

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

Matricentric Feminism

Spring/Fall 2019

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Featuring articles by Tatjana Takševa, Petra Bueskens,
Muna Saleh, Olivia Heal, Tessa Pyles, and many more



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The defining mission of the Journal of the Motherhood Initiative is to promote and disseminate the best current scholarship on motherhood, and to ensure that this scholarship considers motherhood both in an international context and from a multitude of perspectives, including differences of class, race, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and nationality, and from across a diversity of disciplines.

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ANDREA O'REILLY

JMI: A Journal of Our Own

This special double issue on matricentric feminism marks the fortieth issue of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, formerly the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*. Due to the new funding regulations of our granting agency, SSHRC, this will be the last issue available in print format. Beginning, 1 January 2020, *JMI* will be available online in open access format.

Over the last twenty years, *JMI/JARM* has published forty issues on every imaginable motherhood topic; including health, law/politics, literature, popular culture, peace, violence, maternal activism, feminism, motherliness, pregnancy/childbirth, the environment, migration, maternal subjectivities, art, history, reproduction, academe, education, the economy, bereavement, militarism, poverty, carework, race/ethnicity, grandmothers, spirituality/religion, sex/sexuality, becoming a mother, lesbian mothers, mothers in a global context, mothers in the African diaspora, mothers and daughters/sons.

Our inaugural issue, honouring Rich's revolutionary distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, was entitled *Mothering and Motherhood*. The issue opens with my article "Inaugurating the Association for Research on Mothering" wherein I explain why I began The Association for Research on Mothering, and its journal. I wrote these words: Over the last year as *ARM* was being born, I found myself, as mothers will often do, describing in the minutest detail the labour of their beloved child: every contraction, rush, pain, thrill I have shared with colleagues, friends, family acquaintances, and, more often than I care to admit, passerbys at airports, restaurants, in taxis, and at the mall. And while most people listened patiently and congratulated the birth, many expressed puzzlement: "Why would I want such a "baby"; or more to the point, was such a baby really needed? In other words, "Why do we, society, university, government depending on the context, need an association about motherhood?" Such remarks while certainly not welcome were hardly surprising.

Over the last two plus decades as a motherhood researcher and publisher I have heard countless stories from motherhood scholars about how their work has been ignored, dismissed, invalidated, or trivialized by academic feminists: how the women's studies conferences they attend have few, if any papers, on motherhood; how motherhood is seldom a topic of discussion in women's studies classrooms and rarely included in academic feminist textbooks; and how articles on motherhood or reviews of motherhood books are all but absent in the leading women's studies journals. However, despite the disavowal of motherhood in academic feminism, we do have a feminist theory and movement of our own. *JMI/JARM* is certainly a testimony of this with more than six hundred articles published in its forty issues. It is thus most appropriate that our last print issue is on the topic of matricentric feminism, an issue that resoundingly conveys and documents that we have indeed, despite the naysayers, created in the words of Virginia Woolf "a room of our own"—a feminism for mothers.

Matricentric Feminism

Spring/Fall 2019
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Front cover

Allegra Holmes, *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*. A monument to the nursing relationship, refocusing the value of breastfeeding from milk and nutrition to the transformative power of the mother/baby dyad. “As a matricentric feminist artist, I actively reject the notion that mothering and art making are mutually exclusive, and have developed my art practice as one that is intrinsically linked with the daily work of raising my children.”

Matricentric Feminism

Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers

The aim of this article is to introduce a mother-centred mode of feminism—what I have called “matricentric feminism”—to consider the context and challenges of a mother-centred feminist theory and politics, and to suggest directions for future research. Motherhood, it could be said, is the unfinished business of feminism. Matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers’ needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women’s empowerment. This repositioning is not to suggest that a matricentric feminism should replace traditional feminist thought; rather, it is to emphasize that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women’s roles and identity as mothers. Indeed, mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers. Consequently, mothers need a matricentric mode of feminism organized from and for their particular identity and work as mothers. Indeed, a mother-centred feminism is needed because mothers—arguably more so than women in general—remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism. My work does not rationalize or defend the need for a mother-centred feminism, as it takes it as a given. Instead, this article endeavours to describe and discuss this mode of mother-focused feminism, which has emerged as a result of and in response to women’s specific identities and work as mothers.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf writes “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (1). For me, this quote serves to situate and frame what has been a passionate concern of mine over the past three-plus decades as I have sought to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist: namely, mothers need a feminism of their own. When I use the term “mothers,” I refer to individuals who engage in motherwork or, as Sara Ruddick theorized, maternal practice. Such a term is

not limited to biological mothers but to anyone who does the work of mothering as a central part of their life. The aim of this article is to introduce this specific mode of feminism—what I have called “matricentric feminism”—to consider the context and challenges of a mother-centred feminist theory and politics, and to suggest directions for future research.

Background and Context

The article works from one particular assumption: mothering matters and is central to the lives of women who are mothers. In saying this, I am not suggesting that mothering is all that matters or that it matters the most; I am suggesting that any understanding of mothers' lives is incomplete without a consideration of how becoming and being a mother shape a woman's sense of self and how she sees and lives in the world. Indeed, as Eva Feder Kitty emphasizes, “most women care for their dependents at some point, and for many women, this occupies the better part of their lives” (qtd. in Stephens 141). As a motherhood scholar, a director of a research centre on motherhood, an editor of a motherhood journal, and a publisher of a press on motherhood, I have talked to more mothers and read more motherhood scholarship than most, and I can say with confidence that for women who are mothers, mothering is a significant, if not a defining dimension of their lives, and that, arguably, maternity matters more than gender. I do not seek to substantiate these claims but rather take them as my starting point. Mothers need a feminism that puts motherhood at its centre.

Motherhood, it could be said, is the unfinished business of feminism. For example, a cursory review of recent scholarship on mothers and paid employment reveals that although women have made significant gains over the last three decades, mothers have not. Mothers in the paid labour force find themselves “mommy tracked,” as they make sixty cents for every dollar earned by full-time fathers in the U.S. (Williams 2). Indeed, today, the pay gap between mothers and nonmothers under thirty-five years is larger than the wage gap between young men and women (Crittenden 94). And although the “glass ceiling” and the “sticky floor” are still found in the workplace, most scholars argue that it is the “maternal wall” that impedes and hinders most women's progress in the workplace today. As Ann Crittenden writes “many childless women under the age of thirty-five believe that all the feminist battles have been won ... [but] once a woman has a baby, the egalitarian office party is over” (88).

Matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment. This repositioning is not to suggest that a matricentric feminism should replace traditional feminist

thought; rather, it is to emphasize that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mothers. Indeed, mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers. Consequently, mothers need a matricentric mode of feminism organized from and for their particular identity and work as mothers. Indeed, a mother-centred feminism is needed because mothers—arguably more so than women in general—remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism. My work does not rationalize or defend the need for a mother-centred feminism, as it takes it as a given. Instead, this article endeavours to describe and discuss this mode of mother-focused feminism—what I have termed “matricentric feminism”—which has emerged as a result of and in response to women’s specific identities and work as mothers.

I use the term “matricentric” to define and describe a mother-centred mode of feminism. Feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter uses the term “gynocentric” to signify a woman-centred perspective; similarly, I use matricentric to convey a mother-centred perspective. The choice to use the word “matricentric” over “maternal” and to use the term “matricentric feminism” instead of “maternal feminism” is done to distinguish a mother-focused feminism from the theory and politics of maternalism. Writer Judith Stadtman Tucker argues that maternalism “conforms to the dominant ideology of motherhood and emphasizes the importance of maternal well-being to the health and safety of children.” “Maternalism,” she continues, “overlaps with what has been called ‘difference feminism’—particularly the idea that women are ‘naturally’ or intuitively more empathic, less exploitive, and more closely attuned to relational ambience than men” (2). Likewise, Rachel V. Kutz-Flamenbaum, writing in *the Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, says the following:

maternalism, like paternalism, is an ideology and philosophy. It asserts that “mother knows best” and that women, as a group, maintain a set of ideas, beliefs or experiences that reflect their motherly knowledge and motherly strengths. Maternalism suggests that women are (and should be) the moral conscience of humanity and asserts women’s legitimate investment in political affairs through this emphasis. (II: 712)

Patrice DiQuinzio further elaborates that “maternalist politics refers to political activism and political movements that invoke motherhood as the basis of women’s agency” (“The Politics of the Mothers Movement in the United States” 58).

A matricentric perspective must not to be confused with a maternalist one. Although some perspectives in matricentric feminism may be considered maternalist, they are largely limited to the activism of certain motherhood

organizations. Moreover, matricentric feminism understands motherhood to be socially and historically constructed, and positions mothering more as a practice than an identity. As well, central to matricentric feminist theory is a critique of the maternalist stance that positions maternity as the basis of female identity; as well, matricentric feminism challenges the assumption that maternity is natural to women (i.e., all women naturally know how to mother) and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill. Although matricentric feminism does hold a mother-centred perspective, it does not advance a maternalist argument or agenda. Thus, matricentric feminism marks the crucial difference between a focus on mothers from a politics of maternalism.

When discussing matricentric feminism, I draw on the concept of a matrifocal narrative, particularly as it has been developed in maternal literary theory. In her introduction to *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch queries why in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the voice of Jocasta, Oedipus' mother, is missing, and she connects this narrative silence to a larger literary lacuna: "In asking where the story of Jocasta is in the story of Oedipus, I am asking not only where the stories of women are in men's plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters" (4). She concludes that "clearly, to know Jocasta's maternal story ... we would have to begin with the mother" (5). Drawing on Hirsch, Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy emphasize in *Narrating Maternity* that even among the limited number of fictional or theoretical texts that do "begin with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective ... [they] seldom hold fast to a maternal perspective; further when texts do maintain this perspective, readers and critics tend to suppress the centrality of mothering" (2-3). Daly and Reddy have coined the term "daughter-centricity" to describe the perspective wherein "we learn less about what it is like to mother than about what it is like to be mothered, even when the author has had both experiences" (2). Within the last three decades, as motherhood studies has emerged as a distinct and established academic discipline, this daughter-centricity has been countered and corrected in both fiction and theory. Indeed, a central aim of motherhood studies is to articulate and theorize "the voice of the mother"—that is, to analyze becoming and being a mother from the perspective and subjectivity of mothers themselves. Adrienne Rich concludes *Of Woman Born* with these words: "The words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through" (239). Whether such "unmasking" (Maushart) is conveyed by way of a sociological study of mothers or in a popular motherhood memoir, feminist writers and scholars endeavour to unmask motherhood by documenting the lived reality of mothering. In so doing, they counter the daughter-centricity, described by Daly and Reddy, to create and compose what I term a "matrifocal narrative."

My use of the term matrifocal is drawn from Miriam Johnson's discussion of matrifocality in *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives*. Matrifocal societies, she writes, "tend to have greater gender equality because of the power of a maternal paradigm" (226). She continues with the following:

In these societies, regardless of the particular type of kinship system, women play roles of cultural and social significance and define themselves less as wives than as mothers.... Matrifocality however, does not refer to domestic maternal dominance so much as it does to the relative cultural prestige of the image of the mother, a role that is culturally elaborated and valued. Mothers are also structurally central in that the mother as a status "has some degree of control over the kin unit's economic resources and is critically involved in kin-related decision making processes." It is not the absence of males (males may be quite present) but the centrality of women as mothers and sisters that makes a society matrifocal. (226)

A matrifocal narrative, borrowing from Johnson's terminology, is one in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued; it is structurally central to the plot. In other words—and to draw on the work of Hirsh, Daly, and Reddy—matrifocal narratives "begin with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective," and they "hold fast to a maternal perspective; in addition, a matrifocal reading attends to and accentuates the maternal thematic in any given text.

Maternal writing, as Emily Jeremiah has noted, "entails a publicizing of maternal experience, and it subverts the traditional notion of mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being. It is thus to be understood as a key tool in the redefinition of maternity in which feminists are engaged" (231). "It is impossible," writes Patrice DiQuinzio, "for feminist theory to avoid the issue of motherhood, and it is impossible for feminist theory to resolve it" (*Impossibility of Motherhood* xx). However, I suggest that a matrifocal perspective that unmask motherhood and redefines maternity allows for these encounters and explorations.

Not only is matricentric feminism matrifocal in its focus, it is also multi- and interdisciplinary in its perspective. Matricentric feminist theory draws from many academic disciplines—including anthropology, history, literary studies, sociology, philosophy, psychology, sexuality studies, and women's studies—as well as from the established schools of academic feminism. Indeed, far from being an island onto its own, matricentric feminism is informed by traditional schools of academic feminism and its most prominent theorists: womanist and African American feminism (bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins); liberal feminism (Ann Crittenden); psychoanalytic feminism

(Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin); queer-lesbian feminism (Baba Copper); cultural-difference feminism (Adrienne Rich and Mielle Chandler); socialist feminism (Mary O'Brien); and third-wave feminism (Ariel Gore). As an example, matricentric feminism is informed by the African American feminist commitment to the epistemological importance of lived experience while also being informed by third-wave feminism's commitment to intersectional analyses.

I am frequently asked what matricentric feminism is. As a new and emergent feminism, it is difficult to define matricentric feminism other than to say that it is explicitly matrifocal in its perspective and emphasis—it begins with the mother and takes seriously the work of mothering—and that it is multidisciplinary and multitheoretical in its perspective. I gesture towards a possible definition by listing what I see as the central and governing principles and aims of matricentric feminism:

- asserts that the topic of mothers, mothering, and motherhood is deserving of serious and sustained scholarly inquiry;
- regards mothering as work that is important and valuable to society but emphasizes that the essential task of mothering is not, and should not be, the sole responsibility and duty of mothers;
- contests, challenges, and counters the patriarchal oppressive institution of motherhood and seeks to imagine and implement a maternal identity and practice that is empowering to mothers;
- seeks to correct the child centredness that defines much of the scholarship and activism on motherhood and seeks to develop research and activism from the experience and the perspective of mothers;
- commits to social change and social justice, and regards mothering as a socially engaged enterprise and a site of power, wherein mothers can and do create social change through childrearing and activism;
- understands mothering and motherhood to be culturally determined and variable, and is committed to exploring the diversity of maternal experience across race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, age, and geographical location; and
- endeavours to establish maternal theory and motherhood studies as an autonomous, independent, and legitimate scholarly disciplines.

This list is only partial and provisional. It is my hope that future scholarship will lead to a more substantive and robust definition of matricentric feminism to create a feminism, in the words of feminist writer and activist Marilyn Waring, for which mothers and mothering count.

Controversies and Challenges

Matricentric feminism, however, has yet to be incorporated into the field of academic feminism. In making this claim, I am not saying no feminist scholarship on motherhood exists; rather, matricentric feminism remains peripheral to academic feminism. Over the last three-plus decades as a motherhood researcher and publisher, I have heard countless stories from motherhood scholars about how their work has been ignored, dismissed, invalidated, or trivialized by academic feminists; how the women's studies conferences they attend have few, if any papers, on motherhood; how motherhood is seldom a topic of discussion in women's studies classrooms and rarely included in academic feminist textbooks; and how articles on motherhood or reviews of motherhood books are all but absent in the leading women's studies journals. My 2016 study of the place of motherhood over the past ten years—in contexts such as National Women's Studies Association conference panels as well as in top feminist journals such as *Signs*, *Frontiers*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Gender and Society*, and in gender and women's studies textbooks and syllabi—has confirmed this antidotal evidence, as only 1 percent to less than 3 percent of the content is devoted to the topic of motherhood (*Matricentric Feminism*). Given that 80 percent of women become mothers in their lifetime, there is an evident disconnect between the minimal representation of motherhood in academic feminism and the actual lives of most women.

A demand for a theory and practice based on a specific identity of women is hardly an innovative or radical claim. Over the last forty-plus years, many groups of women have argued that mainstream feminism—largely understood to be liberal feminism—has not adequately represented their perspectives or needs. Women of colour, for example, have advocated that feminism must address the intersectionality of their oppression as racialized women, a feminism now known as womanism; women from the Global South have called for the development of a theory of global feminism; and queer, lesbian, bi, and trans women have supported the growth of queer feminist theory and activism. Likewise, the development of third-wave feminism in the 1990s grew out of young women's sense of alienation from the aims of second-wave feminism. When such women demanded a feminist theory of their own, the larger feminist movement acknowledged, albeit often reluctantly, that such women had been excluded from the larger canon of feminist thought. Feminist theory was subsequently revised to include these different positions and perspectives within feminism. Most introduction to women's studies textbooks or courses now include chapters or units on socialist feminism, global feminism, queer feminism, third-wave feminism, and womanism, and these perspectives and topics are well represented at women's studies conferences and in women's studies journals.

However, as mothers began to call for feminism for and about mothers over the last decade and to ask for its inclusion in an academic feminism, their calls were not met with the same respect or recognition. More often than not, their claims were dismissed, trivialized, disparaged, and ridiculed: why would mothers need such a mother-centred feminist perspective? The question implies that mothers do not have needs or concerns separate from their larger identity as women. It troubles me deeply that feminists can understand the intersectionality of gendered oppression when it comes to race, class, sexuality, and geographical location but not so for maternity. But I would argue—and I suspect most mothers would agree—that maternity needs to be likewise understood in terms of intersectional theory. The category of mother is distinct from the category of woman: many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological—are specific to their work and identity as mothers. Mothers, in other words, do not live simply as women but as mother women, just as Black women do not live simply as women but as racialized women. Moreover, mothers' oppression and resistance under patriarchy are shaped by their maternal identity, just as Black women's oppression and resistance are shaped by their racialized identity. Thus, mothers need a feminism of their own—one that positions the concerns of mothers at the starting point for a theory and politics of empowerment. For me, this seems self-evident. Why then is maternity not understood to be a subject position and, hence, not theorized as with other subject positions in terms of the intersectionality of gendered oppression and resistance? Why do we not recognize mothers' specific perspectives as we do for other women, whether they are queer, working class, racialized, and so forth? Why do mothers and mothering not count or matter?

In my 2016 book, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, I consider various reasons for what I term the “disavowal of motherhood” in academic feminism. Here I share two of these considerations: the confusion of mothering with motherhood and the conflation of maternalism, and hence gender essentialism, with matricentric feminism. Samira Kawash in her review article on motherhood argues that “the marginalization of motherhood in feminist thought over the last 15 years was a political rejection of maternalist politics constructed as a backlash to feminism and the result of dramatic upheavals in feminist theory” (971). Indeed, Kawash argues that “by the late 1990s difference feminism had been eclipsed and was no longer a serious topic of discussion in feminist graduate programs or in the academic feminist press.” “The deconstruction of ‘woman’ and the post structuralist accounts of gender and power,” she continues, “left motherhood to the side, an embarrassing theoretical relic of an earlier naïve view of the essentialist woman, and her shadow, the essential mother” (971). Building on Kawash's argument, I argue that it is more precisely a misreading of maternity and

maternalism in matricentric feminism that has resulted in the disavowal of motherhood in and by academic feminism.

Confusing Mothering with Motherhood

It is my view that the disavowal of motherhood in academic feminism is the result of a larger and pervasive feminist discomfort with all things maternal and, more specifically, the result of confusing the institution of motherhood with the experience of mothering. Much of second-wave feminism—in particular that of liberal and radical-libertarian feminism—views motherhood as a significant, if not the determining, cause of women’s oppression under patriarchy. As Rosemarie Putnam Tong notes in her second edition of *Feminist Thought*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, a central liberal feminist text, “advised women to become like men” (31). The now-infamous quote from *The Feminine Mystique*—“the problem that has no name”—quickly became a trope for the dissatisfaction supposedly felt by stay-at-home mothers. Friedan states that “in lieu of more meaningful goals, these women spent too much time cleaning their already tidy homes, improving their already attractive appearances, and indulging their already spoiled children.” (69-70). Moreover, Friedan argues that “contemporary women needed to find meaningful work in the full-time, public workforce” (22). Along the same lines, radical-libertarian feminist Shulamith Firestone claims that “the material basis for the sexual/political ideology of female submission and male domination was rooted in the reproductive roles of men and women” (qtd. in Tong 52). Elsewhere, Firestone writes the following:

No matter how much educational, legal, and political equality women achieve and no matter how many women enter public industry, nothing fundamental will change for women as long as natural reproduction remains the rule and artificial or assisted reproduction the exception. Natural reproduction is neither in women’s best interests nor in those of the children so reproduced. The joy of giving birth—invoked so frequently in this society—is a patriarchal myth. In fact, pregnancy is barbaric, and natural childbirth is at best necessary and tolerable and at worst like shirting a pumpkin. (92)

For Friedan and Firestone, motherhood is a patriarchal institution that causes women’s oppression, and, thus, for them, the feminist solution is to disavow and denounce motherhood.

However, as motherhood scholars and mothers alike have rightly argued, such reasoning is deeply flawed in its failure to take into account the important difference between the institution of motherhood and women’s experiences of mothering. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: “the potential

relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children”; and “the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, whereas the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering and is female defined and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood, thus, must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of feminist mothering. To critique the institution of motherhood, therefore, is “not an attack on the family or on mothering except as defined and restricted under patriarchy” (Rich 14). In other words, whereas motherhood as an institution is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can be a source of power. It has long been recognized among scholars of motherhood that Rich’s distinction between mothering and motherhood was what enabled feminists to recognize that motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive. Rather, mothering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment and a location of social change if, to use Rich’s words, women became “outlaws from the institution of motherhood.” However, in much of academic feminism, this crucial difference between the institution and the experience is not recognized or understood. As a result, mothering becomes confused with motherhood, and maternity is regarded solely and exclusively as a patriarchal entity.

Conflating Matricentric Feminism with Maternalism and Gender Essentialism

A matricentric perspective is often confused with a maternalist one. Matricentric feminism, as already discussed, understands motherhood to be socially and historically constructed and positions mothering more as a practice than an identity. Central to matricentric feminism is a critique of the maternalist stance that positions maternity as basic to and the basis of female identity; it challenges the assumption that maternity is natural to women (i.e., all women naturally know how to mother) and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill. Although matricentric feminism does hold a matrifocal perspective and insists that mothering does matter, it does not advance a maternalist argument or agenda.

However, matricentric feminism—in its focus on a gendered experience that of mothering (and the related ones of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding)—does force us to address the thorny issue of gender difference. Feminist theory, with the notable exception of cultural-difference feminism, positions gender difference as central to, if not the cause of, women’s oppression. Liberal feminists advocate what has been called “sameness feminism,” wherein women become more like men; radical-libertarian feminists promote

androgyny; and poststructuralist feminists seek to destabilize and deconstruct gender difference all together. Indeed, as Niamh Moore notes, “challenging biological determinism and other essentialisms has been a crucial policy strategy for feminists” (qtd. in Stephens 141). Thus, because feminists are uncomfortable with anything that underscores gender difference and suggests essentialism (i.e., men are naturally this way, and women are naturally this way), motherhood becomes problematic, as it more than anything else is what marks gender difference: only biological females can biologically become mothers. And because gender difference is seen as structuring and maintaining male dominance, many feminists seek to downplay and disavow anything that marks this difference—the main one, of course, being motherhood. For many feminists, to call attention to women’s specific gendered subjectivity as a mother is to subscribe to an essentialist viewpoint: acknowledging and affirming what is seen as marking and maintaining gender difference and, hence, the oppression of women. Indeed, as Julie Stephens writes in *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking*: “the primary focus of the second-wave feminist movement has been one long struggle against essentialism, whether this be biological, cultural or ideological. This makes any discussion linking women and care, or mothering and nurture, particularly troubling” (10). Consequently, as Stephens goes on to argue, “any activism done in the name of the maternal will be unsettling, particularly for those who perceive feminism as primarily a struggle against essentialism” (141).

I agree that gender is constructed—sex does not equal gender or as Simone de Beauvoir said “one is not born a woman but made one”—and thus people cannot define themselves or limit their lives to that which is socially constructed by gender. However, I likewise believe that feminists should not disavow motherhood to facilitate this destabilizing of gender. I believe it is possible to simultaneously argue that gender is constructed and that motherhood matters and that maternity is integral to a mother's woman's sense of self and her experience of the world. In my view, the apprehension over gender difference is the elephant in the room of academic feminism; it has shut down necessary and needed conversations about important—and yes gendered—biological dimensions of women’s lives: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and mothering. Mothers can no longer talk about their reproductive identities and experiences without being called essentialist. But maternal scholars do not reduce women’s sense of self to motherhood, nor do they say that this is what makes her a woman or that motherhood is more important than other variables that constitute her self. They say only that motherhood matters and that it is central and integral to understanding the lives of women as mothers. Thus, mothers need a feminism, in both theory and practice, for and about their identities and experiences as mothers.

