motherhood and mothering was first made by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* in 1976 and then expanded upon by Andrea O'Reilly. Rich defines mothering as a "freely chosen practice" in distinction to patriarchally defined motherhood, like that found in the expectation that women bear children in the service of the state but do not actively participate in politics or social change. This leaves open the possibility that maternal activists might be radical on two counts: through the nature of their political agenda, but also through their efforts to challenge the historical interpellation of mothers as outside active citizenship. However, O'Reilly notes there do not exist many descriptions of what that practice would look like. In closing, I'd like to suggest that we can learn more about a radical maternal politics, and diverse performances of public maternal subjectivities (like the grieving Gold Star Mother), by not dismissing all of those engaged in maternal activism as second-class feminists or as accidental

activism. If it is true that women's status as mothers (or not) always already enters into their status as citizens and agents of social change, then working to subvert traditional notions of motherhood can be just as radical as refusing motherhood altogether.

<sup>1</sup>See Natalie Wilson, Cynthia G. Franklin and Laura E. Lyons, and Laura Knudson for recent scholarship on Cindy Sheehan and her activism.

<sup>2</sup>I want to thank Natalie Wilson and Meghan Gibbons for introducing me to the controversies surrounding Sheehan and other maternal activists.

<sup>3</sup>Private conversation with Karen Meredith, October 12, 2010. I would like to thank Ms. Meredith discussing the history of Gold Star Mothers Speak Out, her activism, and her leadership of that group. Meredith's son Lt. Ken Ballard was killed in Iraq.

<sup>4</sup>"Matriot" is the title of a 1992 poem by Frances Payne Adler that advocates that older women rise up and work for an end to war, universal healthcare, and ending pollution.

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