Direction for Future Research

Motherhood studies as an area of scholarship,” Kawash writes, “is on precarious grounds: ignored by mainstream academic feminism, fragmented and discontinuous in the academic margins” (986). In making this argument, Kawash uses as her example York University’s refusal to provide institutional funding for the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) and the resulting closure of the association in 2010. Kawash writes that “the fact that neither the university system nor the institution of academic feminism appears willing to support a scholarly community and research program that explicitly foregrounds mothering is discouraging” (986). However, as Kawash goes on to argue, “but the fact is, even before York pulled the plug, the established academic community completely ignored the work of ARM. Neither O’Reilly’s work nor the Demeter volumes were reviewed in any significant feminist journals, and JARM had few institutional subscribers” (986). Thus, “while motherhood has been an energizing topic in the past decade,” Kawash argues, “there has been little boundary-crossing movement between academic and popular discussion, and the movement between feminist studies and motherhood studies has been only in one direction” (986). But Kawash concludes with the following:

Feminist theorists, scholars, and writers, as well as feminist mother activists, have a lot to say to each other, and a lot to learn from each other, about motherhood. Motherhood studies needs the perspectives and commitments of feminism as well as the institutional resources that feminism and women’s studies have accumulated over the past four decades. At the same time, feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities. (986-87)

Indeed, in the words of maternal theorist Patrice DiQuinzio, since “mothering in all its diverse forms remains an important aspect of women’s lives and that decisions about whether, when, and how to mother continues to face almost all women, feminism cannot claim to give an adequate account of women’s lives and to represent women’s needs and interests if it ignores the issue of mothering” (“Mothering and Feminism” 545).

Conclusion

In this article, I have introduced matricentric feminism, discussed the disavowal of motherhood in academic feminism, and suggested possible explanation for its exclusion. However, despite the disavowal of motherhood in academic feminism, we do have a feminist theory and movement of our own. But matricentric feminism must be more than acknowledged as a

legitimate, viable, and independent school of feminist thought; it must be integrated into mainstream academic feminism. But how do we accomplish this? We need more women doing motherhood scholarship and more mother professors in academe. We demand that matricentric feminism have a chapter of its own as do other schools of feminism theory—queer, global, womanist, third wave—in our feminist theory readers, that introduction to women’s studies courses and textbooks include sections on motherhood, that women’s journals and conferences include more papers on motherhood, and that more books on motherhood are reviewed. We must continuously challenge the conflation of mothering with motherhood within academic feminism as well as counter the association of matricentric feminism with gender essentialism. And decisively and urgently, we must interrupt the received narrative of academic feminism—in particular its normalization of the genderless and autonomous subject—in order to foreground the centrality of women’s reproductive identities and lives and the importance of care in our larger culture. Indeed, as Ann Marie Slaughter comments, “the bottom-line message is that we are never going to get gender equality between men and women unless we value the work of care as much as we value paid work. That’s the unfinished business” (qtd. in McCarthy). Finally and most important, we must demand that matricentric feminists be recognized and respected as the feminists that they are and that their feminism, that of matricentric feminism, have a room of its own in the larger home of academic feminism.

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One Is Not Born But Rather Becomes a Mother: Claiming the Maternal in Women and Gender Studies

In their dominant, institutionalized iterations within the field of women and gender studies, as well as in much feminist theory, the concepts of female empowerment, self-direction, and gender equality are still largely based on Western neoliberal views of individualism, self, and agency. Notwithstanding important theoretical interventions from the field of motherhood studies and a recent strand of feminist theory and philosophy promoting a relational understanding of identity, self and agency, full equality in mainstream feminism still “requires that women be liberated from the consequences of their bodies, namely the ability to bear children” (Fox-Genovese 21). The aim of this article is to contribute to work seeking to deconstruct forms of essentialism embedded in women and gender studies and feminist theory by bringing together feminist critiques of Western conceptions of self and identity and the theory of the maternal articulated in motherhood studies. My hope is to make apparent the distance between the body in its reproductive function (pregnancy and birth) on the one hand, and the performativity embedded in the maternal role, on the other. By discussing maternal work as separate from pregnancy and birth, I wish to highlight the socially constructed nature of expectations and ideas associated with maternity and reveal that the often neglected agency involved in taking on and performing the role of mother.

Introduction: Disclaiming the Maternal in Mainstream Feminism

Simone De Beauvoir’s famous dictum “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (301) has been essential to the development of twentieth-century feminist thought. In implying the separation between sex and gender, she makes clear the social construction of the category of “woman” as a set of attitudes and behaviours developed gradually within particular social and

historical contexts. In stating that “woman is not a completed reality, it is rather a becoming” (31), De Beauvoir compels us to acknowledge that sex and the body are not enough to define one as a woman. Since then, feminist theory has adopted this antiessentialist perspective, arguing for an epistemology built on deconstructing oppressive patriarchal structures that delimit gender. Feminist epistemology has been striving to replace positivist models of inquiry with what Donna Haraway (1988) calls “feminist objectivity,” or situated forms of knowledge, where knowledge and truth are understood as partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational.

By replacing the word “woman” with “mother” in my title, I wish to draw attention to the fact that although this antiessentialist orientation regarding the category of woman routinely informs feminist inquiry, its implications and relevance for the category of mother continue to be ignored. This exclusion is most striking in academic or mainstream feminism—the kind of feminism that has been institutionalized through women and gender studies departments and programs. The absence through exclusion is not necessarily new, although it has been strongly affirmed over the last two decades.

In tracing the vexed relationship between feminism and motherhood from the early twentieth century until the 1990s, Ann Snitow identifies the persistence of “the taboo on speaking the life of the mother” well into that decade. The extent of this issue and the absence of motherhood and the maternal in feminist theory since the 1990s has been articulated by Samira Kawash. Remarking on the absence and lack of serious feminist engagement with motherhood, she argues that “feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities” (997). The keen relevance of Kawash’s insight notwithstanding, matters have not changed significantly. In her 2016 book on matricentric feminism, Andrea O’Reilly documents the disavowal and virtual disappearance of motherhood in twenty-first century academic feminism by examining the syllabi of introductory women and gender studies courses, articles, and book reviews published in women’s studies journals, introduction to women and gender studies textbooks, and papers presented at the National Women’s Studies Association (185-86). Significantly, textbooks designed to introduce students to the field of women and gender studies published over the last ten years and purporting to ask challenging questions about knowledge production and representation within the field, also show a gap in their material and scope as far as the subject of maternity (Takševa, “Motherhood Studies”).

Even when it is not articulated as an absence, the feminist debate about motherhood ends in a kind of theoretical impasse, which as Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, rests on being able to articulate “indictments of the negative aspects of the role women play as mothers” but without any “consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system” (434-35). Mainstream

feminist discourse is, in fact, still determined by universalist and essentialist accounts of motherhood and versions of the maternal that still “equate the feminine with the maternal” thereby assuming the “naturalisation of maternal identity in terms typical of patriarchal understandings of femininity” (DiQuinzio 10-11).

Although women and gender studies are no longer always synonymous with feminism, one of the dominant discursive lenses for examining women’s experience in the various disciplines that fall under the women and gender studies umbrella remains rooted in feminist principles: the fight for women’s empowerment and right to self-direction in individual as well as professional terms in conjunction with the pursuit of full equality with men. In this article, I argue that in their dominant, institutionalized iterations within the field of women and gender studies, as well as much of feminist theory, the concepts of empowerment, self-direction, and gender equality are still largely based on Western, neoliberal views of individualism, self, and agency. In this context, notwithstanding important theoretical interventions from the field of motherhood studies and a recent strand of feminist theory and philosophy promoting a more relational and complex understanding of identity, self, and agency, full equality in mainstream feminism still implies, and, indeed, “require[s] that women be liberated from the consequences of their bodies, notably the ability to bear children” (Fox-Genovese 21).

Within the mainstream feminist paradigm, the absence of the maternal bespeaks the perspective that the feminist empowerment project is essentially incompatible with the social and personal entanglements arising out of the maternal role. Embedded in this assumption is that maternal identity is understood in essentialist terms, as a category of existence rather than a performative role. My goal here is, therefore, to contribute to work that seeks to deconstruct this form of essentialism by bringing together feminist critiques of Western conceptions of self and identity, and the theory of the maternal articulated in motherhood studies. My hope is to make apparent the distance between the body in its reproductive function (pregnancy and birth) on the one hand, and the performativity embedded in the maternal role, on the other. Discussing the maternal in terms of performativity shows that the maternal role is primarily defined through the agency required to commit to the long-term care of children.

At the same time, in foregrounding the distance between the body and the maternal role, my intention is not to widen the space that allows the maternal body to become occluded and recede to the point of obliteration in favour of an objectified uterus interpreted as a temporary fetal container. The most advanced reproductive technologies that open our eyes to the world of the fetus within the womb are already performing this task by encouraging an understanding of the womb as a self-contained ecological system, only

peripherally attached to the rest of the maternal body and the subjectivity that animates it. By discussing maternal work as independent from pregnancy and birth, I wish to highlight the socially constructed nature of expectations and ideas associated with maternity and reveal the often neglected agency involved in taking on and performing the role of mother.

On the Politics of Exclusion and the Limits of Selfhood in Feminist Theory

De Beauvoir could clearly see the social and historical forces conspiring against women over time to create expectations for the performance of good or appropriate womanhood that have come to be accepted as inherent female qualities whose validity was justified through women's reproductive capacity. However, she herself failed to theorize motherhood and the maternal in similar terms. Even though throughout *The Second Sex* she outlines the host of cultural and social conditions that make motherhood oppressive and a source of misery to women, she continues to blame the female reproductive function itself rather than the patriarchal conditions that delimit it by claiming that in maternity "we continue to be ... enslaved" (157). Much of the impassioned antimotherhood rhetoric of the radical second wave and its more recent manifestations find their roots in this line of thought (see, for example, the work of T-Grace Atkinson; Firestone). Advances in reproductive technologies and the increasing number of gay and lesbian parents have made the choice to mother more readily apparent and accepted in a theoretical sense, but they have not resulted in a mainstream shift in the ways the maternal role is constructed.

Despite the apparent feminist commitment to collapsing the universal and essentialist category of woman, however, there have been signs that even this project is far from being finished or unproblematic. Transnational feminist theory and the work of feminists of colour in particular have revealed that the spectre of the unified female subject has played a defining role for the hegemonic feminist academy. As Chandra Mohanty points out in her book on Third World women and the politics of feminism, the academy's response to the challenge of its singular identity presented by racialized communities of resistance and intersectionality has been to "insist that these racialized categories were neither politically contingent nor valid; rather they were essentialist ways of imagining the female body" (5). The politics of exclusion Mohanty articulates is based on the hegemonic feminist projection of its own essentialism onto racialized others as a way to justify their marginal status within dominant feminist discourse.

The politics of exclusion of the maternal within hegemonic feminism functions along similar faultlines, and it consistently reveals that the category of mother within feminism is understood as neither politically contingent nor

particularly relevant to the larger feminist project. It seems that accepting motherhood studies within the fold of mainstream feminist agendas and curricula poses a challenge to the way in which that feminism articulates and sustains itself as an ideology and a politics. So despite the feminist epistemological investment in situated knowledge, and despite brilliant feminist critiques of the rational and masculine-coded bases of objective and universal knowledge in traditional Western philosophy, when it comes to dominant streams of feminist empiricism, the “knower” who is rooted in experience as a valid source of knowledge is still primarily an independent subject whose privileged *modus operandi* unfolds according to individualist principles. The particular kinds of situated and embodied ways of knowing that typify the maternal—rooted in emotional and relational interdependence and within a field of ongoing active consideration of the demands of another—are not consistent with the autonomous self’s primary desire to maintain self-direction in a patriarchal world populated by entangling commitments.

The claim that I am making, therefore, is that hegemonic, academic, or mainstream feminism rejects not only the misogynist heritage of positivism but also the maternal. The rejection is due to this feminism’s lingering orientation towards a preferred neoliberal selfhood understood in terms of individualism, and autonomy as an unencumbered capacity for self-direction. The politics of exclusion of the maternal from academic feminism is thus symptomatic of a larger feminist ideological investment in a concept of identity that alarmingly mirrors the disembodied, male and unencumbered Western model of the self. This model is to a large extent derived from the Kantian philosophy of the ethical subject, where the individual is the standard for understanding identity and whose objectivity and commitment to duty—or in the case of its feminist versions, commitment to equality and empowerment—is imperilled by social bonds and daily acts of care within patriarchal contexts (Willett et al.).

The ethical and moral subject of this philosophy depends on an understanding of the self that “isolate[s] the individual from personal and social relationships, and thus also from all biological and social forces” that make it dependent on others in myriad ways (Willett et al.). The neoliberal self, which combines the idealised subject of neoclassical liberal philosophy and economics, is defined as a “rational, self-interested actor” (Stedman Jones 2) for whom activity, self-reliance, and agency mark so-called success within the neoliberal economy (Verdouw 525). As a hegemonic mode of discourse, neoliberalism extends from the economic to all other spheres of life and shapes the ideologies that regulate not only the everyday but also the conditions through which mechanisms of power are exercised. As such, neoliberalism has profound effects on subjectivization (Verdouw 525) whose effects on academic feminist discourses and politics cannot be underestimated.

Neoliberal subjectivities shift the practices of the self and its particular modes of living to align them with its ethos and remake the subject as autonomous, self focused, and self-regulating. The agency of the neoliberal subject is realized through its independence and laudable pursuit of self-actualization. Neoliberalism is “privatisation” and individualisation “all the way down” (Read 35); it is the extension of private market logic into multiple environments, such as health, policy and education, where the cultural trope of individual responsibility, autonomy and self-reliance underlies its institutional logics (Mori). In other words, in the moral theory extrapolated from these values, society is made up of “independent autonomous units who cooperate only when the terms of cooperation are such as to make it further the ends of each party” (Barry 166). This view is echoed in a number of feminist accounts, such as Martha Nussbaum’s, where “the flourishing of human beings one by one is both analytically and normatively” taken to exist prior to the flourishing of any group (62).

The tacit feminist investment in neoliberal subjectivities leads to the devaluation of the relational and, therefore, the maternal. Much feminist writing has critiqued dominant economic and moral theories, although most of this writing tends to respond to liberal individualism rather than the most recent iterations of the neoliberal variety. In defining care as an alternative global ethic, Fiona Robinson, for example, observes that giving primacy to values such as autonomy, independence, noninterference, and self-determination results in the “systematic devaluing of notions of interdependence, and positive involvement in the lives of others” (7). Diana Meyers’s work has contributed to feminist revisions of liberal autonomy by her insistence that autonomy should be defined by closer observation of the lives of human subjects, particularly women, arguing against purely conceptual approaches. As well, the field of ethics of care that grew out of feminist rethinking of philosophy and moral theory in the 1960s has rearticulated the value of experience as a legitimate mode of knowing. Although not easily classifiable under something that can be called a unified feminist moral theory, as an area of study the ethics of care shares what Virginia Held has called “a basic commitment to eliminate gender bias in moral theorizing as well as elsewhere” (25).

But the conceptual and transformative pull of institutionalized neoliberal subjectivities within academic and institutionalized forms of feminism appears to be very strong. The maternal—as based on the work of care and rooted in a subjectivity that is structurally relational and characterized by vulnerability, exposure, and interdependence—stands as an undeniable “other” to the neoliberal model of preferred selfhood. Moreover, the feminist project of eliminating gender bias in economics, moral theory, philosophy and other areas of knowledge is crucially predicated on an understanding of gender as a category that is conceptually separate from sex and that, as such, can be

subjected to rigorous analytical investigations that are for the most part independent of the body. The maternal has remained outside this project precisely because in the popular as well as the feminist academic imaginary, it continues to be firmly tied to biology and the reproductive function of the female body. According to the logic of this imaginary, biology is, indeed, destiny—in this case, destiny that is defined not only through the oppression of women as mothers within patriarchy but also through their erasure from the very discourses that were supposed to recuperate their standing on the basis of their gender and lived experience. The institutionalization of even the most revolutionary discourses and movements results in their mechanization, their discursive ossification, and their distancing from the conceptual richness of core values that propelled the revolution in the first place. Feminism is not immune to this process, as evidenced by the erasure of the maternal from its institutionalized iterations.

Alternatives: Maternal Theory and How Mothers Are Made

One way to illustrate conceptualizations of the maternal as a performative role is to trace a trajectory of the development of maternal theory through important studies. There were several Anglo American women writers prior to women's right to vote in the USA, like Susanne La Follette and Charlotte Perkins Gillman, who made important observations about motherhood in this regard. In their work, they signal that it is not women's reproductive power per se or even the work of care itself that are the cause for women's subjugation but rather the specific conditions under which that care unfolds within a patriarchal context. In 1898, in *Women and Economics*, for example, Gillman correctly identifies problems with the institutions and systems that govern domestic life and prescribe maternal activity and behaviour. Arguing that women's human impulse to grow and to create was stifled because of a sexual and an economic dependence bred in patriarchal conditions relegating woman to the domestic sphere, Gilman observes that the type of motherhood resulting from these conditions is "more pathological than any other, more morbid, defective, irregular, diseased," since children grow up being "dominated by mothers who had never been allowed to grow to mental maturity" (qtd. in Dally 139). This is an important insight, but one that is not taken up with any seriousness by feminist writers until well after the women's liberation movement in the second half of the twentieth-century.

Two decades after DeBeauvoir's *Second Sex*, Adrienne Rich wrote *Of Woman Born* (1976), a landmark feminist study of motherhood that forms the basis for all subsequent scholarly investigations of the subject. Rich's is the first book-length study of the maternal that accords it serious, systematic attention

within the context of the women's liberation movement and feminist inquiry. Its greatest contribution rests on Rich's insight that motherhood is not a unitary concept naturally tied to the fact of reproduction—it is an institution. Rich observes that motherhood “is not the ‘human condition’ any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are”; instead, it is an institution that “has a history ... an ideology” (33). This leads Rich to postulate, for the first time, a crucial distinction between two meanings of motherhood. The aim of motherhood as an institution is to ensure that women's powers of reproduction and the potential contained within those powers, as well as women themselves, remain under male control (Rich 13). The other meaning of motherhood Rich identifies refers to the daily practice of mothering, which she defines as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children,” and which is not itself oppressive but can, in fact, be a source of joy for the mother and children.

Rich's separation between the institution and the experience of motherhood creates the theoretical space from which it becomes possible to articulate dominant and oppressive ideologies of motherhood. Its conceptual framework continues to facilitate discussions that separate woman's reproductive powers from her potential relationship to those powers—that is, to separate the capacity of the female body to conceive, be pregnant, and give birth, from her subjective orientation in the world and her experience of the maternal, apart from the institution. This space also created the possibility to articulate the extent to which particular aspects of the ideology of motherhood, decoupled from the reproductive function, oppress some or all mothers in a given sociopolitical context.

Ann Dally's 1982 book, *Inventing Motherhood*, deserves a particular mention in developing further the trajectory of inquiry opening with Rich's work. Dally begins from the important premise that “there have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented. Each subsequent age and society has defined in its own terms and imposed its own restrictions and expectations on mothers” (17). Dally's study shows the ways in which mothers have been made, not born, over the course of history; her study still contains some of the most insightful scholarship on fashions in mothering and childcare as well as that venerated thing called mother love. In a perspective that has not lost any of its currency, Dally points out that on the whole the women's liberation movement has been “seriously deficient” in the area of motherhood; it has done a great disservice “not only to mothers but to all women and to society in general,” as much modern feminist writing on the topic has been “superficial’ and has lacked an understanding and awareness “of its own deficiencies in this most important area of life” (165).

Bell hook's essay "Revolutionary Parenting," published in 1984 as part of her collection *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, also represents a very important moment in the development of maternal theory, as it articulates for the first time and from within the women's liberation movement racial biases when it comes to feminist debates on motherhood. hooks points out that motherhood and childrearing may be a locus of women's oppression and an impediment to women's liberation for white, middle-class, and college-educated women for whom motherhood resulted in confinement to the domestic sphere. But for Black women, who "from slavery to the present day ... in the U.S. have worked outside the home" (133), motherhood represented a uniquely humanising form of labour, not an oppressive reality that prevented them from being realized as women and human beings. hooks contributes to the analysis of motherhood as a particular role that is assigned to women and that women adopt on the basis of their race, class, and historical location rather than an essential category of being whose workings remain beyond the possibility of historicizing and theorizing.

Conceptually, hooks's perspective provides the basis for important feminist work on Black motherhood, such as that of Patricia Hill Collins, and paves the way for subsequent interrogations of the maternal across race, class, and culture. Collins's work in particular, as well as the work of scholars in Indigenous mothering, has demonstrated unequivocally the constructed nature of the maternal role by pointing out the ways in which the maternal is enacted within Black cultures. Within Black families, as Collins writes, mothering "was not a privatized nurturing occupation reserved for biological mothers" but a communal activity—one that encompasses at least the extended members of the family engaging in what she terms "othermothering" ("The Meaning of Motherhood" 277; *Black Feminist Thought* 178). In other words, individuals who undertook the care of children performed a maternal role. Similarly, work on Indigenous mothering reveals it to be a collective responsibility; in terms of community status, it is equivalent to any other work structurally important to the collective and performed by both birth mothers and othermothers, as well as other members of the community (Anderson).

Sara Rudick's 1989 book *Maternal Thinking* is another pivotal moment in the development of maternal theory. It is the first feminist study of mothering as experience; it asserts that the work of mothering and mother love are not instinctive but are the product of rational forms of thinking that the mother adopts in order to fulfil her maternal role. Rudick separates the biological act of giving birth from the activity of mothering itself, and defines this activity as grounded in the conscious commitment to providing daily care, nurture, and training to children who require this care. This definition frees considerations of motherhood from gender essentialism as well as biological determinism by making apparent that maternal care is a type of work that can

be performed by anyone, such as othermothers, adoptive mothers, as well as fathers. Through Rudick's book, it becomes fully possible in a philosophical way to conceive of the maternal and the work of mothering as degendered—as a cognitive and an emotional inclination that can be adopted by any woman (whether a biological mother or not), and any man (whether a biological father or not) who is willing to commit to this labour. Rudick's work shows that one becomes a mother primarily by choosing to commit to the long-term daily care of children rather than exclusively through pregnancy and the act of giving birth. The gendered connotations of the verb aside, this also means that anyone can choose to mother, regardless of sex and gender.

The establishment of the Association for Research in Mothering by Andrea O'Reilly in 1997, later to become the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, marks a pivotal moment in the development of motherhood studies as an area of research and scholarship. The association launched its own journal as well, with the aim to promote and make visible scholarship on motherhood. The creation of the association provided a formal platform for scholars, practitioners and activists working on the subject of motherhood, and facilitated their self-conscious engagement in building a field of study. In 2005, the association launched a publishing division, Demeter Press, with the publication of O'Reilly's *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Mothering, Feminism, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering*. In the following year, O'Reilly coined the term “motherhood studies” to acknowledge and demarcate scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate and autonomous discipline grounded in the theoretical tradition developed by Collins, Rich, and Rudick and as interdisciplinary in both scholarship and teaching (O'Reilly, *Rocking* 10).

In 2007, O'Reilly edited the first anthology or reader in maternal theory, *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, composed of fifty theoretical texts on mothers, motherhood, and mothering. In her book-length study, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, published in 2016, she brings together insights developed over a decade or more of her own and other scholarship on the maternal, and she calls for the further development of a particular kind of feminism that is devoted to the explorations of the maternal. The scholarship and practice of matricentric feminism as articulated by O'Reilly arise from the position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy; in her work it is understood that “feminism affords a woman a life, a purpose, and an identity outside and beyond motherhood, and it does not limit childrearing to the biological mother” (147).

It is of significant note that all of O'Reilly's scholarship, as well as the work of other scholars working on the maternal over the last two decades, is devoted to revealing the degree of distance between the biology of motherhood and the performativity embedded in the maternal role as constructed within particular sociocultural, economic, and political contexts (O'Reilly; Thurer;

Hays; DiQuinzio; Douglas and Michaels; Hayden and O'Brien Hallstein; Maushart; Smith; Stephens; Green). By critiquing the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood and the maternal role it proscribes, this scholarship shows that alternative ways of mothering are not only theoretically possible, but that women and others who have chosen to mother have been practicing them for a long time in different cultures and different historical periods. Such scholarship engages closely the conceptual crevices that have opened up by juxtaposing motherhood as a patriarchal institution against the lived experience of mothering of a wide diversity of mothers across time and location. These investigations shed light on overlooked forms of agency and resistance within dominant models of contemporary and historical motherhood, as well as establish a theoretical basis for exploring empowered and feminist forms of mothering.

Due to the significance and scope of this scholarship, it is no longer possible to speak of something called motherhood without carefully contextualizing the term. Cultural ideologies of motherhood in the Western tradition—as in any tradition—construct the image of the good mother and, thus, prescribe certain behaviours that are seen as appropriate and desirable for practicing good mothering. These ideologies also define the normative emotional framework that is supposed to govern the mother-child relationship (Takševa, “Mother Love”). The two major twentieth-century middle-class ideologies of motherhood prevalent in Anglo American contexts—intensive mothering and new momism—continue to reflect and embody the idealized nature of maternal love promulgated by traditional discourses on motherhood. New momism, for example, insists that “no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being 24/7, to her children” (Douglas and Michaels 619).

New momism is, in fact, founded upon another late twentieth-century middle-class ideology, which sociologist Sharon Hays has labelled intensive mothering. She defines it as a still dominant “gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children” and requiring that mothers think about their children at all times (Hays 22). Underscoring the mother’s constant cognitive, emotional, and physical preoccupation with her children as the basis of mother love and the consequent denial of any of the mother’s own immediate and long-term needs, interests, and desires, these ideologies are intolerant of and even hostile towards signs of ambivalence in mother-child relationships (Takševa, “Mother Love”).

In light of extensive scholarship on the subject of how mothers are made by the complex workings of patriarchal ideology, maternal scholars can now more fully understand the myriad unrealistic demands placed upon women by

patriarchal maternal roles in different time periods, including our own. The discourse of patriarchal, normative motherhood positions maternity as a basis of female identity; it presupposes that mothering is the work and responsibility of one person primarily (the woman), and it assumes that mothering is and should be natural or instinctive to women rather than the product of skill and conscious commitment (O'Reilly, *Matricentric* 14). Understanding the nature of sociocultural constructions of motherhood also allows us to understand the political utility of those cultural models to define the maternal in the context of unconditional love, self-sacrifice, and constant physical and psychic availability, which mothers have been required to possess in relation to their children and, frequently by extension, to the fathers of those children. As Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey point out, “current ideas about children as having needs to be met by a mother are not universal, timeless laws, but were developed in specific historical and political conditions,” which make mothering a function that is central to the operation of the modern state (226). As such, normative patriarchally defined motherhood marginalizes and renders illegitimate alternative mothering practices.

Along similar lines to feminist scholarship that has worked to debunk the corollary concepts of the good woman vs. the bad woman, maternal theory has put forward numerous analyses of so-called good motherhood alongside motherhood constructed as bad (Byvelts and Jackson; Hughes Miller et al; Buchanan; McDonald Harker; Filax and Taylor; Bromwich and Eljudpovic; Wong; and Ladd-Taylor and Umansky). These works examine motherhood and mothering across a number of different precarious contexts, such as social exclusion, madness, disability, domestic violence, and incarceration. By focusing on the contexts within which mothering occurs and the structures that constrain mothering choices, this work demonstrates how various patriarchal social discourses and institutions construct bad mothers. These works also show that the constructed dangerous or bad mother continues to trouble major institutional areas—such as law, governance, economy, and child protection services—in ways that reveal why society remains invested in marginalizing mothers instead of seriously addressing the numerous, interconnecting obstacles they face. At the same time, these works record multiple scenarios of maternal resistance and agency, despite oppressive circumstances. Such theoretical interventions reveal that the same interlocking systems of patriarchal oppression that seek to mould and shape the category of good womanhood also come to bear on what the dominant discourse represents and recognizes as the category of good motherhood.

Finally, in terms of alternative conceptualizations of selfhood and agency, a new area of feminist scholarship rooted in explorations of love as well as the ethic of care on individual, social and global levels, has been deconstructing essentialist views of motherhood and providing an alternative to neoliberal

subjectivities (Gilligan; Noddings; Tronto; Bryson; Lowe; Overall; Held; Baraitser; Cavarero). Instead of emphasizing personal identity and agency as fixed, autonomous, and unitary, these works put forwards a different kind of preferred self. This self is relational, is embodied in a complex but loving relationship between mother and child, and is rooted in an understanding of relationships that are not only interpreted in terms of biology or a power differential but also in the context of openness, reciprocity, and structural interdependence. Empirically grounded analyses detailing forms of empowered mothering as well as theoretical studies of feminist mothering (hooks; Hill Collins; Anderson; Bourassa et al.; Horwitz; O'Reilly; Green; Linker; Copper; Gibson) have redefined patriarchal modes of motherhood. They demonstrate that the goal of empowered mothering, “to confer to mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy and advocacy-activism” (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 69), is both in theory and practice consistent with broader feminist goals of empowerment.

Such substantial developments in maternal theory have established a line of inquiry that theorizes individual as well as collective types of maternal subjectivity that can be examined alongside, but also as separate from, critiques of the patriarchal institution of motherhood. They have revealed mothering in all of its diverse complexity and opened up the possibility of empowering mothers in their carework by outlining the possible terms of maternal empowerment within a broad feminist context. They have politicized motherwork and continue to recuperate and reposition its practice outside of privatized sphere of the domestic. Most importantly, they have demonstrated that a mother is not born but created in the image of dominant ideologies and that the maternal role is performed in the context of social, political, and legal discourses that also shape other identities.

Conclusion: Politicizing Maternal Exclusions From Mainstream Feminism

Feminist scholarly practices reflected in mainstream, institutionalized forms of feminism and women and gender studies programs, departments, and curricula, as with most other forms of scholarly and institutional practices, are political, discursive, and ideological. Because of this, they are inscribed with a particular positional power to produce authoritative definitions of the field and to shape the political agenda regarding what belongs and does not belong within its scope. This particular positional power makes mainstream feminist iterations hegemonic. In writing about knowledge production and the recreation of preferred subjectivities within hegemonic feminism, Mridula Nath Chackraborty argues the following:

Hegemonic feminism's prioritization of sex over race has been characterized by—and is symptomatic of—its anxiety over race, racial identity politics and racialized essentialism. This anxiety, in turn marks itself white, neutral and normative.... Hegemonic feminism derives its very definition and understanding of its subjectivity from the idea of difference. Whether it is the New Woman engaged in its imperial mission of civilizing the heathen woman, or the neo-colonial feminist invested in bringing liberty and freedom to the veiled Islamic one, hegemonic feminism imagines itself only by creating its Other (101, 103-104).

Chackraborty's assertion that hegemonic feminism can imagine itself only by imagining its "other" bears significance for the present context, as her critique can be applied to its exclusion of motherhood studies from its mainstream agendas. Motherhood and the maternal have come to function as one of hegemonic feminism's "others"—an othering that as a discursive and institutional practice legitimizes the reproduction of its preferred subjectivities. By marginalizing, ignoring, and side lining decades of maternal theory that has deconstructed essentialist notions about the maternal, hegemonic feminism "transcodes political practice to reproduce exclusionary forms of knowledge" (102) and betrays its tacit and paradoxical alliance with modern, Western, and individualist conception of the self, with its accompanying implied devaluation of caregiving. Despite professing the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion in a field "that is at the forefront of critical thinking about inequalities and social justice" (Hobbs and Rice, xvii) and introductory textbooks promising to rethink the foundational assumptions within the field of women and gender studies, academic feminism continues to ignore the maternal. The continued elisions of motherhood and maternal theory from academic feminism continue to transmit unambiguous messages about the incompatibility of the maternal and feminist identity as a deeply ingrained schema that continues to structure attitudes and perceptions. Continuing to essentialize motherhood and maternity serves the purpose of protecting the imaginary boundaries of hegemonic feminism's ideological project.

Mainstream feminist practice must recognize that just as with a woman, a mother is not born but is made. It is time for curricula in women and gender studies programs and departments to reflect that there have always been mothers, but that motherhood was invented. It is time to recognize that the universal and essential category of mother exists only within the fictional landscapes of patriarchy, and that the traits traditionally associated with it are socially constructed through specific patriarchal ideologies and practices. Finally, it is time that academic feminism aligns its aims and curricula with important developments in feminist philosophy and maternal theory that challenge the view that the maternal role and caregiving curtail the exercise of

autonomy and self-determination.

Early feminist writers examined issues of gender bias in traditional social and political institutions. By asking the question “who benefits?” they demonstrated that the mainly unspoken practices of gender-based exclusion and discrimination favoured the interests of men (Meyers, *Philosophical Feminism* 2). Now it is time for us, as maternal scholars and as feminists, to ask the question “who benefits?” from excluding motherhood studies from mainstream feminist and women and gender studies agendas.

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Access to a Basic Income: Exploring a Matricentric Feminist Approach to Poverty Alleviation for Mothers in Ontario

While the literature on the nexus of poverty and motherhood is substantial, there is a dearth of scholarship exploring the intersection of basic income, poverty, and mothering. This article explores a matricentric feminist approach to poverty alleviation by means of access to a basic income. Such an approach recognizes that women, and mothers specifically, tend to be disadvantaged under current patriarchal, social and economic relations. Within this article, we consider the implications of basic income for mothers by exploring the merits and limitations of this approach to income security in several different domains. As such, we explore the impacts of basic income on mothers in relation to safe and affordable housing, quality childcare, and the overall health and wellbeing of mothers and their children.

Introduction

Notwithstanding the dramatic economic gains realized in the lives of Canadian lone mothers over the past few decades, the relative disadvantage of this population remains unchanged (Evans, “Lone Mothers”); lone mothers continue to be among those most likely to experience poverty in Canada (Yeo et al.). This phenomenon is not new but rather reflects the deeply embedded oppressive social structures and processes that privilege certain groups while disadvantaging others (Smith-Carrier). Scholars have long recognized the vast ill effects of poverty, including poor health, increased stressors, food insecurity (Raphael, *Social Determinants*), a lack of safety, an increased likelihood of homelessness, and a lower life expectancy (Mikkonen and Raphael). In fact, poverty, according to the World Health Organization, is the single most important determinant of health and wellbeing. Researchers have also identified that the experience of poverty among mothers is unique

(Benbow et al., “OPRS”). However, many proposed and enacted strategies for poverty reduction for mothers, among other groups, have been largely unsuccessful (Benbow et al., “OPRS”; Smith-Carrier; Smith-Carrier and Lawlor), largely because they fail to tackle the root causes of poverty—namely, a lack of income due to precarious work, rising costs of housing and material goods, and dwindling social supports (Smith-Carrier et al., “Food Is a Right”). Poverty reduction strategies introduced provincially across Canada have tended to focus primarily on employment readiness and training initiatives—under the dubious assumption that incentives are needed to compel people to work (Pasma)—although these typically only prepare women for the low-wage labour force, where precarious, contractual, seasonal, and unemployment or underemployment are the norm (Vosko). There is no guarantee that the work (even in full-time positions) will render a livable wage. The majority of minimum wage workers are women (MacEwen), yet they remain in poverty. Thus, most women experiencing poverty in Canada are, in fact, working (Fleury and Fortin). A poverty reduction strategy aimed principally at promoting paid employment alone, without recognizing the nature and quality of the precarious Canadian labour market, does little to address the financial insufficiency of the working poor. This reality is particularly true for lone mothers, who have additional costs associated with the “second shift” (Hochschild and Machung) of their care work—for example, the high cost of childcare (Macdonald and Friendly).

A more dignified form of poverty alleviation has been proposed throughout the ages by a litany of leaders (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr., Thomas Paine, and Franklin Roosevelt): a basic income (BI) guarantee. This article explores the intersection of basic income, poverty, and mothering in Canada, and outlines the potential implications of a BI for mothers by exploring the merits and limitations of adopting this approach in several different domains (i.e., safe and affordable housing, childcare, and health and wellbeing). Drawing from a matricentric feminist lens, we recognize that mothers, and lone mothers specifically, tend to be disadvantaged under current patriarchal, social and economic relations.

Theoretical Lens

Women, mothers, and lone mothers specifically have historically been over-represented among those living in poverty in Canada (although this has fluctuated somewhat according to the prevailing economic and labour conditions of the day (Evans, “(Not) Taking Account”). Although an individual explanation of poverty would attribute it to faults within the individual (i.e., the lone mother), evidence suggests that a systemic understanding may be more helpful (Reuter et al.). The overrepresentation of

lone mothers in poverty derives from various systemic factors (Smith-Carrier et al., “Food Is a Right”), including their social location as well as the corollary of occupying axes of identity (based on gender, age, race/ethnicity, newcomer status, disability, Indigeneity, and so forth); they are recurrently subjected to oppression in an inherently patriarchal neoliberal society (reflecting a penchant for free-market capitalism). This clustering of disadvantages (Raphael, *Poverty in Canada*) exposes lone mothers to increasingly harmful health, social, and economic outcomes (Smith-Carrier).

Drawing from the work of Andrea O’Reilly, we adopt the theoretical lens of matricentric feminism to guide our analysis. Such a lens recognizes that although feminism has evolved over time to consider the specific experiences and intersections of women, attention to mothering and motherhood has remained largely peripheral within women’s studies and variants of feminist theorizing. Likely associated with the discomfort with all matters maternal—an assumed site of women’s oppression and source of patriarchy—prevailing feminist scholarship has actively disavowed motherhood, negating it as a central locus of women’s empowerment and agency. Yet significant difference remains between the institution of motherhood and women’s experiences of mothering (O’Reilly). As O’Reilly succinctly argues, “The term ‘motherhood’ refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, whereas the word ‘mothering’ refers to women’s experiences of mothering, and is female defined and potentially empowering to women” (201). Moreover, whereas motherhood is understood to be socially and historically constituted, mothering is positioned as a practice, not an identity. Thus, matricentric feminism is “a feminism developed from and for the specific experiences and concerns of mothers” (O’Reilly 185). It is a fitting extension of intersectional theory (Crenshaw), recognizing the multiple and compounding structures of privilege and oppression that shape social positioning and life experiences (Knudsen). In this way, matricentric feminism recognizes how the practice and experience of mothering intersects with axes of identities, such as those pertaining to, *inter alia*, gender, race, and class. As such, the exploration of a BI for mothers living in poverty is well suited to a matricentric feminist analysis.

What Is a BI?

Everyone should have the right to an adequate standard of living (United Nations). Aligning with this fundamental human right, a BI is a payment made to individuals to ensure that everyone in society has income security. The principles of BI, according to its proponents, include (a) adequacy—the monetary payment should be sufficient to have one’s basic needs met; (b) autonomy—the provision of BI should offer people more opportunities in life

and the ability to make their own choices; (c) dignity—a BI should be a nonstigmatized form of income security; (d) nonconditionality—a BI should have few to no conditions for determining eligibility; and (e) universality of access—a BI should be allocated to any individual in society who requires it in order for their basic needs to be met. A BI should also be provided in regular, reliable payments, offering individuals and families predictability and security. Providing a BI through the extant tax system would ensure confidentiality, assuring that benefit receipt would not be susceptible to stigma (Smith-Carrier and Green). Importantly for mothers in general, and lone mothers specifically, a BI would “loosen the earnings-income link by providing an income to each individual that is not conditional upon fulfilling employment-related obligations” (Evans “Lone Mothers” 46).

Successful Examples of BI

The implementation of a BI could be realized through a variety of mechanisms using the existing tax structure in Canada. It could be provided through the current constellation of income security programs by expanding eligibility criteria—for example, by lowering the age requirements for pension programs, such as Old Age Security (OAS) or Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), making an income test, not age, the key criterion for eligibility (Emery et al.), or providing a new benefit to replace existing social assistance programs and boutique tax benefits, aimed primarily at those in the upper income rungs (Smith-Carrier and Green). Some have argued that a BI has already been extended to certain populations—for example, to seniors through a myriad of pension-related programs. Recent data from Statistics Canada indicate that poverty in Canada has declined. One of the reasons cited for this decrease is the bolstering of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), a key feature of the federal Poverty Reduction Strategy introduced in 2018. The enhanced CCB is a form of BI for families, providing some with income sufficient to lift them above the poverty line (Smith-Carrier and Knezevic). This approach is consistent with research conducted by Bill Jordan in the UK about the viability of tax credits in providing necessary income provisions to address poverty. Increases to the CCB could be further expanded to provide a fully adequate BI for families while also recognizing that lone mothers bear a disproportionate burden of costs relative to sole individual or dual-income households, particularly in instances where childcare is necessary.

Some of the contention surrounding the provision of a BI in the mainstream milieu is derived from a lack of clarity related to how to effectively structure and implement it. A number of models have been described in the literature, yet three mechanisms appear most prominent. The first is a negative income tax (NIT) or income-tested BI, whereby a BI is offered only to those whose

income falls below a given threshold, using a sliding scale to determine eligibility (i.e., as one's income rises, their benefit decreases). The GIS is an example of an income-tested benefit program. The second is a universal BI, or demogrant, in which all individuals within a given population receive the same flat-rate payment at established regular intervals. An earlier version of OAS is an example of a demogrant program, although changes made in 1989 introduced claw backs for high income earners (Young). And the third is a BI provided as a refundable tax credit, similar to the Goods and Services Tax/Harmonized Sales Tax (GST/HST), which provides, typically quarterly, payments to eligible individuals in the form of a tax refund (Smith-Carrier and Green). In whatever form a BI is adopted, it should aim to recognize the principle of adequacy; it must be sufficient to meet one's basic needs. Canada has recently introduced its first official poverty line, the Market Basket Measure (MBM), as part of its newly released poverty reduction strategy (Government of Canada). Thus, to reflect this principle, the benefit level should aim to meet, if not exceed, this measure of low income. This is particularly important for lone mothers who have additional financial needs associated with raising children, which may be overlooked should a BI take the form of a demogrant—an argument similarly made for disabled people (Smith-Carrier et al., “Disability Support Program”).

There is now a substantial literature base supporting BI internationally. Evidence from conditional and unconditional cash transfer programs and various pilot projects on NIT/BI experiments is massive and growing (e.g., Canada, US, Mexico, India, as well as many Latin American and African countries). Many studies document positive (health, social, education, etc.) outcomes associated with the income security provided through a BI (Davala et al.; Forget, “No Poverty”). Indeed, as a result of the BI-related programs introduced through the OAS and GIS, Canada has seen poverty among older adults decrease from 36.9 percent in 1971 to 3.9 percent in 1995 (Conference Board of Canada), virtually wiping out poverty for this population at that time, although the minor increases to these programs over time have not adequately kept pace with the rising cost of living (Smith-Carrier and Green).

The Case of Ontario's BI Pilot

In 2016, the Ontario Government, led by then-Premier Kathleen Wynne, implemented a Basic Income Pilot Project to test the effectiveness of a BI to reduce poverty in the province. Four thousand people, across multiple city sites, were enrolled in the pilot treatment group and were slated to receive a BI for three years, with evaluations conducted periodically throughout the period. Midway into the implementation of the project, the newly elected premier, Doug Ford, leader of the Progressive Conservative party, abruptly cancelled

the project. While some in the Ford camp argued that the pilot was “failing” (Jeffords), one of the reasons cited directly by Ford was that if the program were to be scaled across the province, the cost would be astronomical (see CBC News). This reasoning suggests that the government was less motivated by fears of its potential failure as its demonstrated success, and what that would mean for the government should it be pressured by the public to implement the program province wide.

An evaluation conducted by the Basic Income Canada Network (BICN) shows that the pilot was, in fact, working. Of the four hundred respondents surveyed by BICN, 45 percent indicated they experienced fewer health problems; 32 percent were able to access dental work; 41 percent bought medications they had not been able to afford previously; 17 percent saw the number of medications they needed decrease; 88 percent stated that the BI reduced their stress and anxiety; and 73 percent said it reduced their depression. In addition, 28 percent indicated they had stopped needing to visit the food bank because of the pilot; 32 percent went back to school; and 20 percent launched or expanded their own business (BICN; Paling).

BI and Mothers

Using a matricentric feminist lens, informed by O’Reilly, we explore the implications of mothers’ access to a BI as an effective poverty alleviation strategy. Specifically, we examine its potential impact as it relates to: (a) the promotion of safe and affordable housing, and the ability to leave an abusive partner; (b) the expansion of childcare options; and (c) improved health and wellbeing for mothers and their children living in poverty.

Safe and Affordable Housing

Housing is recognized as a basic human right (United Nations), yet mothers living in poverty face myriad barriers in accessing adequate, secure, and affordable housing. Across Canada, the ability to obtain affordable housing generally ensues after a lengthy wait on subsidized (rent-geared-to-income [RGI]) waitlists, which in some areas, has an expected wait time of twenty years. Waitlists for similar units within the same complex rented at market value (i.e., not RGI) are much shorter or are nonexistent (Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation, 2013). Thus, the protracted wait time for subsidized housing demonstrates the magnitude of the low-income housing crisis and the fundamental need for affordable housing in Canada. The plight of mothers in acquiring adequate affordable housing is also reflected in homeless shelter statistics, in which families, most often headed by lone mothers, are a significant and growing population of homeless persons (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada).

Furthermore, even when RGI housing is accessed in a timely manner, it is often associated with other barriers, such as those related to social housing projects, or more specifically, the ghettoization of neighbourhoods. These housing options raise serious safety concerns, as reported by mothers (Benbow, “Mothers”; Benbow et al., “Spaces of Exclusion”). In fact, in a study exploring social exclusion and homelessness in Southwestern Ontario, one young mother expressed the following: “Living in any hood is not safe, not somewhere you want to live or be. How can you raise your children in housing projects? ... It sucks because people go into these housing projects because they want their life to be better, but they are putting their life at risk. Do I want to die? ... No!” (Benbow et al., “Spaces of Exclusion” 5). Social housing accommodation has been associated with an increased exposure to the drug and sex trades, violence, gang culture, and higher criminal activity (Davis and Appleby) relative to nonsocial housing options. The provision of a BI would ensure that mothers have the necessary financial resources to not only increase their housing choices within and beyond current subsidized options but to also potentially decrease the need for social housing units, with their cognate issues, for mothers and their families.

While waitlisted for affordable housing, mothers typically seek housing in the private market and are often forced to settle for inadequate housing (e.g., housing in dilapidated conditions and in need of repairs), unsuitable housing (e.g., insufficient space or bedrooms for their families), and unaffordable housing (e.g., shelter costs greater than 30 percent of the household’s pretax income (Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation). A BI would ensure mothers’ access to adequate housing options and would equip them with the financial wherewithal to improve their housing prospects. This is of particular importance to mothers, as they are not only responsible for their own safety but also that of their children. Natasha Jategoonkari and Pamela Ponik document the deplorable conditions associated with private market rentals for mothers living poverty, such as exposure to asbestos or the absence of locks on doors and windows—conditions that place mothers’ and their children’s health and safety at risk. Moreover, a BI would engender more housing choices that meet families’ bedroom and space requirements. Many mothers experiencing poverty live in overcrowded accommodations, where they are forced to get creative to construct their family sleeping arrangements, such as having family members regularly sleep in closets or on couches (Jategoonkari and Ponik). Such overcrowding has been identified as having short- and long-term negative effects on children’s wellbeing (Solari and Mare) and mothers’ mental health (Benbow et al., “Spaces of Exclusion”). A BI may also provide increased choice in neighbourhood selection and offer accommodation closer to important amenities (e.g., schools, health services, child resources, and so forth).

Access to finances (income) is one of the most significant factors determining whether a woman stays or leaves an abusive relationship (Wendt and Hornosty). With access to a BI, mothers would have more choice if and when fleeing intimate partner violence as well as in choosing a housing neighbourhood that ensures the family's access to safety. Thus, a BI would equip mothers with the finances necessary to leave an abusive partner.

Childcare

In 2017, the cost of childcare in the vast majority of Canadian cities, urban and rural alike, rose faster than the rate of inflation; many reported lengthy waitlists and fees that were “far too expensive for many” (Macdonald and Friendly 5). Currently, only 20 percent of Canadian children have access to licensed daycares, leaving large swathes of babies and toddlers in unlicensed private facilities with little regulatory oversight (CBC News). In the absence of accessible and affordable childcare options, children are placed in less than ideal care arrangements (Hennessy), and women's labour force mobility is restrained (White). With quality childcare, both children and their mothers are better able to thrive socially, physically, and economically (McCain et al.). Consequently, the provision of a BI for mothers would invariably provide them more childcare choices. With adequate financial resources, mothers could contemplate different employment options (i.e., to stay at home for a time or work full-time and/or part-time) and possibly have more flexibility in their determining their hours of work, including both standard and non-standard work arrangements, with resources to pay public and/or private childcare providers (e.g., other family members or trusted neighbours). Some debate in the BI/NIT literature has ensued regarding the possibility of BI creating a disincentive for mothers to work, under the assumption that they would simply stay at home with their children and not pursue paid employment opportunities. This proposition, however, is not borne out from the current evidence. Evelyn Forget (*Basic Income*) argues the following:

The only women for whom basic income may create an incentive to leave the labour market are the low-waged. Some will be better off financially not working than they would be working, especially when they take childcare into consideration. How is the world better off if a woman pays someone else to care for her children while she struggles at a low-paid job? ... Low-waged, insecure work will always exist, and when unskilled women re-enter the workforce after their children grow up. (110)

Health and Wellbeing

Income is the single most important determinant of health, as the lack of it results in a multitude of adverse health consequences (Raphael, *Social Determinants*). The BI experiment tested in Dauphin, Manitoba, in the 1970s resulted in significant improvements in individuals' health outcomes, including decreasing the hospitalization rate by 8.5 percent in four years alone, which amounted to significant savings in healthcare dollars. BI was also found to encourage security and stability, reduce stress, and improve the mental health of its recipients (Forget, "No Poverty"). This is particularly relevant for mothers; newcomer mothers, racialized mothers, mothers with mental illness, mothers with a disability, and teen moms are among those who experience increased economic vulnerability due to structural inequalities (Benbow, "Mothers"; Jolly). Furthermore, research indicates a strong connection between maternal and child health outcomes (Larson; Fitzsimons et al.; Woolhouse et al.). Thus, when a mother is healthy, she is better able to promote the health of her children. Expanding the financial resources extended to mothers through increases to the CCB or other tax-related programs would promote the health and wellbeing of mother and child, including improving the food security of these families (Emery et al.). This, in turn, would ultimately enhance a mother's overall quality of life as well as that of her family. Yet a BI, depending on how the program is implemented by the government, could have disparate outcomes for mothers, depending on their intersectional identities. For example, a mother with a disability who because of her impairment is not able to engage in paid work may require more income assistance than a mother without such an impairment. A mother who is working for wages may simply not be making enough income to bring her above the poverty line; a minor increase to her income earnings through even a minimal BI may be sufficient.

Limitations of BI

BI is not a panacea; it would not directly remedy the shortage of quality licensed childcare facilities available to mothers, nor would it expressly address the rising cost of childcare fees across Canada. However, it could indirectly impact the childcare market resulting in greater demand from families with the purchasing power to pay for better quality care, potentially raising the standard of care for all.

Furthermore, although there is potential for long-term transformation, the provision of a BI will not remedy the current shortages in healthcare (Verma et al.) and mental health services (Canada Mental Health Association) that are pervasive across Canada. Demand on the health and mental health sector is immense, and is not likely to change in the near future. Although the

reduction and even elimination of poverty wrought through a BI will invariably improve the health and mental health of recipients over time, demand for related services will continue to be substantial. BI would, however, immediately address the feminization (and, more specifically, the motherization) of poverty that continues to beleaguer women in Canada (Kwok and Wallis).

There is also concern that a BI for mothers promotes the private distribution of wealth, deemed a hallmark of a conservative ideology, which would translate into a diminished role for the state in the provision of care. As funds are distributed to families directly (as they are now through the CCB), efforts towards expanding publicly regulated childcare spaces could be sidelined or jettisoned entirely. BI proponents, however, have never called for the reduction or dissolution of vital health and social care services; BI is meant to supplement existing health and social programs, not negate them (BICN).

Conclusion

Using a matricentric feminist lens, informed by O'Reilly, we explored the implications of a BI as an effective poverty alleviation strategy for mothers living in poverty in Canada. Access to a BI is an effective poverty reduction strategy with its potential benefits and efficacy now well documented (Forget, *Basic Income*). For lone mothers specifically, who face a myriad of economic vulnerabilities arising from systemic barriers, access to a BI would directly remedy the feminization, and motherization, of poverty they often experience through using a nonstigmatized approach to income security. With an adequate income, mothers would have increased choice, control, and access to fundamental resources, such as safe housing and food security. For some, having access to a BI may also provide the financial means necessary to leave an abusive relationship. Safe neighbourhoods, adequate housing, and increased health and wellbeing are among the many profound implications of providing a BI for mothers and their children. In recognizing that mothers and mothering matter, access to a BI is not only an effective response to the economic, family, health and safety needs of mothers living in poverty in Canada, but a necessary one.

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Deregulated Patriarchy and the New Sexual Contract: One Step Forwards and Two Steps Back¹

Social life has changed significantly over the last four decades. Women across the Western world have entered the workforce en masse, and, together with their partners, they have delayed (and in some cases eschewed) marriage and childbearing. Motherhood, which once seemed immutable and a natural function, is now subject to choice, including where, when, how, with whom, and if to have children. Women's individualization is the key driver of these social changes as they have sought—both individually and collectively—to release themselves from the strictures of patriarchal family structures. But has patriarchy disappeared? It is my contention that it has not. Instead, it has become fluid as with other contemporary social structures. In the “post-structural social,” patriarchy has become what I call “deregulated patriarchy.” Women are not legally subordinated, as in the first age of modernity; rather women are normatively free and equal. However, this freedom is now extended to women in their caregiving capacities, and, thus, bearing and rearing children become women's individual problem. In late modernity, motherhood has become an individualized risk, the consequences of which can be seen in women's interrupted employment histories and drastically reduced lifetime earnings. Where divorce is normal, such individualized responsibility for children is a source of profound injustice. This situation produces a complex picture of women's collective situation; women are free, and they are subordinated—it just depends on which phase of the life-course we are looking at. My key contention is that women are, with important intersectional differences, free as individuals and constrained as mothers, and that these two apparently polar outcomes are mutually constitutive, which generates major paradoxes in women's civil status in contemporary Western societies.

From the late twentieth century, a revolution in gender relations has been widely observed in mainstream social theory. In his *Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, Geoff Dench suggests that “each of us feels that we can be what we

like and construct our own biographies. If we want to have a new sort of template for society in which gender does not entail what it used to, or indeed mean anything at all then this is what we can now choose” (ix). Dench proposes two possible ends for this revolution in gender relations: first, the inexorable decline of “complementarity,” or “the idea that men and women were inherently different and needed each other’s distinctive mutual support” and, second, a corresponding rise of neoconservatism, whereby “ordinary people” will continue to enact traditional gender roles, presumably because this is the most enduring and sensible arrangement (ix). Dench notes a duality picked up by many sociologists: the pervasive hiatus between ideals and reality.

Clearly, with the advent of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s, Western women made an historic movement out of the home and into the public sphere. The transition from a manufacturing to a service economy, along with the rise of global capitalism and flexible employment, have consolidated this shift and furnished new economic foundations for women’s labour market participation (Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices*; Patten and Parker; Blau). At the same time, women have largely retained their so-called traditional² roles in the home. The question of whether women are emancipated or oppressed is, therefore, central in contemporary discourses of social change. Although social theorists point to processes of revolutionary transformation in private life—indicating a move towards greater equality between the sexes (indeed, some point to the “end of men”)—feminists point to endemic structural inequalities associated with the rise of flexible capitalism and the ongoing domestic division of labour. Both sets of evidence prove compelling.

Women across the Western world have achieved unprecedented gains, considering their mass movement into education and the labour market (including, especially, the professions).³ Women are increasingly postponing their first births, having fewer children overall—thanks to revolutionary developments in contraceptive technology—and retaining their place in the labour market once they are mothers. Together with the rise in (female initiated) divorce and the mother-headed family, there appears to be considerable evidence for what Manuel Castells calls the “end of patriarchy” (Castells 20-21). In only four decades, Western women have achieved historic gains in their civil rights, economic independence, and personal autonomy, which suggests a different but no less compelling “end of history” narrative. If, as Mary Wollstonecraft asserted in 1792, “marriage has Bastilled me for life” (146), then her late modern daughters have certainly stormed the Bastille. The trajectory of female emancipation in the West appears to have reached its zenith with only a modicum of tweaking left. Or so the story goes.

In contrast, another parallel body of literature reveals systematic inequalities and injustices in contemporary gender relations. Large-scale international research in the advanced capitalist nations reveals significant gender

discrepancies in occupation, rates of pay, employment status and hours, and ongoing inequality in the domestic division of labour, including childcare and pervasive discrimination in the workplace (Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood*). Indeed, some of the most provocative research on gender suggests that the ideology of egalitarianism is the very obstacle preventing recognition of inequality (Bittman and Pixley; Baxter and Western; Dempsey, “Attempting”; McMahon). Most unequal marriages are now justified in the language of free choice. Feminists have questioned the purported “transformation of intimacy” thesis promulgated by Anthony Giddens and other social theorists, pointing out that even though attitudes have changed significantly in the contemporary West, behaviours have lagged sorely behind and, in some cases, have reversed (Jamieson; Beck-Gernsheim; Gross; England; Lauer and Yodanis). More recently, attitudes themselves have stalled (van Egmond et al.; Cotter et al.). It is now widely recognized that the family has become a key site of gender struggle and that women are, on average, far from equal within it and, therefore, outside of it. As Linda Hirschman succinctly puts it, when it comes to women’s social progress, “the thickest glass ceiling is at home” (1).

When the two sets of evidence are placed together a complex portrait of women’s situation emerges. This contradictory evidence is perhaps best encapsulated by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s assertion that the process is one of “two steps forward, one step back” (55-6), which implies a still unfolding historical process. Or to put it another way, it implies that the social and political recognition of women’s freedom is still evolving and that the current historical period reveals tensions between the two different gender systems: one related to the old sexual contract of female subordination and the other to a new social contract of gender equality.⁴

This portrait of simultaneous liberalization and constraint becomes more meaningful when considering transitions across the lifecycle. Longitudinal studies indicate that crucial gains made by women in their youth—in relation to education, the labour market, and personal autonomy—are not sustained across the lifecycle transitions of marriage and motherhood. Motherhood remains central in the loss of bargaining power both in the workplace and in relation to male partners (Craig; Baxter et al.; Treas and Drobnic; Bueskens, “Mothers and Basic Income”). After this point, as sociologists have observed for forty years now, most women are in a state of chronic and inexorable contradiction, ameliorated only by declining attachment to the labour force and/or radical declines in sleep and leisure. In other words, the historic gains made by women in their youth are, on average, not sustained into their thirties and beyond, and although marriage typically conceals this discrepancy, rising divorce rates reveal women’s unequal status more clearly than ever before. Once women have crossed the threshold of motherhood, those without a breadwinner (as seemingly passé as such a term is now considered) are

confronted with multiple structural impediments.⁵ Single mothers turn out to be among the most economically impoverished and time poor of any social group, and their capital accumulation (including superannuation and home ownership) is heavily compromised as a result (Christopher et al.; Walter; Gray et al.; Loxton; Christopher; de Vaus et al.). Certainly women can do it alone but only at a very high price, which casts a long shadow on the paradigm of equality currently hegemonic in the West. Yet, when examined in historical context, this may be the first time in history that women hold an independent legal status, have access to reliable birth control, can choose when or if to marry and become mothers, can enter any educational institution or profession, and can earn independent wages.⁶ These are significant changes generating, as Catherine Hakim has argued, a revolutionary “new scenario” (*Work-Lifestyle Choices* 7).

In this article, I explore the dual and seemingly contradictory theses concerning Western women’s liberation and oppression with a view to elucidating the terms of what I call the “new sexual contract.”⁷ The key statistical profiles on which this change is based—namely delayed marriage and declining fertility; women’s increased labour force participation; and ongoing inequality in the domestic division of labour (also conceptualized as women’s preference to care for young children and reject ideal worker norms)—are outlined in my recent book, *Modern Motherhood*.

This article focuses more specifically on the new sexual contract and, what I call “deregulated patriarchy”; it explores how women are operationalizing two modes of self in late modernity that were established as antithetical (or complementary) gendered personae from the outset. The new sexual contract has quite specific contours and takes root only after women become mothers, although its effects are still felt on those who are not. In keeping with the central dialectic outlined in *Modern Motherhood*, I argue that modernity has both enabled and disabled⁸ women in diametrically opposed but interrelated ways. Specifically, modernity has enabled women as individuals and disabled them as mothers, with the twist that the very freedom women have gained as “individuals” relates directly to the difficulties they face as mothers.⁹ It is only in late modernity as women have gained political, civil, social and economic freedom that these two differentiated personae have come together to produce the now well-documented contradictions associated with having dual roles and, indeed, dual personae.

While there is widespread research evidence of duality, then, theorists typically stress one pole over the other—individualization, and thus freedom, or double shifts, and thus oppression. For those who acknowledge both (and this is rare), there is no theoretical framework that makes sense of this duality. Catherine Hakim’s widely influential “preference theory”—emphasizing women’s choice to work part time (or not at all), and thus assume the majority

of domestic work—fails to examine either the causes or the consequences of these preferences and, by implication, their relationship to the old and new sexual contracts. Again, the freedom dimension is stressed over the constraint dimension producing a truncated problem and a truncated analysis. *Some* women may now be free to choose the precise allocation of home time and work time, and, thus, mitigate the strain ordinarily associated with having dual roles; however, this fact does not help us to understand why the two roles are contradictory in the first place and, more specifically, why this contradiction is gender specific. As it stands, no one has asked the simple question: why are women free and oppressed in late modernity and what are the causes and consequences of this contradictory duality? To address this, I have developed a theory of women’s duality with a view to interpreting rather than simply restating the extant problematic.

Deregulated Patriarchy or the New Sexual Contract

Social life has changed significantly over the last four decades. Women across the Western world have entered the workforce *en masse*, and together with their partners, have delayed (and in some cases eschewed) marriage and childbearing while having fewer children overall. Women are initiating and experiencing more separations and divorces, and many more women are combining paid work with mothering. Simultaneously, and as part of this process, there is a dissolution of the hard social structures of modernity. The deregulation of the family brought about by globalization and individualization means that marriage and childrearing have moved from being the centre of life to one (defining) stage while more people are choosing to remain single and/or childless.

In the modern West, marriages are contracted on the basis of love and affinity and terminated according to these same criteria. Moreover, motherhood, that seemingly immutable and natural function, is now subject to choice, including where, when, how, with whom, and even if to have children, although as research shows, such choice is compromised by the inability for some to find a suitable partner, which has produced new categories of the “circumstantially childless” (Cannold 284) and the “socially infertile” (Marriner). What the social statistics show is that couples (and single women) increasingly postpone first births and then compress their childbearing to one or two closely spaced children. Having children—or, as is increasingly likely, just one child—is now defined as a smaller part of life, much more of which is defined by being childfree. Women’s individualization is the key driver of these social changes, as they have sought, both individually and collectively, to release themselves from the strictures of patriarchal family structures.

But has patriarchy disappeared? It is my contention that it has not. Instead,

it has become fluid like other contemporary social structures. In the “post-structural social” (Adkins 139), patriarchy has become what I call “deregulated patriarchy.” Women are not legally subordinated as in the first age of modernity; rather, women are ostensibly free and equal citizens. However, this normative individualism is now extended to women in their caregiving capacities, and, thus, bearing and rearing children becomes women’s *individual problem*. In other words, in late modernity, motherhood has become an individualized risk, the consequences of which can be seen in women’s interrupted employment histories and drastically reduced lifetime earnings (Blau; Baxter and Hewitt). Where divorce is normal, such individualized responsibility for children is a source of profound injustice. Again, this situation produces a complex picture of women’s collective situation: women are free and they are subordinated; it just depends on which phase of the life course we are looking at (and which part of the self we are examining). Moreover, such freedom—or lack thereof—is determined by the presence or absence of a child and the presence or absence of a husband, which is something that is patently not the case for men.

Just as the obstacles to women’s freedom as individuals are being swept away by modernity, so too is the economic security women have traditionally received as men’s dependents and the broader nexus of community and familial support within which women traditionally mothered. Clearly, the key social structures, such as marriage, the family, and the labour market are deregulating. However, the lack of substantive policy initiatives that support mothers in the labour force—through adequate leave provisions, flexible hours, working from home, and government contributions to superannuation—means women face not only economic compromises should they take “time out” for even one child, let alone two or three, but also great logistical difficulties combining their paid and unpaid work should they remain in the workforce. Importantly, prioritizing care over paid work has all but evaporated as a genuine choice in neoliberal economies with their retracting welfare states and imperatives for all adults to be economically self-sufficient (Orloff).

My key contention is that women are now free as “individuals”¹⁰ and constrained as mothers and that these two apparently polar outcomes are mutually constitutive, which generates major paradoxes in women’s civil status in contemporary Western societies. Moreover, the deregulation of social structures and increasing individualization reveal the sexual contract more clearly than ever before. That is, without the safety net of marriage, women’s compromised status as “individuals” is exposed. In particular, when women have to compete in the labour market on the same terms as men (with wives) and/or childfree individuals, the otherwise repressed sexual contract is revealed. The upshot is a pervasive feminization of poverty in the advanced capitalist nations running alongside—and indeed related to—the increasing

individualization, or freedom, of women.¹¹ Not surprisingly, as the gendered wage gap has narrowed, the gap between mothers and (all) others has increased.¹²

Mothers are losing out in the neoliberal economy because they cannot earn fulltime wages in the context of their (largely unshared) caregiving responsibilities, nor can they work within the inflexible industrial time structures of most paid work. One of the critical outcomes of the new sexual contract, then, is declining fertility, as women increasingly calculate their options in a high divorce society with inhospitable workplace practices and unrenovated models of mothering. In effect, what we see is a “fertility strike” in the West. Underlying this strike, however, is a deeper point: motherhood constitutes an individualized risk in deregulated patriarchy because the social contract still does not, as Carole Pateman contended thirty years ago, account for the fact that there are two kinds of individuals, male and female, with different corporeal (reproductive) capacities and, thus, different relationships to the social order. Unless or until the social contract can extend genuine freedom and equality to its maternal citizens, which means transforming motherhood from an individualized liability mandating unequal dependence into a recognized and remunerated social good, then pervasive inequality will only increase. It is, in fact, the individualization of women that has exposed this problem by insisting that women are free and equal and by reconstructing marriage as a soluble institution. Although it is clearly beneficial that women (and men) can leave destructive or abusive marriages, in the absence of economic alternatives to marriage for women who are mothers, we are left in a social and economic predicament.¹³ As policy analysts in Australia have noted, women are encouraged to stay at home when they have young children through a combination of tax and family policies that reward male breadwinner families (van Gellecum et al.; Cooke and Baxter; Craig et al.) generating a process of deskilling and interrupted work histories, leaving many women vulnerable to poverty in the event of divorce (Walter; Loxton; Baxter and Render), which now occurs in a third of all marriages and is predicted to increase to half or more in the coming decades (Hewitt and Baxter). It is women and their children who fill the ranks of the poor in the advanced capitalist nations, which results directly from mothers’ caregiving responsibilities (Kingfisher).

Although women in the advanced capitalist nations can more or less function as individuals in their youth, once they marry and become mothers (still the majority preference), this equality is seriously eroded and a new sexual contract emerges. Tracing the contours of the social norm, it is clear that patriarchy is busy reproducing itself in the present generation. Various defined as the traditionalization process or, more innocuously, as “the gendered division of labour,” the transition from individual to mother is pivotal for understanding

the new sexual contract. The subjection women experience as mothers is not necessary or natural; it is a function of the old sexual contract that never granted a full place, observes Pateman, to “women *as* women” (16) in the first place. And it is on this unequal foundation that modern liberal-democratic societies have grown.

The early exclusions of women from the social contract on the grounds of their sexual, reproductive, and caregiving capacities are critical to the dilemmas contemporary women face. As it stands, women can participate as men—or in the words of social contract doctrine, as “individuals”—but not *as* women, to use Pateman’s insightful yet routinely misconstrued formulation (16). This is why women without children are making the greatest strides in careers and in closing the pay gap. Hakim shows that work-centred women (who are much more likely to be unmarried and/or childless) earn 30 percent more than their peers with children (*Work-Lifestyle*; see also Crittenden; Budig and England). Though still dealing with gender discrimination, childless women are able to meet ideal worker norms and reduce the conflict routinely experienced by women who are mothers of dependent children.

A longitudinal approach, which considers the significant changes in women’s work and family life across the lifecycle, can track this transition with greater clarity than cross-sectional studies. Understanding the “new sexual contract” also requires a dialectical method moving between social theory and empirical research, since both have important contributions to make in grasping the complexity of contemporary women’s situation. Importantly, women are free “individuals” in contemporary Western societies, as both grand social theorists and lay commentators contend, and have historically unprecedented choices in personal and professional life; however, this position becomes increasingly difficult for even privileged women to sustain as they enter their thirties, become mothers, and typically withdraw or substantially reduce their labour market participation (Craig), generating unequal dependence on marriage, in turn reducing women’s bargaining power in the home and at work. These are mutually reinforcing problems, for the simple reason that the gender system is organized around the complementary – although for women who are working mothers “*conflictual*” – relationship between family work and market work

Integral to the mechanics of the new sexual contract, then, is the gendered division of labour (Craig; Bianchi et al.). Although this division is old, what is new is that it now runs alongside and, in fact, underscores increasing individualization. Women continue to undertake the vast majority of childcare and domestic work despite the new disembedding of structure from agency. Indeed, the more individualized everybody (else) becomes, the more work is left to women who are wives and mothers—specifically, the care of households, husbands, children, grandchildren, ill family members, and aging parents. In

sharp contrast to their early adult years, women in their middle and later adult years bear a disproportionately large care load, which has a direct relationship to the contraction of the extended family and community in the rest of society. Moreover, with the exception of the Nordic countries, social policies typically reinforce male breadwinner/ female nurturer families through failing to provide adequate paid maternity leave, affordable childcare, workplace flexibility, and imposing heavy taxes on double income families.¹⁴ Lastly, men's resistance to sharing childcare and domestic labour, combined with their higher earning power, typically obstructs a shared division of family work.¹⁵ As Linda Hirshman insists, this is the primary reason for the so-called glass ceiling at work. Women's performance at work, and their structural position in the labour market, is inextricably tied up with their roles in the home—a phenomenon that cuts across class and occupation categories and, thus, reconstitutes women as a sex class notwithstanding the apparent demise of social structure.

This reality is, however, complex. As Hakim's research also shows, women's partial (and sometimes total) withdrawal from the workforce when they become mothers is largely in keeping with their preferences. If we step back from the consequences of these preferences for one moment and take seriously what women say, then a central message emerges from Hakim's research: male models of work are not working for (most) women once they become mothers. If caring for children in combination with part-time work is what most women want,¹⁶ then clearly women are not going to be able to "have it all", given the present structure of paid work. As Kathleen Gerson argued over thirty years ago, "hard choices" still exist for the majority of women between children and careers or, less obviously, between careers and jobs. As Hirshman found in her study of elite women, many were still working after they became mothers, however not in their chosen field. Nor are women able to independently run households on the kinds of salaries that part-time work, even part-time professional work at the higher levels, pays. Again, this generates asymmetrical gender dependency inside marriage and inequality in the workforce as well as in society at large.

Thus, in the current social order, specifically in the "post-structural social," in which women are said to have transcended the constraints of patriarchy, women who exercise their procreative capacities and become mothers—which is still the overwhelming majority of women—have to be married or else face severe economic discrimination. This imperative forecloses gender equality and the capacity to negotiate fairly with partners. Importantly, one must be free to leave a relationship (or institution) in order to freely be in it, let alone to renovate it. As the nineteenth-century feminists were at pains to point out, these facts stand separately from the question of love and arguably provide love with its proper foundation: freedom rather than necessity. Many women are married to men they freely chose to be with and whom they love, and these men may be good and kind men who economically provide and, to a lesser

extent, share household and childrearing duties, but this does not alter the fundamental structural reality that their wives (or partners) could not live adequately without them. Such asymmetrical dependence is neither anomalous nor random but the normal situation for the vast majority of women (after motherhood) in contemporary Western societies, which casts a long shadow on the paradigm of freedom and equality prevailing in the West.

Even Hakim, who trumps women's "free choice" in the "new scenario" puts in the disclaimer that women's choices are not evident until they have secured for themselves a "breadwinner spouse" ("Women's Lifestyle Preferences" 83). It seems problematic, to say the least, that women's "free choice" remains contingent upon a breadwinner spouse. Moreover, this inadvertently reveals the considerable difficulties unmarried, never married, and/or divorced women have exercising their preferences.

The discourse of choice has trumped the analysis of social structure much to the chagrin of feminists. However, the critical problem with the new sexual contract lies not in the choices women make to work less or "opt out" but in the long-term consequences of these choices. It is the fact that society—including its key institutions of the government, the labour market, and the family—has failed to provide a satisfactory support structure for women as individuals who (choose to) give birth to and rear children—that is, who choose to become mothers. Marriage has provided an economic safety net for women as members of families but not as individuals. To rely exclusively on marriage as a support structure for mothers is inconsistent with the ethics of liberty and equality on which liberal democracies are ostensibly based, which, in turn, generates a structure of subordination based on natural difference. If all men and women are created free and equal, then the new social contract will have to renovate the sexual contract so that the reproduction of the species is, if not rewarded, then at the very least no longer punished.

Duality Theory and Women's Two Modes of Self

Crucially, women's individualization predisposes them to expect and even demand greater equality and the free exercise of choice. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that this expectation is derived from an individualist and liberal rights philosophy that is itself founded on the subjection of women (Pateman). Women's claim to freedom and equality is built on the liberal separation of spheres, which simultaneously sequesters women to the private domestic sphere as wives and mothers. Herein lies the conundrum: women's freedom is implicated in women's subjection. Liberalism created the structural and ideological conditions for the release of "the individual"; however, it simultaneously created the stay-at-home wife and mother, who was assigned to provide structural (social, emotional, and domestic) support to individuals.

The intensification of motherhood was an outcrop of modern Rousseauist ideals that countered the impersonal ethos of liberalism as well as, paradoxically, an extension of rationalization and individualization into the private sphere. The private-domestic sphere developed its own counter-discourse of love and care in opposition to the prevailing ethos of competitive individualism. In a patriarchal social system, the two spheres were complementary rather than incompatible. It was only once women sought a role in public life as "individuals" that problems emerged, something that only developed on a mass scale in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Duality, thus, operates at the structural, ideological, cultural, and psychological level. It is not only that modern social structure pushed women into the newly isolated home, it is also that cultural ideologies elaborated on this with a new emphasis on romantic partnership and the intensive care of children, who were now valued as ends in themselves. What Edward Shorter call the "surge of sentiment" (170) was the private face of political individualism, which emerged in women's own preferences—still evident today—to nurture their children within the domestic sphere. The psychology of individualism includes and, indeed, fosters "intensive mothering" (Hays, "Cultural Contradictions" 3).

Moreover, as Nancy Chodorow has perspicaciously observed, in the normal "male dominant father absent family" (40), women (and men) internalize a model of attachment based on near exclusive maternal and/or female care. In the formative years between birth and three years of age, few infants and toddlers internalize substantive embodied nurture from men. For Chodorow, this early experience of (near) exclusive female care becomes internalized and forms the basis of gendered identity, with the corollary that separation, individuation, and freedom become aligned with masculinity, and empathy, altruism and relationship with femininity. Feminine selves are cultivated by women drawing on these early models of mother-centred (or female-centred) care. They are also (re)activated when women themselves become mothers and provide care for their own infants and young children (Baraitser; A Stone; Bueskens, "Maternal Subjectivity").

Suffice it to say that the combination of early attachment with mothers and the complex historical legacy of the modern separation of spheres means women in the twenty-first century have well-developed maternal selves, memorably identified by Carol Gilligan as a morally distinct "ethic of care". Women, and more particularly mothers, have selves that are crafted in, and defined through, embodied nurture, both that which they likely received from their own mothers and that which they give to their children. What has shifted in more recent decades is that women have increasingly come to inhabit the category of the neutral individual too; or, in the language of moral philosophers, women have come to adopt the "ethic of justice" (Kohlberg). This means that most women in the twenty-first century have two modes of self—

an individualized self oriented to competition and achievement in the public sphere and a maternal or nurturing self oriented to care for family members in the private sphere. These selves overlap, although they may also operate independently. For example, prior to motherhood, young women in the West are mostly operating with their individualized selves (albeit, in anticipation of a later maternal phase)—a requirement, as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim note, for participation in modern institutions. Likewise, the majority of women who withdraw from or reduce their participation in the workforce while their children are young are largely operating with their maternal selves, although even among women who are at home fulltime, the sense of having another, individualized, self in addition to the mothering self is evident (Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood*). Similarly, women at work often undertake mothering tasks, including making contact with children and organizing appointments and schedules throughout the day (Morehead; Bittman et al.; Maher).

Arguably all women in the West now have dual selves; however, it is those who are engaged in active participation in both the public and private spheres—that is, mothers of dependent children who are simultaneously active in the labour force—who feel the dual role burden most sharply. The contradiction, therefore, exists at both the structural level (the contradiction between spheres and activities) and at the psychological level (the contradiction between different parts of the self). Although this contradiction is identified in the literature on motherhood, it is rarely linked back to the history of modernity or to the paradoxes inherent in liberal individualism. Moreover, there tends to be an emphasis on either women's newfound freedom as individuals or on their constraints as mothers; few researchers or social theorists hold both dimensions simultaneously, which is required to understand the contemporary dilemma of dual roles.

The Problematic as It Stands

There are ten key points that can be gleaned from extant research, which form the backbone of my conceptualization of women's duality and the new sexual contract.

1. In late modernity, women are free as individuals and constrained as mothers. This freedom and constraint can be directly related to the contradictions women experience between work and home and between their autonomous and maternal (or caregiving) selves.
2. These two seemingly opposing developments are mutually constitutive, producing an especially complex dual role problematic. Women's freedom as individuals is produced by the same social structure and philosophical foundations that produced and continually recreates women's sequestration to the private sphere.

3. In the contemporary West, patriarchy operates in a deregulated form, which reveals women's compromised status as individuals more clearly than in earlier phases of modernity, when women were defined as dependents within (fraternal-patriarchal) families.
4. After motherhood, women experience a massive increase in their workload, as they undertake the majority of domestic work and childcare in heterosexual, married couple families, which constitute the majority of couple families with children, although a substantial minority of these households transition to single parent, step, and blended-family households. Between 80 and 95 percent of couples have a highly unequal division of domestic and childcare labour.
5. Most mothers prefer to stay at home when their children are in infancy and to work part time (or less) when their children are in preschool. Part-time work continues to be the majority preference (evidenced in the Nordic countries, where women are free to exercise their preferences, and also in Australia). Only a minority of mothers with dependent children prefer to work fulltime or stay at home fulltime (Hakim, "Women's Lifestyle Preferences").
6. Mothers manage the contradictions between family work and paid work through undertaking a "second shift" (Hochschild), which is operationalized as "multitasking" (Sayer et al.; Sayer) and "synchronising time" (Morehead)—or, in other words, performing tasks simultaneously. Employed mothers of young children who undertake fulltime or part-time paid work continue to undertake the majority of childcare and domestic work (Bianchi et. al). For upper-middle-class women, this work is routinely outsourced to other women rather than shared equally between "husbands" and "wives" (MacDonald; Baxter, Hewitt and Haynes; Baxter et al., "Who Uses").
7. Mothers in the West have dual selves, including an individualized self and a maternal self corresponding to their dual roles. These selves are experienced as both separate and intertwined. They remain difficult to activate simultaneously within the social structure of most liberal democracies, given extant intensive mothering and ideal worker norms and the structural separation of spheres.
8. In households with dependent children mothers are, for the most part, in the default position, which means their labour market participation and leisure are compromised to meet childcare and housework demands, including any contingencies or emergencies. The "default position" is, as a rule, not shared by husbands and fathers within families. On the flip side, most women prefer to undertake the majority of care work and to combine mothering with paid work.

9. A third of all marriages end in divorce (in the USA and the UK this is closer 50 percent); and this number is forecast to increase in Australia in the coming decades to between 40 and 50 percent; while cohabiting de facto couples with children are even more likely to separate. Since the late twentieth century across the Western world, increased divorce rates have produced a large growth in single-parent families, of which the overwhelming majority are headed by women (on average between 85 and 90 percent). Close to half of these families—that is, many women and children—are in, or at great risk of, poverty.
10. In late modernity, women who are mothers are not free to choose marriage or permanent partnerships, since they are not free to leave them without drastic economic consequences.¹⁷ Married mothers are not free to negotiate fairly with partners, since they are not free to leave their relationships without a very serious decline in their own and their children's standard of living. Motherhood has, thus, transformed into an individualized risk in the "society of individuals". Given that the overwhelming majority of women choose to become mothers (approximately 90 percent), this means that almost all women are subject to the new sexual contract.

The unfinished business of feminism and of Western modernity is the complete emancipation of women, not only as individuals but also as mothers, specifically as autonomous mothers. We have grudgingly come to accept the independent woman, but the independent mother is still structurally and psychologically constrained. Given the interdependence of the public and private spheres and the historical relegation of women to the private sphere, in combination with women's majority preference to undertake and prioritize mothering, social reorganization is both necessary and inevitable.

In many respects, the self-made man is the icon of Western modernity, but the self-made woman is its unfinished project because she calls forth a second and final transformation in the relationship between the public and private spheres and, ultimately, in the relations between men and women. The problem requires two key shifts: first, legislative and policy change to facilitate women's attachment to the labour force across the transition to motherhood (including paid maternity and paternity leave, flexible employment, leave without pay, options for working from home, shorter working hours, remunerated childcare, a universal basic income etc.);¹⁸ second, change in the domestic sphere, to facilitate a more equal division of household labour between men and women, which would enable women to pursue paid and/or other creative work. In short, there needs to be a reconstruction of the social and sexual contracts.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a keynote address at the MIRCI “Matricentric Feminism” conference at Syracuse University in Florence in May 2018. This is a revised, edited, and abridged version of chapter five of my book *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*.
2. The term “traditional” is a misnomer here; however, it is so widely used it becomes difficult to break with convention without causing confusion. Calling modern sequestered mothering “traditional” is both true and false. It is true in so far as an earlier noncontractual, kinship logic persists in the family, but it is also false because there is nothing traditional about the isolated, specialized, and intensive mothering characteristic of the contemporary Western family.
3. Across the Western world, and particularly in the US, Black and working-class women engaged in paid work from the outset of industrialisation, long before the mass movement of white, middle-class women into the labour market (Jones). This meant they could not subscribe to or embody ideal-typical norms of the “stay-at-home mother”. Black women’s mothering was not protected like white women’s mothering was (Stack and Burton; Collins). Another feature of women’s labour, including Black and working-class women’s labour, is that it rarely provided a living wage that enabled independence from husbands, family wage pools, and/or welfare. Black women workers relied heavily on reciprocity networks to support their paid employment (Stack and Burton). Moreover, Black women suffered discrimination in access to higher status jobs and were, until recently (and, to some extent, even now)—largely segregated in low-paid and insecure domestic and childcare service work to the very white women who had entered the workforce *en masse* in the later twentieth century (Mutari et al).
4. When I refer to equality, this does not mean women’s sameness with men; rather, it refers to women’s right to stand as civil equals and, from there, express their difference.
5. It is widely assumed that women are now co-equal breadwinners with men; however, this is not the case in heterosexual couple families across the Western world, since women earn less, around 80 cents for every dollar men earn, and since most couples prioritize men’s careers over women’s when they become parents. In Australia, the USA, and the UK role-reversed families—that is where women are the primary breadwinners and men are the primary caregivers—constitute between 2 and 5 percent of all families (de Vaus et al.; Chesley, 644), and it is a pattern that is rarely sustained because mothers continue to perform more domestic work even when they are the primary providers (Chesley). Most mothers of dependent

children work part time in Australia and undertake the majority of both domestic labour and childcare (Craig). In the USA, among heterosexual couple families, men are the breadwinners in just over 70 percent of families; women now constitute 29 percent of the breadwinners (Chesley). However, breadwinning mothers continue to undertake the majority of childcare and domestic labour (Bianchi et al.), even when their husbands are unemployed, and it is for this reason that this family pattern is rarely sustainable. Fulltime working mothers now also undertake more direct childcare than did mothers in the 1960s. In terms of the broad contours outlined in this article regarding the new sexual contract, fathers still constitute the great majority of breadwinners, and breadwinning wives are not relieved from the double shift that hampers their income earning potential, career trajectories, and quality of life. Both the institution of waged labour and the institution of motherhood presuppose structural interdependence to meet their respective normative ideals. Single mother families are particularly at risk of poverty for precisely these reasons and, therefore, can in no sense said to be "undoing the new sexual contract", except in the highly unusual cases of those with very high incomes, inheritance, or independent wealth.

6. I am referring here to Western women and recognize the variegated nature of these changes across different strata of women.
7. I am tracking a broad outline here based on average patterns for the majority of women. There are always women whose specific or individual situations vary from the normative pattern; however, very few mothers escape the economic and social consequences of the new sexual contract—that is, becoming a mother reduces income, leisure, and long-term economic security while increasing unpaid labour substantially.
8. I am not referring here to bodily ability or disability; rather, this term is being used as an adjective to describe the ways in which modernity has facilitated women to individualize and obtain autonomy and how it has simultaneously constrained women as mothers.
9. I am referring to legal freedom and also shifts in the culture that recognize this freedom. For example, it is more normal for young women today to prioritize education, relationships, travel, and career in their late teens and twenties rather than get married and have children as it was only forty years ago. Individualization is normative across the culture; it is not the preserve of the privileged exclusively. However, the capacity to actualize these preferences does correspond with privilege. I am here identifying normative rather than empirical freedom.

10. I am using the term “individual” in the more specific sense of classical liberalism where it referred to a philosophical and legal invention created with a view to granting equal political rights to all citizens]
11. The literature on the feminization of poverty, and more specifically the links between single motherhood and poverty, is well established (Christopher et al; Hays; Christopher; Misra et al., “Work Family Policies”; Misra et al., “Family Policies”).
12. The role of motherhood in the gender pay gap, and more specifically the loss of relative and absolute income, is well established in the international research (Waldfoegel; Budig and England; Crittenden; Gangl and Ziefle; Budig and Hodges; Baker; Livermore et al.; Kricheli-Katz; Budig et al.).
13. This includes marriage substitutes, such as a de facto partnership.
14. Policies in the Anglo American world, including Australia, make it difficult for women to combine paid and unpaid work (van Gellecum, et al; Cooke and Baxter; Craig et al.; Baxter and Chesters; Jones).
15. The literature on men’s resistance to undertaking domestic work is well established (Komter; Delphy and Leonard; Bittman and Pixley; Dempsey, “Trying”; McMahan; Craig; Baxter et al., “Lifecourse”; Treas and Drobnic).
16. There is an extensive literature on women’s preferences to combine motherhood with part-time work (Hakim, “Work-Lifestyle Choices”; Belkin; P Stone; Hakim, “Women’s Lifestyle Preferences”; Hoffnung; Arthur and Lee).
17. This does not mean women cannot choose to leave marriages. Divorce is both legal and normal in the modern west. The point is that once women are mothers, they do not have a satisfactory alternative to marriage (or a “breadwinner spouse” to use Hakim’s more precise terminology). With few exceptions, mothers are either married to a breadwinner spouse or in poverty. As such, women who are mothers cannot bargain from a position of equality within marriage or outside of it.
18. Supporting women in paid work may not come in the form of adaptation to prevailing models of work but rather in the transformation of work to be more accommodating of the necessity of care. Most women who are mothers are unable to adapt to prevailing models of work, so they withdraw, down scale their job, and/or transition to part-time and/or casual work. Renovating work also means transforming work cultures that operate around the norm of an unencumbered male breadwinner.

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FIONA JOY GREEN

Practicing Matricentric Feminist Mothering

The practice of feminist mothering is central to matricentric feminism because it is centred on the experiences of mothers. Mothering and feminism are equally defining dimensions in the lives of feminist mothers who recognize that although they are oppressed and disempowered both as women and as mothers by the patriarchal institution of motherhood, they, along with their children, can also be empowered through the conscious and active praxis of feminist parenting. By placing their needs and concerns as mothers at the centre of their feminist and political practice of parenting, feminist mothers engage in and offer others a praxis of matricentric feminism that incorporates maternal theory, activism, and feminist motherlines.

*This article reflects upon some of the lessons of matricentric feminism explored and detailed within my 2011 book *Practicing Feminist Mothering*. The book is based on two decades of research involving the lived experiences and knowledge of sixteen self-identified feminist mothers and a number of their adult children. Although the experiences and findings may appear to be somewhat dated, the insights from this research, nevertheless, provide an understanding of the conscious and political action of feminist mothering towards changing society through their parenting. They also provide a powerful perspective on mothering as a central aspect of feminism that may act as a foundation for further alternative family structures.*

Setting the Stage

When I read the call for this matricentric themed journal edition, I saw a perfect fit with my twenty-year research into feminist mothering and with the feminist parenting I have been engaged in for the past thirty years. Simply put, the praxis of feminist mothering—the process of joining one’s feminism together with one’s parenting—is explicitly matricentric and matrifocal; “it begins with the mother and takes seriously the work of mothering” (O’Reilly, “Conference Booklet”). In other words, matricentric feminism, as noted by

Canadian maternal scholar Andrea O'Reilly, is “for and about mothers” (“Ain’t I a Feminist”). In the form of feminist mothering, matricentric feminism not only honours the work of mothers and their mothering, it also contributes to the ongoing development and practice of feminism through feminist motherlines.

As a feminist and a first-time mother in the late 1980s, I was curious about how other feminists were living their feminism while parenting. At that time, feminist mothering was not particularly visible, nor was it understood as a viable strategy of parenting or a meaningful way to practice one’s feminism. There was not a body of literature or group of scholars to consult as there are today. Here, I am particularly thinking of the maternal scholarship and activist organizations Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI) and the International Association of Maternal Action and Scholarship (IAMAS). Nor were there established communities of feminist mothers to connect with, either in person or online. No matter how hard I tried to seek them out, feminist mothers were not readily available as role models or easily found to confide in. Although I was connected to and involved with a number of feminist consciousness raising groups and feminist activist groups in my community at the time, mothering and feminism were not readily linked, spoken of, or considered to be areas of discussion or activism. Many feminists during what is now known as the second wave of feminism were closeted as mothers because parenting was seen as secondary to organized feminist activism and movement (Green, *Practicing*).

To deal with my feelings of isolation, I consciously sought out self-identified mothers, like myself, to learn from and with. I wanted to know how they understood feminism, motherhood, and mothering. And more importantly, I was curious about how this confluence of experience and knowledge might inform and underpin their understandings and practices of feminist parenting. As a new mother who was also pursuing a PhD, I used this educational opportunity to explore the interconnection of feminisms and mothering. While I developed an understanding for theoretical perspectives about and an appreciation for historical literature on motherhood and practices of mothering, some of which were feminist, I was left seeking deeper experiential knowledge and meaning making beyond the sporadic informal conversations I had with others about their personal experiences of uniting their feminism with their parenting practices.

My doctoral research, which took place primarily during the mid-1990s, included interviewing sixteen female cisgender, temporarily able-bodied, neurologically typical, self-identified feminist mothers living in or around Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The majority of mothers were born in Canada, with eight in Manitoba, two in Ontario, and one in British Columbia. One mother was born in Guyana, two were born in England, and two were born in

the United States of America. Most women describe their heritage as mixed, noting their ancestry being connected to countries in the European Union (as of July 2019)—notably, England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Poland, and Sweden. Three women identify as Jewish and one as Mennonite. One woman identifies herself as Guyanese and another as Métis. One names her heritage as Scottish and Icelandic and two others as Colombian and Australian.

All mothers had some postsecondary education, were between the ages of twenty-nine and fifty years, and were raising biological children who ranged in age from newborn to twenty-something. Of their collective of thirty-three children, eighteen were female, and fifteen were male. One mother was parenting an adopted child along with two biological children, and another was raising three non-biological children from a previous relationship, a biological child and an adopted child. Half of the 16 mothers were caring for children alone, and the other 8 were raising kids in partnerships. One woman identified as bisexual, two identified as lesbian, and the remaining thirteen described themselves as heterosexual.

This doctoral research was one of the first scholarly undertakings to position the needs and concerns of feminist mothers at its core. With the overt purpose of understanding and developing a theory and practice of feminist mothering, it was explicitly by, for, and about feminist mothers. Discoveries from that early matricentric research project can be found in *Feminist Mothering in Theory and Practice, 1985–1995: A Study in Transformative Politics*.

For this current article, I draw upon my 2011 book, *Practicing Feminist Mothering*, to provide specific examples of matricentric feminism. This two-decade longitudinal research (1995–2007) articulates the praxis of feminist mothering. It begins with my early PhD research exploring the interconnection between feminism and mothering in the lives of sixteen self-identified feminist mothers, and concludes with the influence of the parenting of four of those mothers in the lives of five of their adult daughters. Whereas the last of the interviews with the daughters took place a dozen years ago, *Practicing Feminist Mothering* provides specific examples of how matricentric feminism has been created, experienced, and lived by this select group of feminist mothers and daughters. Moreover, their voices provide insight into how matricentric feminism assists the intergenerational development of both feminism and feminist mothering that nourishes feminist theory, activism, and feminist mothering practices. They also offer examples of parenting that others can draw upon to parent in matricentric ways that fit with and are true to themselves.

Now, as then, I attempt to understand and explain the maternal experiences of these feminist mothers and daughters in a way that honours their particular perspectives without being elitist or exclusionary (Green, *Practicing* 53). My intent is to offer a formidable perspective on mothering, a central element of

feminism that is often neglected. Motherhood, notes O'Reilly, "is the unfinished business of feminism" ("Baby Out with the Bathwater"). Positioning the needs and concerns of mothers as the starting point for a theory, practice, and politic on and for women's empowerment is central to the lives of feminist mothers, to the lives of their children, and, potentially, to the lives of future generations.

I begin this article by briefly introducing the concept of matricentric feminism and how feminist mothering is central to its foundation and practice. I draw from the experience and knowledge of self-identified feminist mothers from my previous research to articulate five shared common characteristics that define their feminism. I then address the ways in which their feminism informs their understanding and critique of motherhood as a patriarchal and oppressive institution. I explore how this particular worldview informs the ways in which they choose to trouble motherhood and to create affirming feminist mothering practices for themselves and for their children. Through the conscious and active praxis of bringing feminism and mothering together—the active engagement of matricentric feminism—these mothers place their needs and concerns at the centre of their political practice of parenting. In essence, they disrupt the child centric model of mothering prevalent in intensive mothering (Hays) that developed during the 1980s with the millennial generation and continues to be practiced today. I conclude by demonstrating that by engaging in the praxis of feminist mothering, these mothers create a practice of matricentric feminism that dislodges sacrificial motherhood for themselves, their children, and others; it offers a foundational model of matricentric feminism based on agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity that benefits parenting, families, and feminism at large (O'Reilly, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood").

Defining Matricentric Feminism

In "Ain't I a Feminist?: Matricentric Feminism, Feminist Mamas, and Why Mothers Need a Feminist Movement/Theory of Their Own", O'Reilly contends that mothers, more so than women in general, "remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism" because mothers face distinct social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological problems related specifically to the identity of mother, the work of mothering, and the patriarchal institution of motherhood (4). Mothers, she argues, "need a feminism of their own"; one that positions the concerns and realities of mothers at the "starting point for a theory and politic of empowerment" (O'Reilly, "Conference Booklet").

Simply stated, under patriarchy mothers are oppressed as mothers because they are mothers. A matricentric mode of feminism organized from the mothers' particular identity and their work as mothers has the potential to

finally deal with motherhood. Consequently, mothers, children, and feminism benefit from a matricentric mode of feminism based upon the particular identity, knowledge, work, and politics of mothers.

Five Shared Characteristics of Feminism

Each person certainly comes to their feminist consciousness and to their mothering through their own particular journey. Nevertheless, the feminist mothers I interviewed between 1995 and 2005 about their experiences of becoming feminists and becoming parents all believe, as clearly articulated by African American feminist bell hooks, that “feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression” (26). Furthermore, as a group, these mothers share five common characteristics when defining what feminism means to them—characteristics that are fundamental to their parenting values and practices.

First and foremost, these mothers recognize their feminism as an embodied identity. Like self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde, they understand their own personal and varied identities to be interwoven and inspirable. For them, feminist and mother are two self-defining core identities that are intertwined and inform each other. Feminist and mother cannot be separated or torn apart. Being a feminist mother is crucial to their sense of self, and informs the ways in which they see the world, choose to live their lives, and how they engage with and parent their children.

Second, their feminism entails a world view that acknowledges and critiques patriarchal society, which is based on a binary view of the world. These feminist mothers are especially critical of and work against the patriarchal sex-gender system that privileges cisgender males over cisgender females as well as folks with other gender identities. They also recognize that patriarchy intersects with other systemic forms of oppression that operate within power hierarchies that classify and oppress people according to socially constructed identities based on, among others, ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, literacy, race, religion, sex and sexuality.

Their third shared understanding of feminism is that the personal experiences of people are directly linked with the social, economic, and political contexts in which they live. Personal experiences are related to and are influenced by the hierarchical power dynamics of patriarchal and other systems of oppression. These gendered personal realities are political in nature because the political environment has tangible and particular ramifications for individuals (Hanisch).

A fourth shared belief of these mothers is that meaningful and permeant change in the individual lives of women and others who are oppressed will only be reached when patriarchy and other related and intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression are eradicated. They consider feminism to

be, as articulated by hooks, the necessary “struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (26). Their feminisms value individual autonomy and choice, which are both essential to human self-determination and freedom as well as to bringing about progressive social change. These mothers consider a person’s autonomy and choice to be important not only for an individual’s development and life, but also for their own beliefs and how they are practiced in their relationships with their children.

And, finally, these feminist mothers believe in and are committed to feminist praxis—the conscious act of putting one’s theoretical and experiential knowledge of feminism into daily practice, particularly during their motherwork and in their relationships with their children (Green, *Practicing* 56, 150). Like hooks, they believe “the foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression” (33). As feminist mothers, they know that the institution of motherhood, so central to the life and longevity of patriarchy, must be eradicated because it reifies and reinforces patriarchal ideologies and practices, which, in turn, oppress women as mothers. They, too, recognize that “without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long-range impact” (hooks 33). This strategy of troubling patriarchy and bringing about feminist social change by integrating feminist theory with their parenting practices as mothers, so central to matricentric feminist praxis, exemplifies the confidence they have in the potential of intergenerational feminist mothering. It may also have the potential to reform mothering for other folks who may not meet the patriarchal definition of mother, such as transgender parents and plutonic co-parents.

Feminist Understandings of Motherhood

Accepting that they live in a patriarchal world, which influences all social institutions and interpersonal interactions, informs the ways in which these feminist mothers understand motherhood. Each recognizes the difference between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, first identified by the American poet, activist, theorist, and feminist mother Adrienne Rich. In her now classic 1986 book, *Of Woman Born*, Rich notes there are “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13).

These feminist mothers also know that motherhood, which encompasses the ideal of intensive mothering, can be an oppressive institution that systemically places social pressure on women to conform to culturally defined and monitored constructions of the ideal, perfect, and good mother (Green, *Practicing* 76-77). They recognize these regulatory elements of motherhood to be harmful to women and children and speak of the low self-esteem, self-blame, and self-hatred associated with internalized oppression (Green, *Practicing*; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 139). Yet through their critique of motherhood, they create some distance from it and make space to redefine motherhood for themselves and for their families (Green, *Practicing* 151).

Intensive mothering, first theorized by Sharon Hays in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, expects and demands that mothers (not fathers or other caring adults) will unconditionally give themselves and their resources to their children, which include but are not limited to their time, physical and emotional energy, money, emotional support, and love. Parenting is the primary focus of the mother, who must respond to her child's needs before her own. Any guidance she seeks must come from mostly male experts in child development and childrearing.

In understanding the distinction between the institution and ideology of motherhood and the experience of mothering, these feminist mothers recognize the following: 1) the institution affects mothers differently depending on their social location (i.e., age, class, disability, ethnicity/race, gender, sex, sexual orientation); 2) mothering can be an empowering site for mothers, children, and community members; 3) feminist mothering can challenge the ideology of motherhood; and 4) feminist mothers can make space in their mothering in which they can actively engage in alternative practices of raising children through close and egalitarian parent-child relationships.

Each of the feminist mothers I interviewed considers their mothering to be a conscious political act. Like hooks, they believe that "feminist movement must necessarily think of feminist education as significant in the lives of everyone" (23). For these mothers, feminist education is intrinsic to their decision making and mothering practices, particularly when they engage with and educate their children about themselves, the world around them, and their place within it. Feminist education is fundamental to their matricentric parenting practices, which is central to the political act of troubling patriarchal ideals of motherhood and creating alternative models of parenting that empower themselves as mothers and, as a result, also their children.

Creating and Affirming Feminist Mothering Practices

The feminist mothers I interviewed between 1996 and 1997 knew they were in a complicated position due to their critique of the dominant ideology of the institution of motherhood. Yet, they found ways to navigate both the societal and internalized expectations of motherhood and to honour their own understandings of feminism and parenting. For instance, Niere,¹ a forty-one-year-old white Jewish mother of three cisgender kids—a teenage daughter and a ten-year old and six-year-old son—came out as lesbian after divorcing her heterosexual cisgender male spouse. She elucidates her understanding and critique of motherhood as an institution:

I think it boils down to this whole ideology surrounding the family: that the family has two people, opposite sexes and the children. And they're enclosed, a supposed fully-functioning family unit. And our society is still predicated on that. So, if a woman finds herself in a position where she's not within that structure, the society only pays lip service to supports and that kind of thing. But I think, given that this patriarchal model is still very much in existence, there are still a lot of women who are falling into this trap. And it just creates a lot of conflict and a hell of a lot of guilt. I think it's very damaging. It's definitely damaging to mothers because it erodes our self-esteem and our self-confidence in our ability to be good mothers. (Green, *Practicing* 73)

Keeping herself centred as a mother in her feminist analysis of the institution of motherhood, Niere is both critical of its damaging expectations and is able to break free of the patriarchal model of family that she finds so restricting. As such, she is empowered to mother confidently alone and come out as lesbian at a time when lesbian mothers were often isolated and ostracized.

Willow, a thirty-seven-year-old single, white Jewish lesbian mother of a ten-year-old daughter also understands and rejects the patriarchal ideal of motherhood. She clearly redefines mothering for herself and invents alternative ways to parent her cisgender daughter. Reflecting on her feminist mothering she tells me the following:

I mean basically, in order to do this, I broke all the rules and went about this in the most conscious manner that I knew at the time. I'd probably go about it differently now, but back ten years ago, I broke all the rules by making a choice to be a mother. Nobody told me I had to do this because I was married or that I had to get married in order to do this. I made choices for myself. I did not let myself be subjugated, as it were, by men. I'm not married, and I never have been. And no man ever called the shots in my home, nor did a man ever support me in any way. (Green, *Practicing* 95)

By honouring her own understandings of feminism and parenting, Willow chose to become pregnant at a time during the late 1980s when there was little support from lesbian and feminist communities in Winnipeg for lesbian women to do so. By retaining a matricentric feminist outlook and practice, she could redefine motherhood for herself, for her child, and for others within the larger lesbian and feminist communities.

Thirty-four-year-old Deb, a white heterosexual woman, living common-law with the white heterosexual cisgender father of their seven-and-a-half-year-old son has a more subversive approach to mothering than that of Niere and Willow. Nevertheless, Deb is just as conscious and inventive in her matricentric parenting activity, noting:

Someone can look at me on the surface and go, “Okay, there’s a woman who’s chosen to be a mother, good patriarchy likes that. Good, good.” They don’t have a clue! I have the ability to transform what I perceive the role to be, to take it on, to claim it, and to just create it. I’m a mother in my own image in the absence of a role model, or someone telling me how to do it. (Green, *Practicing* 98)

Deb resists the damaging elements of the institution of motherhood by continually noting, analyzing, and challenging the power dynamics inherent in stereotypical gender roles and their associated prescribed domestic roles. She does so by inventing and engaging in relationships with her partner and their child that are centred on her own feminism, experience, and knowledge.

Niere, Willow, Deb, and the other feminist mothers I spoke with, each parent from their own specific matricentric place and, as a result, each create their own image of mother. Whether blatantly or surreptitiously, each challenges the hegemonic ideals of the good mother. By creating their own practices of mothering that fit closely with their feminist beliefs, they also trouble and oppose the dynamics of power and control in their mother-child relationships.

Bev, a forty-four-year-old white bisexual lone mother of two teenage daughters, notes how she consciously shares the power she has as an adult and mother with her daughters: “I’ve had to treat my children in an equal fashion from the beginning so that they have always known that they have the right to express themselves, that they have the right to say, ‘No’ and that we could engage in a dialogue about the issue as opposed to me wielding my power over them. And that’s still very important to me” (Green, *Practicing* 124). In 2007, I had the good fortune of interviewing Bev’s two adult cisgender, neurologically typical, temporarily able-bodied adult daughters who were living and working in different parts of Toronto. They spoke about the respectful and egalitarian relationships they each have with their mom and how they treasure their ability to have open and frank conversations about a plethora of topics and life

issues with her. They believe their mother's feminism is the source of their conscious and deliberate nonhierarchical relationships with her, and they credit it for their ongoing connection with Bev over the years (Green, "Empowering").

Bev's eldest daughter Sonia, who is thirty-one and identifies as heterosexual, reflects on the centrality of her mother's philosophy and practice of encouraging her daughters to engage in an egalitarian relationship with her: "I have always been able to say how I feel to my mother and subsequently to others. I can say to my mother, 'I don't accept that.' Or tell people that I'm not happy with something" (Green, *Practicing* 127). Sonia notes that her mother encourages her daughters to develop an autonomous sense of self and to be whoever and whatever they want to be. Sonia notes feeling supported and encouraged by Bev in her unconventional, unexpected, and sometimes risky decisions about education and work, especially when she first studied fashion design and then engineering.

Kyla, Bev's twenty-eight-year-old bisexual daughter, concurs with her sister; "I think in a lot of ways, what I have respected her for as a parent I also had to kind of struggle with as a child. She definitely wanted to install a sense of individual autonomy, and she also definitely wanted to show that we were able to act for ourselves in our own lives. And I think that was probably a central kind of value that she wanted to put into our childrearing" (Green, *Practicing* 130). Bev, like other feminist mothers in the study, facilitates family decision making as well as frequent and diverse interactions with her daughters to encourage them to express their individual opinions and autonomy (Odenweller et. al.). She also gives her kids the freedom to solve their own problems, and expects them to, in an effort to encourage them to be independent and efficacious. Both Sonia and Kyla clearly meditate upon this approach of Bev's relationship with them.

Like their mom, Sonia and Kyla believe feminist mothering is a political act. Kyla, for example, recognizes how her mom has taken on more battles than she has had to. She understands Bev's generation was forced to live within a society that was less comfortable with young, single, and queer mothers. As a child, she witnessed the pressure placed upon her mother and how she responded to it. Kyla believes that she's grown up in an era far more accepting of feminism, fluid gender expression, sexual orientation, and diverse family types. She also thinks that there is now more tolerance, and a greater chance of possible positive role models for her as a queer woman. She is grateful for the ground-breaking work done by previous feminist mothers like her mother.

Both daughters speak about the support they received from Bev for their plans to have children. They name her feminist mothering as a positive model of parenting that they would draw upon should they become mothers themselves. Kyla speaks of her mom's lived example as a queer single mother and of the support she has offered Kyla who is planning to have a child and

co-parent with another woman. Sonia is grateful for the encouragement she has experienced from Bev for her personal plans to conceive and raise a child on her own terms, with or without a partner.

Another feminist mother, May, who moved from Guyana to Canada in her twenties, clearly understands the power she has as a forty-year-old and recently separated heterosexual mother of two biracial cisgender teenage daughters. Like Bev, and the other feminist mothers I interviewed, May respects her own capacity to resist the social pressure placed upon her to engage in interpersonal adult-child dynamics that encourage adult domination of power and control. She also understands her ability to establish alternative rules and parenting practices based upon her own experiences, knowledge, and feminism to those prescribed by institutional motherhood:

To be a mother to me is a big thing. As I say, you have the next generation in your hand. And we can do a lot to shape that, regardless of whatever is out there; you can still make a big impact being a mother. I really believe in mothering. It's a feminist thing. It's a very special power that women have that we should not lose sight of. We're raising children that will take our place, and they're 'gonna shape that world.... We can help them think critically on different issues by presenting them with all these ideas. I'm trying to give them a new sense of what it is to be women. I'm trying to give them some understanding of where oppression is and to encourage them to always seek justice and to resist the current structure. (Green, *Practicing* 86)

The result of engaging in open and honest relationships that are not based on a hierarchy of adult power over children also foregrounds how feminist mothering can be a site of resistance and a place of empowerment for mother and child alike.

In 2007, ten years after my initial interview with May, her eldest daughter, Gemma, is on the cusp of her twenty-sixth birthday, is recently divorced, and self-identifies as biracial, cisgender, heterosexual, and feminist. She credits her mother's feminist parenting for her own sense of autonomy, independence, and the confidence that she has developed and needs to work within the Canadian music industry as a musician composing music, writing and singing lyrics, and producing popular music. Reflecting upon the influence of May's feminist parenting on her own identity and life, Gemma tells me the following: "I've always identified myself as a feminist. I've always felt feminism is a positive thing. It just means that you believe that women should be equal in all aspects of everything in terms of getting paid the same in terms of just being treated fairly" (Green, *Practicing* 118).

Gemma explicitly thanks her mom for instilling a foundational value of being able to understand how the world is patriarchal and ways to challenge

its ideology and practice. She is grateful for learning how to respectfully speak her own truth when she feels safe enough to do so. She speaks with admiration for May, who persistently supports her in her career in popular music:

I think that coming from the background I came from made it a lot easier for me to believe in myself as a musician—that I could do it and not think less of myself because I am a woman and not be intimidated by all the males that are there a lot of times telling you “I don’t think so.” I think my mother encouraging us to be independent is a big part of that and knowing who we are.... I think it’s about embracing yourself as a woman. And about overcoming those barriers set up for us as women that are just a part of society and those stereotypes. And finding the confidence to deal with it and fight it in any way that you can. (Green, *Practicing* 118)

When envisioning the possibility of parenting her own child, Gemma declares the following:

I would want to prepare her for what’s out there. And I’d want to instill a strong sense of self, which I think was at the root of everything my mom did when she was raising us. She wanted us to feel confident and not to be intimidated as a woman by anything that might come at us. It all starts with confidence and I would definitely talk about that with my daughter, if I ever have one. (Green, *Practicing* 121)

In the early summer of 2007, I spent time with Shar, almost sixty-two years and her eldest daughter, Darcy, age thirty-nine years. Both are Euro-Canadian, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, and lone mothers. Shar has two biological adult children in their 30s, Darcy and a son, and two adopted children, a daughter a few years younger than Darcy and an infant whom Shar recently adopted. Darcy is the mother to a twelve-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son. Feminism for Shar is “not merely a theory but rather an embodied political worldview that informs her entire life,” and “like mothering, needs to be a lifetime commitment” (Green, *Practicing* 139). Darcy explains her feminism as “an underlying philosophy that can rear its head at times, and not at others, that’s based on the rights for women, and respects the work that other women have done to allow her and others to be where they are today” (Green, *Practicing* 143). The two mothers share a close relationship; they often finish each other’s sentences or only say two or three words because they know what the other is thinking or talking about. They constantly discuss their beliefs about the ways in which they raise their children and the thinking they put into their motherwork, particularly around values, communication, and the types of toys, clothes, activities, books, and movies they should encourage and allow.

Self-respect and effective respectful communication are important to both

mothers in their relationships with each other and with their children. Shar understands that her position and role of mother and grandmother is unique: “I’ve had the privilege most grandparents don’t have in having a huge hand in raising my grandchildren as well as being a pseudo parent in some ways. Not many grandmothers adopt a child that is not their grandchild” (Green, *Practicing* 145). As self-described co-parents, Shar and Darcy spend time together talking about and consciously raising Darcy’s youngest sister and Shar’s grandchildren in ways that do not replicate but rather trouble and contest patriarchal ideals of motherhood and parenting. Shar notes the following: “I end up in this situation where I’m saying to my daughter, ‘This is what I want for my grandchildren.’ And she’s saying, as the mother of those children, ‘This is what I’d rather you say.’” Because they are close, they figure out and decide together what they are going to do. Darcy practices her own matricentric feminist mothering in her relationship with her mother, and she consciously collaborates with Shar to deliberately challenge the institution of motherhood and to negotiate the social and cultural obstacles to their, as well as their children’s, self-determination and agency.

Key Findings

When feminist parents are aware of and challenge the institution of motherhood, they can define and practice mothering on their own terms. Rather than being a stagnant, mechanical, and formulaic practice, feminist mothering is alive and vibrant. By placing themselves, and not their children at the centre of their lives, feminist parenting becomes a dynamic place for creativity. These matricentric feminist mothers have been inspired to contest, trouble and challenge the roles, assumptions, and expectations placed on them and on the construction of families by patriarchal motherhood (Green, *Practicing* 159). As a result, their matricentric feminist mothering practices trouble the patriarchal institution of motherhood and create affirming and nurturing mother-child relationships that positively change mothering to be a site of feminist political activism, which empowers mothers as well as children. It is also a space in which feminist values of empowerment and self-governance are modelled and fostered in the daily lives of mothers and their families.

Although I have relied on research based on a select group of feminist mothers and their daughters, together they demonstrate the power, potential, and longevity of matricentric feminism in feminist mothering. Through their lived experiences of creating and engaging with feminist mothering practices that counter those prescribed by the institution of motherhood, they demonstrate how feminist mothers and feminist mothering can successfully confront the rules and ideology of motherhood and rework the mould of this patriarchal institution. The matricentric feminist mothering developed by

these women has cultivated interconnectivity with their children that offer ways to resolve potential intergenerational rifts between mothers and daughters. The voices of both mothers and daughters highlighted here express their experiences of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy through their exposure to an embodied knowledge of feminist mothering, whether it is that of mothers or daughters.

The power and significance of matricentric feminist mothering is evident in the experiences of the daughters of feminist mothers. Each daughter I interviewed spoke passionately of the particular need for, and practice of, a feminist gender-based analysis of social systems, including patriarchal, intersectional, and interpersonal social relations that privilege some people over others due to social identifiers, such as ability, age, education, ethnicity/race, gender, sex, sexuality, and social class. They comment on how they value the lessons and their continued conversations with their moms about how society is constructed and functions. They appreciate being able to recognize that everyone is located within that constructed society, and how people can be positively and/or negatively affected by it in complex ways (Green, "Empowering" 16).

They also acknowledge and confirm the risks and struggles their moms took to ensure they raised them in the ways that were faithful to their mothers' feminisms. They especially acknowledge the importance of their mothers in encouraging and involving them in discussions about a range of ideas and decisions, and the importance of fostering close and egalitarian relationships. During these sometimes uncomfortable conversations, they note how as mother and daughter, they are candid about their feelings and ideas. They recognize that together they learn how to think and speak for themselves, and how to also engage in respectful and sincere relationships. They all speak of the positive influence their moms have on their own understandings and practices of feminism and of the respect they and their mothers have for each other, particularly when their feminisms may not replicate that of their mothers' (Green, *Practicing* 147).

Furthermore, matricentric feminism offers daughters various opportunities to develop their own feminisms and future mothering practices should they become parents. It also fosters feminist motherlines that connect mothers and daughters and helps them to understand how their life stories are linked with previous generations through a mother tongue of relational discourse (Le Guin). These close relationships based upon matricentric mothering and feminist motherlines assist mothers and children to develop authority through exposure to their embodied knowledge of feminist mothering. They are also given the opportunity to develop a lifecycle perspective and a worldview of interconnectivity, which offers them ways to create parenting perspectives and practices that contest those prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood (Green, "Empowering" 18).

Foundations to Be Built Upon

The lessons of these particular feminist mothers and their daughters provide a foundation for other parents to dream, create, develop, and live their own empowered parenting practices. The examples of how Willow, Niere, and Bev step away from compulsory heterosexual relationships and other patriarchal expectations of mothers to create families on their own terms offer others who do not meet societal expectations of mother and parent the possibility of also creating matricentric practices that suit them. Kyla reflects upon the influence of her mother's queer identity on her own sense of self and future possibilities to be a mother as a bisexual woman. At a time when gender and sexuality rights continue to be contested and expanded, these lived examples provide concrete illustrations of how matricentric feminist mothering has helped to create successful alternative families beyond the narrowly prescribed heterosexual nuclear family. They may also provide a foundation from which to develop parenting practices for families that challenge notions of who can be defined as mother and what types of compositions create and define family. This may include parents raising gender fluid kids, platonic parents who are increasingly creating families and raising children alone or together, and families with trans parents (Green and Friedman).

The matricentric approaches used by these feminist mothers demonstrate ways of engaging in more egalitarian relationships with children that counter those often expected and performed in helicopter parenting and intensive mothering methods where children are the primary focus. Their feminist mothering exemplifies specific approaches to disrupting child-centric motherhood and dislodging sacrificial motherhood. They model an alternative way to parent that is more in line with parenting practices that create “flexible and open family environments,” whereby each family member is treated equally and with respect (Odenweller et al. 411). As a result of this type of parenting, children are more likely to be assertive, mature, and self-reliant; they will have more resilience in adverse situations, have more interpersonal competence, and have more ability adapt to changing environments (Odenweller et al. 410-11). Their matricentric feminist mothering practices provide clear examples for others about how to engage in this alternative parenting.

In her recent book *Happy Parents Happy Kids*, Canadian mothering writer Ann Douglas speaks to the importance and value of keeping the mother central to parenting. During an interview on Mother's Day 2019 with CBC Radio One's *Weekend Morning Show* host Nadia Kidwai, Douglas talked about the significance of ensuring the wellbeing and autonomy of mothers. Although Douglas may have been drawing on the popularity of self-help discourses in her popular blog and book, she, nevertheless, centres mothers in her advice about helpful parenting strategies; she notes that parenting starts with how

mothers feel about mothering, what they think about parenting, and how they take care of their mental, emotional, and physical health. She also specifies the need to create the right parenting strategies for both parent and children (Douglas). She argues being parent centred is essential to parenting in an age of anxiety where Canadian families are living under increasing stressors. Matricentric feminist mothering strategies presented in this article may well be suited to some parents who are contending with these anxiety challenges.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this longitudinal intergenerational study provides meaningful insights, there are limitations. First, the sample is relatively small and focused on effectively homogeneous, normative families. Expanding the number of mothers and families—as well as including a diverse array of folks regarding ability, age, class, ethnicity/race, gender, sex and sexual orientation—would enrich future research. How may matricentric parenting take shape within the context of alternative families? For instance, how may it take shape for queer family members that transgress normative roles or in the context of reproductive, communication, or disability technologies of family creation? Second, this study is somewhat dated; the focus is on parents of children born in the late 1970s to mid-1990s. Research including the grandchildren of mothers of this generation would address the intergenerational effects of matricentric parenting. Engaging younger age groups of parents who are committed to and are practicing matricentric parenting in their unique ways would also enrich and move the research forwards. And, finally, because research in this area is in its infancy, there are many avenues future researchers may explore to advance knowledge of matricentric mothering and its effects on mothers, children, parent-child relationships, and parent-parent relationships. These may include feminist mothers parenting today within social conditions of the Internet, climate change, and fundamental conservatism as well as in various movements, such as #blacklivesmatter, #me too, and the resulting backlash.

Endnote

1. The names used to identify the mothers and daughters in this article are their given names or pseudonyms, depending upon the autonomous decision of each person.

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Relational Resistance: (Re)telling and (Re)living Our Stories as Canadian Muslim Mothers and Daughters

*Drawing upon my experiences as a Canadian Muslim woman and mother, I engaged in a two-year narrative inquiry (Clandinin; Clandinin and Connelly) alongside three Canadian Muslim girls, and their mothers, as the girl co-inquirers transitioned into adolescence. Reverberating across the stories co-inquirers and I shared are experiences of living in the midst of, and in relation to, multiple arrogant perceptions (Lugones) and single stories (Adichie) of who we are— or should be—as good Muslim mothers and daughters. However, sharing, living, and inquiring into these stories alongside one another foregrounded the many ways we lived stories of relational resistance (Saleh, *Stories We Live and Grow By*).*

*Ben Okri asserts that “one way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves” (46). Re-presenting my inquiry journey alongside one pair of mother (Layla) and daughter (Maya) co-inquirers, I make visible many of the stories we live by, with, and in (Clandinin; (Saleh, *Stories We Live and Grow By*.) and how, together, we inquired into many of the stories that have been planted in us, the stories we are planting in ourselves and others, and the stories that we are relationally shaping and reshaping alongside one another. Thinking alongside Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s (1995) conceptualization of chosen communities as sites of resistance to taken-for-granted, dominant narratives, I make visible how we resisted arrogant perceptions and single stories of us as Muslim mothers and daughters.*

Maya¹: There's one kid, he's from ... I'm not sure where, but he was in my class because he was kept back a grade, so I see [other students] saying mean things to him like, "Go back to your country!" and I'm like, "This is his country."

Layla: Good for you ... Good for you for speaking up though.

The above conversational excerpt is rooted from within a two-year narrative inquiry (Clandinin; Clandinin and Connelly) alongside three pairs of Canadian Muslim mothers and daughters (Saleh, *Stories We Live and Grow By*).² As a Canadian Muslim woman, mother, daughter, granddaughter, educator, and beginning scholar whose eldest daughter was in the midst of transitioning into adolescence, I had many wonders about the experiences of other Muslim mothers and daughters during this time of significant life transition³ (Brown and Gilligan). I especially wondered about how dominant narratives from within and across Muslim and other communities in Canada shape our lives and experiences. Despite—or perhaps because of—the prevalence of stories of Muslim females as victims of oppression⁴ in various media and literature (Bullock and Jaffri; Sensoy and Marshall), little is known about our diverse experiences—particularly the experiences of Muslim mothers and daughters composing lives and identities alongside one another in familial and community places in Canada.

Ben Okri asserts that “one way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves” (46). Alongside three Muslim mothers (Safaa, Ayesha, and Layla) and their daughters (Rayyan, Zahra, and Maya), I narratively inquired into many of the stories that have been planted in us, the stories we are planting in ourselves and others, and the stories that we are relationally shaping and reshaping as Muslim mothers and daughters.

Rooting and Growing a Narrative Inquiry

Connelly and Clandinin (“Narrative Inquiry”) help me to understand that, as both phenomenon and methodology, narrative inquiry “is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study” (375). Narrative inquiry is rooted in a Deweyan (pragmatic and transactional) philosophy of life as experience and experience as education. John Dewey asserts that all experience stems and grows from previous experience. Drawing upon Dewey's ideas and his criteria of experience —*interaction* and *continuity* enacted in *situations*—Clandinin and Connelly develop the metaphoric three dimensions of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place.

Believing in the storied nature of life and experience (Bruner; Crites) and that I am an inextricable part of the research phenomena and process, I have engaged in an extensive autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly; Saleh et al.) into the stories I live *by*, *with*, and *in* throughout the research. In asserting we live *by* stories, I draw upon a narrative conception of identity (Connelly and Clandinin, *Shaping a Professional Identity*). I also believe that we live *in* stories—in the midst of continually unfolding personal, familial, intergenerational, social, cultural, temporal, linguistic, institutional, and other narratives (Clandinin). The work of David Morris has helped me to understand that living *with* stories is an ongoing process of living in relation to the countless narratives we are always in the midst of. Alongside co-inquirers, I sought to co-compose this research in ways rooted in relational ethics (Clandinin et al., *The Relational Ethics*; Menon et al.) as we made visible the multiplicity of stories we live *by*, *with*, and *in*.

Rooting and Growing Relationships and Research Texts

Relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do.
—Clandinin and Connelly 189

Following institutional ethics approval in January 2015, I contacted several friends, former colleagues, and community liaisons with connections from within and across diverse Muslim communities and larger community organizations to help in my search for potential mother and daughter co-inquirer pairs. I asked for help in connecting with potential participants who self-identified as Canadian Muslim mothers and daughters, with girl/daughter co-inquirers who had grown up in Canada and were in the process of transitioning into adolescence (approximately eleven or twelve years old at the commencement of our research). Introduced by different friends and colleagues, I was blessed with the opportunity to narratively inquire alongside three Muslim mothers (Safaa, Ayesha, and Layla) and their daughters (Rayyan, Zahra, and Maya).

Between February 2015 and March 2017, co-inquirers and I lived and inquired alongside one another in many familial and community places, including our homes, parks, masjids (mosques), and restaurants. Although I believe that our experiences within school places undeniably shape our lives and experiences, I also believe, like Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011), that school curriculum making has often been privileged over familial curriculum making in the study of curriculum.⁵ For this reason, I purposely sought to engage alongside co-inquirers into a world of curriculum making not often recognized, particularly for Canadian Muslim children, youth, and families.

Co-composed inquiry field texts (often referred to as “data”) included the following: multiple transcribed conversations alongside mothers and daughter co-inquirer pairs (together and individually), researcher and co-inquirer reflective writing and artistic representations, field notes, text messages, letters, photographs, and other personal and familial artifacts. Following several seasons of inquiry, and still in the midst of conversations alongside co-inquirers, I began the process of looking across field texts to discern narrative threads (Clandinin et al., “Reverberations”) that resonated across field texts—for each co-inquirer, pair of mother and daughter co-inquirers, and all six co-inquirers. I did this by discerning patterns of continuities, discontinuities, silences, resonances, tensions, and wonders within and across field texts. Throughout this process, I typed notes of what I understood to be threads resonating within and across our stories and brought these notes with me to conversations with all three pairs of mother and daughter co-inquirers. During these conversations, I asked variations of the following questions: Is anything missing? Did I misunderstand anything? Is this how you understand the stories we lived and inquired into together? All six co-inquirers approved of the narrative threads I identified and helped to elucidate and/or identify resonant threads.

Rooting (Research) Relationships alongside Layla and Maya

Me: I was thinking about how this is one of our last research conversations ...

Layla: I was thinking the other day about how bad I feel that you have to go back and listen to these conversations again [laughing] ... Maya, can you get closer to *A3mto* [Arabic for Auntie] Muna’s phone so she can hear you later?

Maya: Want to listen to me chew *A3mto* Muna? [laughing as she chews near the phone]

Layla: [Laughing] This girl is so not me ... she’s social, but she’s so sarcastic too ...

A key commitment I hold as a narrative inquirer is to re-present the stories co-inquirers and I shared, inquired, and lived alongside each other in ways that honour the contexts, complexities, and nuances of our sharing and experiences. Margot Ely notes that “our reports must glow with life. This not only to honor our stories but, more important, to support the ethic that undergirds them ... narrative researchers are obligated to present the stories of those people in ways that cleave as closely as possible to the essence of what and how they shared” (569). Thus, rather than attempting to (shallowly) re-

present living and inquiring alongside all three mother and daughter co-inquirer pairs, in the following sections, I focus upon inquiring alongside one mother and daughter co-inquirer pair—Layla and Maya⁶—to give a sense of our relational resistance (Saleh, *Stories We Live by, with, and In*) to arrogant perceptions (Lugones) and single stories (Adichie) from within and across Muslim and other communities in Canada.

A good friend introduced me to her younger sister, Layla, almost fifteen years ago. Layla and I have built a strong friendship over the ensuing years, with my children calling Layla “*A3mto*” and her children doing the same with me. Layla has five children (by birth order): Ahmed, Maya (daughter co-inquirer), Adam, Rema, and Jamal. Layla was born in Canada to Lebanese immigrant parents, and Maya’s father, Mahmoud, was born in Lebanon and immigrated to Canada as a young child. Layla and Maya’s family have composed their lives in rural Alberta’s Tree Town⁷ for almost fifteen years. After hearing about my search for mother and daughter co-inquirer pairs from her sister, Layla contacted me to express an interest in participating in this research alongside Maya. While I recognized that I needed to be wakeful (Greene) to how our already close relationships would shape our inquiry, I felt that it was important to include Layla’s and Maya’s stories of experiences as Canadian Muslim females composing their lives in a rural Alberta context.

Rooting and Growing Stories of Relational Resistance in (Our Chosen) Community

If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.

—Lorde 137

In a paper (delightfully) titled “Resistance and Insubordination,” Hilde Lindemann Nelson discusses the process by which groups of people can come together to resist taken-for-granted, dominant narratives. She differentiates between “found” and “chosen” communities by asserting that we are all members of found communities—that is, communities within the places we find ourselves, such as schools, workplaces, and nations. However, drawing upon the work of Marilyn Friedman, Nelson also describes the powerful possibilities of communities of *choice*—particularly for women:

Rather than accept as binding the moral claims of the communities in which they find themselves, Friedman points out, on reaching adulthood women can form *radically different communities based on voluntary association*. She invokes both friendship and urban relationships as models for this sort of chosen community. Because such communities can focus “on people who are distributed throughout

social and ethnic groupings and who do not themselves constitute a traditional community of place” (Friedman 1989, 290) and because women are a prime example of such a distributed group, chosen communities are particularly important for women. (my emphasis, 23)

Over time, I have come to recognize and appreciate how, through our narrative inquiry, Maya, Layla, and I formed a chosen community within which we were able to co-create spaces to (re)live and (re)tell “morally self-defining narratives” (Nelson 24).

Although a thread woven throughout my inquiries alongside co-inquirers was our relational resistance (Saleh, *Stories We Live and Grow By* 207) to dominant narratives of who we are or should be as Muslim mothers/women and daughters/girls, I am wakeful to how matricentric feminism (O’Reilly) bolstered our resistance. Andrea O’Reilly explains that matricentric feminism is “a mother-centred mode of feminism” (3) that is not simply for biological mothers; it is inclusive of “all people who do the work of mothering as a central part of their life” (1). She asserts that undergirding her work and this form of feminism is the affirmation that “mothering matters, and it is central to the lives of women who are mothers” (1). Through our motherline inquiries, however, co-inquirers and I also illuminated the relational resistance we engaged in through our *sisterlines*, or how we are supported and sustained in our mothering by other girls and women, not necessarily connected to us by blood but by the heart. My inquiries alongside mother co-inquirers further highlighted how, at times, our daughters can mother us (Saleh, *Stories We Live and Grow By*).

Our Relational Resistance to Multiple Arrogant Perceptions and Single Stories

The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In her TED talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that single stories are created when places and/or people are repeatedly (mis)represented in reductive, monolithic ways. For me, single stories are intimately connected to Maria Lugones’s conceptualization of arrogant perception. Of particular salience for the experiences co-inquirers and I (re)told and (re)lived alongside one another, Lugones elucidates her conceptualization of “world”-travelling, in which “a ‘world’ need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few

people. Some ‘worlds’ are bigger than others” (10). Lugones highlights how in foregrounding variations of the many selves we embody, we travel within, across, and between myriad personal and social worlds. She emphasizes, however, that we “world”-travel with varying degrees of (un)health⁸ and/or (dis/)ease, as there are “worlds” where we are constructed by/with arrogant (rather than loving) perception.

Through my narrative inquiries alongside co-inquirers, I am more wakeful to how although there are countless stories—constructed and enforced by different individuals, families, and communities—of who can be deemed a ‘good’ (Muslim) girl/daughter and woman/mother, each construction involves the creation and perpetuation of a single story of ‘goodness.’ Inquiring alongside mother and daughter co-inquirers has made me wakeful to how single stories of goodness are undergirded by personal and social constructions of normativity (Goodwin and Huppatz). Because these single stories can be deeply rooted, those considered to be on the margins of, or outside, the borders (Menon and Saleh) of constructions of goodness can be arrogantly perceived as deficient or lacking in goodness. However, considering the diversity of stories co-inquirers and I shared of our experiences in relation to single stories of goodness as Muslim daughters and mothers, it is important to note that these stories are neither fixed nor frozen; for, as Goodwin and Huppatz (2010) assert, the form and expression of constructions of goodness are rooted in ever-shifting personal, cultural, social, geographic, temporal, and generational narratives, contexts, and expectations.

The following sections illuminate some of our stories of living in the midst of, and in relation to, multiple arrogant perceptions and single stories of who we ‘are’ or ‘should’ be as good Canadian Muslim mothers and daughters. However, I simultaneously illuminate how, as we told, retold, lived, and relived⁹ (Clandinin; Clandinin and Connelly) our stories within our chosen community, Layla, Maya, and I engaged in relational resistance to these unhealthy narratives.

“Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover” (Maya, Summer 2015)

In the summer of 2015, I visited with Layla and Maya in their home in Tree Town for our first research conversation. During this conversation, Maya offered me the reflective research journal she had been keeping for several months in anticipation of our research conversation. One of Maya’s first entries in the summer before starting grade six read as follows: “At school when it’s hot out and all of the girls are wearing shorts and tank tops and I can’t wear that stuff it’s kind of hard, and when I swim all the girls wear bikinis and I have to wear shorts and a swim shirt, but clothing has nothing to do with my personality in other words—don’t judge a book by its cover.” I

responded by telling Maya that as a woman in hijab,¹⁰ I know how frustrating it can be to feel (overly) covered in warmer weather. Maya sighed and said, “It sucks. My friend Yasmeen is Muslim and can wear shorts, tank tops, and even bikinis.” Layla responded to Maya’s words with understanding, but also by reminding her of the diversity of individual and familial faith and practice: “It’s hard because I know that clothes are a really big deal for her ... I try to tell her that not all Muslims practice the same and that we don’t have to do what everyone else is doing.”

Later in our inquiry, Layla stressed the importance of encouraging Maya to be active in sports and extracurricular activities, not just to build relationships in Tree Town, but also because she wants Maya to pursue her passions. In response, Maya excitedly talked about practicing multiple figure skating routines for an upcoming Tree Town skating exhibition. Layla discussed how she sometimes makes slight alterations to Maya’s skating costumes because the skirts are “really short”:

Layla: She wears thick tights anyway, so it’s okay [laughing]. But some of them are *really* short...

Maya: I don’t like it when they’re so short like that.

Layla: But do you have a hard time because your costume is different?

Maya: Kind of ... but, I don’t really care because I always have nice dresses. I mean everyone has long sleeves though ...

Layla: They all have long sleeves, but they’re usually very short. Like last year, I just added an extra piece of material at the bottom so it didn’t really make much of a difference; it just looked more flowy.

Although Layla and Maya repeatedly and creatively (re)negotiated dressing expectations, our inquiry highlighted how arrogant perceptions and single stories about how Maya should dress as a good Muslim girl can be difficult for both Maya and Layla to navigate. During a conversation with Layla in the early winter of 2016, she shared her frustration with feeling judged in her mothering when a female relative expressed displeasure after seeing a picture of Maya in one of her skating costumes. Layla and I agreed that Maya’s skating costumes were not at all inappropriate, and Layla said the following:

I get it ... someone seeing a picture, it can come across like, “Shoo labsee?” [Arabic for “What is she wearing?”] ... but at the same time, that’s the problem with our kids; they can’t participate in anything because of stuff like that, you know? ... and Maya doesn’t seem to care that I alter her costumes; she just loves skating. I asked her if she minded and she said no, and you *know* that she’d tell me if she didn’t like it. [laughing]

Giving a sense of Layla's embodied knowing (Johnson; Waheed) as a woman in hijab, Layla mused, "It's so sad because people see us and make assumptions about our kids or the way we are as parents ... the stereotypes are so strong sometimes." Towards the end of our inquiry, in response to pressures that both Layla and Maya felt from family members and others in their community for Maya to don hijab,¹¹ Layla repeatedly assured Maya that donning hijab is a *choice* that must be carefully made with awareness of multiple considerations. However, she also stressed that "it won't stop her from doing what she wants to do if she chooses to wear it."

The stories Layla and Maya shared continue to make me contemplate how single stories and arrogant perceptions related to dress from within and across Muslim and other communities in Canada can be extremely challenging for Muslim girls and their mothers to negotiate. We often struggle to honour and balance personal, familial, cultural, and religious/faith-based narratives with the awareness that, no matter what we do, we will be deemed too covered by some and not covered enough by others. However, alongside Layla, and supportive family, friends, teammates, and coaches, Layla and Maya creatively shifted boundaries and expectations through slight alterations to her costumes and by continuing to pursue Maya's passion for figure skating. As the following sections will elucidate, however, expectations related to dress were only some of the myriad "shoulds" we resisted within our chosen community.

**"I Always Tell Them Don't Ever Be Ashamed of Who You Are"
(Layla, Fall 2015)**

In the late fall of 2015, Layla shared her surprise upon receiving a delivery of flowers accompanied by a supportive note from an anonymous neighbour following the Paris terror attacks in November.¹² "The thought was so nice, especially when so much is going on with the politics and all the talk about Muslims and whatever." I asked Layla if she felt a difference towards her following the attacks, particularly as one of only a few Muslim women in hijab in Tree Town.

Layla: I don't really feel racism in town. I really don't. But we have an opinion page in Tree Town, and I see a lot in there ... I don't see it when I'm out and about or at the arena or anything. At the arena, we're like a family, all the people who have their kids in hockey and skating; we all kind of know each other ... and yes, I might get a few stares here and there, but I don't think about it ...

Me: That opinion page you were talking about, that was in the paper?

Layla: No it was online. There's lots of racism in there actually, like one guy was responding to a lady who was like [in relation to recent

terror attacks], “They’re not real Muslims,” and he was like, “No, they’re all like that.”

Troubled, I asked Layla if she knows the person who posted that comment:

No, because he commented anonymously. But there’s this one dad from Ahmed’s [her son] hockey team that wrote something in the opinion page. He said, “*they* need to do something; their people need to stop them.” ... So I said to [my husband] Mahmoud, “It’s funny that he thinks we can do something, like I forgot I have ISIS on my callers list [sarcastic tone].” I mean we don’t know who these people are, and we can’t stop them, but others think we can. I wish we could, but we can’t.

As I murmured my agreement with Layla’s words, Maya tearfully interjected, “I don’t think Muslims can do that kind of stuff. They’re not Muslim But, yeah, they think we’re terrorists.” Listening to Maya with concern in her eyes, Layla said, “*Yimkin fitna bi’l hakee shway* [Arabic for “Maybe we let our conversation get out of hand”] ... but they have to know about it too. I always tell them don’t ever be ashamed of who you are.”

This conversation gives a sense of the multiple times we relationally resisted single stories and arrogant perceptions of Muslims as terrorists (or as terrorist sympathizers) alongside one another. However, our conversations continue to make me wonder about the ways single stories and arrogant perceptions—whether they stem from family, friends, neighbours, peers, or strangers—shape the experiences of Muslim children growing into adolescence and adulthood. Thinking of Maya’s tearful comments during our conversation, I continue to wonder about how parents and other educators can discuss potentially painful arrogant perceptions and single stories others may hold of Muslims and Islam in ways that encourage awareness and understanding while simultaneously rejecting fear and cynicism.

“This Is How We Live. I’m Not Going to Hide or Put on a Lie for You” (Layla, Fall 2016)

Inquiring alongside Layla and Maya (and other co-inquirers) prompted my realization that we contend with multiple forms of arrogant perceptions—from within and across Muslim and other communities in Canada—as Muslim girls/daughters and women/mothers. During our first conversation in Tree Town, I laughed as Maya and my daughter Noor posed for a selfie. Layla incredulously asked, “Are you guys taking a selfie while we’re talking?” Noor responded, “Yeah, I’m posting it on Snapchat.” Maya added, “Mama, I just downloaded Snapchat.” Layla cautioned, “Remember what *A3mo* [Arabic for Uncle] did when you got Vine?” Maya sighed, “Yeah, he’s so annoying.” Layla and Maya explained:

Maya: I posted a video of [my younger brother] Jamal saying, “Heyy Girlll!” on my Vine [laughing] ...

Layla: And her uncle must’ve seen it, and he called Mahmoud [Maya’s father], and was like, “Mahmoud, did you see what your daughter is doing?”

Me: For God’s sake ... our girls are so policed ...

Layla: I know.

Several months later, as Maya was in grade seven, Layla and Maya shared how a family friend storied Maya’s intentions in attending school sports games in unsettling ways:

Layla: Maya and some girls went to watch the game, and Yasmeeen’s mom goes there and texts me, “Your daughter is not in the gym.” So I texted Maya, “Where are you?”

Maya: I was at a friend’s locker.

Layla: Because *A3mto* said she seen you with boys.

Maya: I’m with my friend at her locker, and these boys were following us and even asked us to sit with them, and I was like “No.”

Layla: But Yasmeeen’s mom took it that these guys are hanging out with them ... so she called me after the game, and I told her that Maya said that these boys were following her and she was like, “I was going to tell you, but I wanted to see if she would tell you first.”

Maya: I got really mad ...

Layla: She was like, “Don’t get mad at me, but your daughter doesn’t really watch the game” ...

Maya: No duh. It’s boring. We suck [laughing].

Layla: And I don’t like that about *A3rabs* [Arabic word for Arabs], like when they see a girl talking to boys, they think that there’s something going on, and I don’t like that. I used to talk to boys all the time, and they were just friends. My teacher’s son used to drive me to work experience every day because I was like, “Hell no, I’m not walking all that way alone.” And it’s funny because my dad knew but my uncles didn’t know because they wouldn’t like it.

Shaking my head at Layla’s words, I said, “So true ... it’s not fair.” Layla continued: “You know, if someone doesn’t accept her for who she is and she has to hide things, then they can just get lost ... This is me. You want me for who I am? Great. You don’t? Hit the road Jack. This is how we live, I’m not

going to hide or put on a lie for you.”

The stories Layla and Maya shared of feeling policed by the judgments of some of their close family and friends resonated profoundly with many of my experiences of feeling arrogantly perceived as a Muslim girl/daughter and woman/mother. In response to their stories that day, I shared my frustration at the countless times I have been told by those closest to me that something I do/say, or my children do/say, is inappropriate:

Me: We were taught to be trusting and that it's okay if someone mistreats you when it's people in our families who aren't being kind ... they love you so it's okay ...

Layla: Just suck it up.

Me: It's not our place to not like it.

Layla: Yeah, exactly.

Contemplating the many single stories and arrogant perceptions Maya, Layla, and I have experienced, and will likely continue to experience, as Canadian Muslim females, I think about how, within our chosen communities, we interrupted, disrupted, and relationally resisted stories of who we 'are' or 'should' be in ways that affirm our right to live in ways *we* deem appropriate, even if these unhealthy narratives stem from family, friends, or other loved ones.

Growing Forward ... Together

As I reconsider some of the stories that Maya, Layla, and I lived, shared, and inquired into, I think about how, at the commencement of this research, I had focused upon girls' transitions into adolescence as the most significant period of life transition. However, while adolescence is undoubtedly a period of significant life transition, this research has made me increasingly wakeful (Greene) to how both girls/daughters and women/mothers are *always* in transition, always in the process of imaginatively composing ourselves and lives in relation to countless people, places, and past and ongoing stories we live *by*, *with*, and *in*. Heilbrun conceptualizes transitions as follows:

A threshold experience ... providing to the actors involved the condition of liminality. The word "liminal" means "threshold," and to be in a state of liminality is to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another. But the most salient sign of liminality is its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing. (3)

For Heilbrun, liminal spaces of transitions are in-between spaces rife with uncertainty and unsteadiness but also with imagination and possibility. Layla, Maya, and I composed our lives and inquiry alongside each other for over two years and supported one another through many moments and periods of liminality—including shifts in relationships and mourning the passing of loved ones—as we lived in the midst of, and in relation to, multiple arrogant perceptions and single stories of goodness from within and across Muslim and other communities in Canada. However, (re)telling and (re)living our stories alongside one another within our chosen community created (liminal) spaces within which we were able to relationally resist and reshape countless stories of who we are should be as good Muslim mothers and daughters, and continually (re)compose ourselves and lives together.

Endnotes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all co-inquirers.
2. I gratefully acknowledge Killam Trusts for funding my doctoral research.
3. In their five-year study alongside one hundred participants between the ages of seven and eighteen attending a private school in Cleveland, Brown and Gilligan discuss how adolescence marks a “crossroads in women’s development: a meeting between girl and woman, an intersection between psychological health and cultural regeneration, a watershed in women’s psychology which affects both women and men” (1).
4. In my doctoral dissertation, drawing upon the work of several scholars, I write, “Muslim women—especially veiled Muslim women—are often storied by the media and in literature as any combination of the following: poor, uncivilized, oppressed, meek, exotic, suspicious, less-than, and primitive” (*Stories We Live by, with, and In* 38).
5. Huber et al. (2011) discuss curriculum as being composed within two worlds: school and familial curriculum-making worlds. They argue that although school curriculum making is recognized and accepted as a place where curriculum is composed, familial curriculum making (the curriculum that is composed within familial and community places) is not often recognized as an equally important site of curriculum making.
6. I chose to focus upon my inquiry alongside Layla and Maya in this article because I feel that the stories we (re)told and (re)lived alongside each other suit this article’s re-presentation of our inquiry. I have published a chapter about dwelling in uncertainty as I narratively inquired alongside Ayesha and Zahra (Saleh, “Dwelling (together)”), and in the near future, drawing upon my inquiry alongside Safaa and Rayyan, I will compose a paper about the racial discrimination that Black Muslim mothers and daughters face from within and across Muslim and other communities in Canada.

7. Pseudonym for a rural town in Alberta.
8. Here, I draw upon Lugones's conceptualization of lack of (un)health: "So, though I may not be at ease in the 'worlds' in which I am not constructed playful, it is not that I am not playful because I am not at ease. The two are compatible. But lack of playfulness is not caused by lack of ease. Lack of playfulness is not symptomatic of lack of ease but of lack of health. I am not a healthy being in the 'worlds' that construct me unplayful" (14).
9. I use these terms in a specific way throughout this work. Clandinin explains the following:
 "People *live* out stories and *tell* stories of their living. Narrative inquirers come alongside participants ... and begin to engage in narrative inquiry into our lived and told stories. We call this process of coming alongside participants and then inquiring into the lived and told stories *retelling* stories. Because we see that we are changed as we retell our lived and told stories, we may begin to *relive* our stories" (my emphasis, 34).
10. Although many scholars are careful to differentiate between the terms headscarf/veil and hijab—arguing that the concept of hijab is broader than a piece of fabric covering a woman's hair—I use the terms headscarf/veil and hijab interchangeably. I do this because this is the term many Muslim women use to refer to their headscarf/veil. However, the concept of hijab includes a requirement for men and women to observe modesty in demeanour and dress. The headscarf/veil is considered a form of hijab, and Islamic scholars from diverse Muslim communities differ in their opinions as to whether the headscarf is required to fulfill hijab for women.
11. Many Muslim individuals and communities believe that puberty marks the time when Muslim girls are required to don hijab.
12. A group of attackers killed 130 people and injured hundreds in coordinated attacks in Paris, France, on 13 November, 2015 (CBC News).

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Towards a Matricentric Feminist Poetics

The title of this article recalls that of Elaine Showalter's essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in which she posits "gynocritics" as a term for a mode of "feminist criticism ... concerned with woman as writer—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (25). Here, I call for a matricentric feminist criticism, or "matricritics," where the latter refers to that area of literary criticism concerned with the mother as a writer and the attendant subjects. In attempting to draw up a matricritics, I begin by acknowledging the current rise in English-language maternal writing. I then, in the first part of this three-part article, list a number of formal tendencies common to this body of writing, drawing particularly on "Accumulations (Appendix F)" by Kate Zambreno. In the second part, in direct response to this taxonomy, I speculate on and begin to sketch out a critical methodology for reading maternal writing. The third part of the article is given over to a creative matricritical reading of "Appendix F"; this standalone piece is suggestive of how we might conceive of a matricentric feminist reading methodology in practice. An afterword highlights the matricritical elements at work in this alternative close reading.

"It's time to let mothers have their word," clamours Susan Rubin Suleiman in her 1979 essay "Writing and Motherhood" (120). Coming three years after the publication of both Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*, this call was perhaps a belated one. However, forty years on from Suleiman's cry, the need for direct testimony to maternal experience remains a principal literary preoccupation. The recent spate of maternal literature, or so-called "mom-lit," in English-speaking countries testifies to the ongoing nature of this concern (Elkin; Sehgal; Skurnick). I would, however, like to suggest here that a number of these recent works of maternal literature assert a politics that supersedes the need for testimony: the writing of Joanna Walsh, Sarah

Manguso, Jenny Offil, Anna Prushinskaya, Sara Ruhl, Andrea Brady, Maggie Nelson, Sheila Heti, and Kate Zambreno, to name but a few, performatively and creatively rewrites motherhood. Irreverent and formally inventive, this “countercanonical” body of literature spans memoir, fiction, poetry, and autofiction; it often defies conventional genre classifications altogether and is as much an act of testimony as one of deliberately upending previous discourses (patriarchal, social, psychoanalytic, and feminist) around motherhood.¹ This body of maternal writing is significant for a number of reasons: not only does it situate itself at the forefront of experimental contemporary women’s writing in the UK and US, not only does it revision the maternal imaginary, but it also—to adapt Rosi Braidotti’s words on speaking “as a woman”—potentially empowers mothers and activates sociosymbolic changes in their condition.² I argue, therefore, that this maternal writing positions itself within a wider matricentric feminist project and, as such, calls for a method of criticism that affirms this project.

The title of this article is taken from Elaine Showalter’s “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” in which she called for a “gynocritics”—a mode of “feminist criticism ... concerned with woman as writer—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women” (25). I draw on her essay to propose here a “matricritics,” a matricentric feminist criticism concerned with mother as writer and the attendant subjects. In order to do so, I first, borrowing Showalter’s words, “outline a brief taxonomy, if not a poetics” (25) of maternal writing. I begin by referring to “Accumulations (Appendix F)” by Kate Zambreno, an explicit example of the kinds of formal invention and subversion common to this countercanon in order to provide an overview of the strategies used in this body of writing and to delineate a poetics of maternal literature. I speculate in the second part of this article on what a matricritics may look like. How can we as critics, as theorists, and/or as mothers read this literature? What might a matricentric feminist methodology look like? I call for a gently postcritical inclination in our work—one that seeks to take maternal writing at face value to attend better to what the maternal texts themselves are saying and making possible.² The third part offers a potential close reading of “Appendix F,” which as a standalone piece is suggestive of how we might conceive of a matricentric feminist reading methodology in practice. An afterword elucidates the matricritical elements at work in this reading.

Maternal Poetics

“Our first breast-feeding friendly piece!” tweeted an editor of *The White Review* when “Appendix F” was published. The essay was published online as a thin column to make it easy to scroll and read one handed while breastfeeding. As

such, it both established the nursing configuration, and with the insertion of a screen into the shared mother-child gaze, it gave permission to the split the dyad. A maternal act and one of maternal distraction, hovering closely to one of maternal finitude, the screen marks a pertinent and provocative incision in the nursing dyad, attested to by the vitriol directed towards a mother absorbed by the gaze of her iPhone and not her child. (It does interest me, this rage that flares up in response to an elsewhere absorbed mother, a reading mother, or, say, a thinking mother. Another version of this: to read, to think is to cease to be maternal.) Similar provocation occurs in a conversation between Zambreno and writer Marie Darrieussecq, published in *The Paris Review* in 2017, which is peppered with references to a “baby crying in background” (Darrieussecq and Zambreno). This performative mingling of the maternal day-to-day and highbrow culture seems to be Zambreno’s signature. *The White Review* piece continues this provocation: “I’ve been keeping a mental list of all the pieces of art that I’ve nursed Leo in front of this past year.” By placing maternal experience in spaces that have long overlooked (if not denied) it, Zambreno establishes a political position—one that foregrounds maternity as a central concern.³ It is no longer beside, or outside, the point.

Already, this brief introduction to “Appendix F” offers a glimpse of what a maternal poetics may look like: it is written in the first person and situated in everyday experience; it testifies and gives voice to maternal subjectivity; and it resists conventions and does not fit neatly into genre distinctions. But let us take a step back and begin this taxonomy with that first and still necessary act of testimony.

Maternal writing begins with an “I”; in a deft step, it pulls the mother out of the third person into the first. By positioning the mother as subject, it begins to unravel those discourses, notably patriarchal and psychoanalytic ones, that have long held “mother” in the third person as object or “other.” Discourses with which, as Marianne Hirsch argues in *The Mother / Daughter Plot*, feminism has often colluded: “Feminist writing and scholarship continuing in large part to adopt *daughterly* perspectives, can be said to collude with patriarchy in placing mothers in the position of object—thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility” (163).

Indeed, Hirsch queries the feminist “reliance on psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework and [the] psychoanalytic construction of mothering,” wherein psychoanalysis has tended to hold mother in position of “other” (167). Crucial to the matricentric feminist project by inhabiting a maternal “I,” this writing repositions a mother as a speaking subject and a desiring social subject—thus making stories, to paraphrase Hirsch, that begin with a mother and that grant her agency, subjectivity, and initiative (175).

Yet Andrea O’Reilly observes in *Matricentric Feminism* how difficult it can

be to speak as a mother and to “unmask” or “out” oneself, since the maternal paradigms are so insistent and motherhood so idealized. Nor should we make light of this here. To inhabit a maternal “I” is indeed a nerve-racking, doubt-inducing position. As Zambreno says, “I was nervous to take my breast out... I felt panicky and self-conscious.” This difficulty poses an equally important question to us as writers, theorists, and mothers in the matricentric feminist project: how willing are we to dismantle the myths around motherhood? If Adrienne Rich is a forerunner in this project, it is heartening to recall her words in “Some Notes on Lying,” where she urges us to delve still deeper:

Women are only beginning to uncover our own truths; many of us would be grateful for some rest in that struggle, would be glad just to lie down with the sherds we have painfully unearthed, and be satisfied with those. Often I feel this like an exhaustion in my own body.... The politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper. (191)

To delve still deeper, despite the exhaustion, gives an added charge to this maternal “I”: establishing that the project of writing as a mother is a politically committed one. To occupy in what the term suggests of political protest becomes an appropriate term here: writers do not so much inhabit as occupy a maternal first person. Their feminist position challenges previous inhibiting discourses and rewrites debilitating maternal representations. It seeks to do so without replacing old myths with new ones: the task is not to construct a new good mother.

How then do these texts occupy the “I”? There are four main strategies of political engagement that this body of writing employs: misreproduction, queering, formal engagement, and new materialist and phenomenological approaches. Misreproduction relates to a practice in which normative representations are deliberately reproduced imperfectly, thus destabilizing normative discourses. Representations of maternity that do not conform to idealizations, which are spattered with irreverence or humour, not only testify more exactly to the experience but also confront those idealized versions. “I became used to taking my breast out in art spaces ... in front of the El Greco ‘Holy Family’ at the Met ... her straddling me ... I figured if there were so many penises in that room it was okay to have my breast peek out through my leather jacket, like a floppy blue-veined sac of a sculpture, scratched and sad.” In the quote here from “Appendix F,” for example, the juxtaposing of the El Greco “Madonna and Child,” the toddler straddling the mother, and the phallic sculptures obliges a discomfiting revisioning of the maternal imaginary—one that recalls the misreproduction at work in the visual art of Cindy Sherman and Catherine Opie.

Second, since “Appendix F” plays with who or what is object, who or what

is subject, and who or what artwork, the text asks to be read as a queer text. “To queer motherhood,” writes O’Reilly, “is to destabilize patriarchal motherhood, particularly its ideological mandates of essentialization, normalization, naturalization, and biologicalization” (100). Non-normative (LGBTQ, single, adoptive, to name just a few) representations of motherhood help to undo patriarchal ideals. Although Zambreno’s text does reference a number of queer artists, it is not explicitly counter-heteronormative. However, the destabilizing of boundaries and bodies that happens in it recalls one of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s statements as to what queer could mean: “That’s one of the things ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made or can’t be made to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 7). As with many of the countercanonical texts, “Appendix F” is an open mesh, fissured and dissonant; it presents as an open mesh of possibilities and could thus be read as a queer reclaiming—where queering becomes a formal device not directly related to gender or sexuality. To queer as such becomes a useful tool in re-representing motherhood without asking it to signify monolithically.

Queering would be one formal device among the many that are used as a tool or a medium through which writers disturb previous notions of motherhood. Although form can be used mimetically, it can also be used subversively by upsetting the language that supports the discourses, it undermines them. The third strategy is, therefore, that of formal engagement. Formal aesthetics common to this maternal writing include disjointedness, interruption, splintering, fragmentation, polyphony, multiple figures, and shifting of pronouns. These texts thus frequently frustrate any attempt to produce a coherent subject and resist the possibility of a singular interpretation. As such, this countercanon enacts a politics that works to demythologize and de-essentialize the mother, all without creating a new bounded maternal subject. Formal innovation becomes a feminist practice. “We need accounts of maternal experiences that move the mother away from containers and receptacles altogether, that have other shapes and contours,” writes psychologist Lisa Baraitser (21). I would like to suggest here that this body of writing inhabits these other shapes and contours.

Fourth, the renewed engagement with the body enabled by new materialist and phenomenological approaches is forming a space within which writers can once more dwell in this long ignored arena of maternal experience. By taking a “perspective not of biology, but of experience” (Hirsch 163) or by championing phenomenology over ontology, texts depict maternal embodiment without essentializing it and forge versions of maternal subjectivity that arise from everyday practice. This occurs in “Appendix F” through its depiction of a fraught maternal day to day: “it had taken all of our energy to get there on the

subway, and it was almost closing time, and I couldn't find anywhere comfortable to nurse." These texts are more concerned with a mother does, not what she is; they situate the maternal in the everyday, multiple, disparate, and episodic experiences of mothering, and, as a result, they evade essentialist and biological approaches to motherhood.

Our countercanon could, thus, be defined as allying a maternal first person with a number of the political strategies discussed above. This brief taxonomy, or poetics, recognizes the occupation of a maternal 'I' in texts that are formally inventive, that give voice to maternal subjectivity in its variety, and that are often hard to grasp and hard to fix. Through acts of testifying, writing back and rewriting these texts fashion alternative maternal imaginaries; they couple a feminist stance with maternal interests and thus advance a matricentric-feminist project.

Perhaps here we as critics, theorists, writers, and mothers need pause once more, for it would be easy to gather together and then gloss these commonalities but harder to respond in kind. Texts that are hard to grasp and formally difficult ask us to read them differently and, perhaps, to respond to them with an approach close to their own. Hirsch writes that "the psychoanalytic frame in which we have been thinking has made us unable to hear" maternal stories (174). I would suggest that the many frames—historical, social, psychoanalytic, patriarchal, and even feminist—in which we have been thinking might mean we cannot hear these maternal stories. It would be too easy to co-opt or neutralize these maternal forms or to try and fit them into the already known and into conventional histories of literature. I would like to propose instead, in the second part of this article, that we adopt alternative methods for reading maternal writing. My hunch is that this countercanon looks to us, critics, to reangle our ways of reading and to tune out the hefty discourses that may be preventing us from hearing what is actually being said; it asks us to tune in as matricentric feminists.

Maternal Methods

In their introduction to a recent issue of *Feminist Review* on methods, editors Yasmin Gunaratnam and Carrie Hamilton underline that "feminist research and knowledge-making [demand] a distinct approach to empirical inquiry" (1). Likewise, I propose that matricentric feminist research and knowledge making demand a distinct approach to empirical inquiry, in which "empirical" refers not to an outmoded single methodological approach but to a breadth of modes of academic inquiry and knowledge seeking.

Motherhood has long been prey to misreadings and misinterpretations, as much within the academy as outside it, but motherhood studies today incites us to develop alternative models of critical approach. The terrain of motherhood

studies remains an unsettled one (O'Reilly), yet this indeterminacy arguably offers more scope for experimenting with methodologies, specifically matricentric ones. Drawing once again on Showalter, I understand that “the programme of [matri]critics is to construct a [maternal] framework for the analysis of [maternal] literature, to develop new models based on the study of [maternal] experience” (28).

What then might our new models of analysis look like? My sense is that we might find an approach among those current academic modes that tend towards the postcritical. The turn away from depth hermeneutics and towards other modes of criticism, specifically to attentive and affirmative methods, offers a number of suitable models for reading maternal writing. The ethical and political stances asserted by many of these methodologies chime with those at work in the countercanon itself. Could a reparative, postsymptomatic, close but not deep, or vulnerable reading orientation better affirm the politics of these source texts? (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Love; Page).

Following Showalter, I propose a mode of inquiry that is informed directly by the experiences, ethics, and aesthetics attested to in the maternal texts without “build[ing] new models for subjectivity that solidify and reify experience, processes to which ‘the mother’ as metaphor, figure or trope is particularly vulnerable” (Baraitser 3). If we look again to those facets of maternal writing enumerated in the second part of this article and join those to the reading orientations above, we can begin to construct a potential theoretical framework of matricritics. This framework remains undefined, and as with the writing, it seeks to try a variety of approaches in order to create a set of methods that could be more widely circulated. Pragmatically, however, some steps we might try out include the following:

First Person

As with current maternal writing, we might turn to a first person or confessional register in our criticism, thereby furthering the project of maternal subjectivity. In addition, the intimacy born from a dialogue between two maternal “I’s” begins to counter the previous “othering” of mothers.

Political and Ethical Position

We might take into account the politics and/or ethics proposed in the source text and seek to reproduce this in our own work, affirming the matricentric-feminist position inhabited by the author.

Describe Not Interpret

We could resist the common critical tendency towards pathological, symptomatic, and in-depth readings, and revel instead in taking the source text at face value, our role being only to describe not interpret (Love 375).

Beside, Neither Beneath nor Beyond

Similarly, we could explore methods of close reading that are positioned beside the source text—not seeking to reveal what is hidden beneath or to transcend to what is beyond (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 8).

Read Reparatively

We could replace a paranoid critical stance with a reparative one (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123-51).

Acknowledge Our Own Vulnerability

We could strip ourselves of our status as all-knowing critics, and acknowledge our own vulnerabilities as researchers. We could have the courage to “question assumptions and forms of certitude, to return to materials and change our minds” (Page 16).

Listen in to the Lesser Beats

We could listen in to the lesser beats of the texts and compose works of criticism that attend to these “lesser beats, the parts of life that do not get heard, or are misheard, ignored or erased in forms of remembering and in modes of telling” (Page 23).

Refrain from Essentialization and Biologicalization

We could refrain from the essentialization or biologicalization of mothers in our own work while finding modes—be these new materialist or phenomenological approaches—that allow for bodily and biological maternal experiences to be studied and written about.

A New Good Mother?

The critical process should challenge us to dismantle our own myths about maternity, even to out ourselves as flawed mothers. Holding to our aspiration to not reconstruct a new good mother, we may fragment, undermine or queer this figure, a stance that mirrors the techniques at work in the countercanon itself.

As such a tentative but ethically and politically appropriate matricritical framework begins to take shape—one that aligns the literary critical project with the practices of the literature it is considering. And writing now, I begin to imagine this critical practice being one of care, an attentive being-alongside, one which, as I describe it, which seems not to be talking about the work of a critic at all but the work of a mother.

In her book exploring the turn away from a hermeneutics of suspicion, *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski concludes with the following: “I want to move on: to try out different vocabularies and experiment with alternative ways of

writing, to think in a more sustained and concentrated fashion what other moods and methods might look like” (193). In this vein, I will finish by experimenting with a matricentric feminist reading of Zambreno’s breastfeeding friendly essay, “Appendix F.” This first person maternal piece reads “Appendix F” as it asks to be read—while breastfeeding. The text in italics is quoted directly from Zambreno’s “Accumulations (Appendix F),” whereas the words in regular type are my own.

A Maternal Reading

I’ve been keeping a mental list of all the pieces of art that I’ve nursed Leo in front of this past year, the essay begins, I am reading, my daughter is feeding, balanced between my upper thigh and left arm, I became used to taking my breast out in art spaces, and began to savour it with sometimes a fatigued perversity and other times something more sacred, my phone’s in my right hand, in the corner of the nearly pitch-black room where gold thread made geometric curtains, right thumb caressing screen to scroll downwards, or recently on a bench in front of the El Greco “Holy Family” at the Met, the way in which Mary presses down on her breast and points the nipple towards baby Jesus, both her and Joseph gazing downwards at the central point of the baby, the baby’s little hand on his mother’s hand, left hand supporting my daughter’s head, my palm meeting the bald patch at the back of her head where the hair has rubbed away, people were staring, I read, listening to the glug of milk as it hits the back of her throat, I nursed Leo outside the bubblegum phallic Franz West sculpture at MASS MoCA, amidst the industrial landscape and grey cool light, her straddling me, downy head bobbing back and forth between each breast, feeling my right breast savagely empty, and this fall in front of a Harry Dodge video at the New Museum’s gender show, because there was a bench to sit on, I lose my place, people were staring, reread the same lines, her straddling me, downy head, at the noise of air being gulped with the feed I stop reading and put down the phone to better her latch, I figured if there were so many penises in that room it was okay to have my breast peek out through my leather jacket, like a floppy blue-veined sac of a sculpture, scratched and sad, my jumper is slipping down, I wonder whether to change side, but keep her on the same side to make sure she gets all the hind milk, scratched and sad, aware of my daughter’s hot creamy skull skin against the skin of my palm, the two skins not unlike, I still felt shaky and strange occupying public space in the city with a baby. A maintenance worker told me I could sit on the wooden pews in the atrium that were part of the exhibit, she’s pawing at my breast, I still felt shaky and strange, and I’m leaning the phone on her head, just beside her beating fontanelle, but the security guard told me I couldn’t as I approached, I wince as a nail catches my skin, if Louise Lawler were there she probably would have let me breastfeed on the pews, because isn’t her work about critiquing these institutional spaces, I lose my place

again or the screen slips, *and points the nipple towards baby Jesus*, I read, I'm still on the first paragraph, *but the security guard told me I couldn't as I approached, I apologized*, I don't remember that apology, but I recognize it, *I used to be so aware of people staring at me when I took my breast out*, her head drops back into my hand, I stroke her cheek with my forefinger to encourage her to feed a bit more, *They might look at me*, she's finished feeding, *but I don't look any more at them looking at me*, her head lolls, *I've stopped even thinking about someone staring at me*, falls away, *at least when with the baby*, she's bleary, *It's just the two of us*, dazed, *together*, so am I, *and there's a freedom to that*, her eyes just visible beneath the lids trying to close, the screen blurring, I sit her up to burp her before letting her fall asleep on my chest so that I can continue reading. She wraps her fingers around mine, a dribble of milk spills out of her loose mouth and runs down her cheek, runs down my still bare breast.

Afterword

Our response to a passage of criticism where nothing appears to happen, where the critic appears to be almost inert, is perhaps one of deflation. Although I am resistant to the need to explicate, hopeful that the methodological elements are visibly mobilized by the example above, I am aware that for such a reading to gain traction these points are reliant on identification. I would like to conjecture here then, that within this example, a number of acts of matricritical analysis are occurring.

The secondary text posits the source text, "Appendix F," as site of experience and the critical reading as maternal encounter. It seeks to trace what is already at work in the text and to do so with a lightness of touch: the critic positions herself attentively close to the text, but at no point does she claim to see through, beyond, or beneath it. We may speculate then that the apparent inertia here is not so much a failing but a deliberate and gentle affirmation of the source text itself.

The intimacy created in the original is further intensified for the reader of the secondary text who partakes both in the public scene of the writer-mother nursing in a variety of museums and the private scene of the reader-mother feeding her baby while reading. The position of witness or voyeur allocated to the reader becomes even more salient. The very pragmatic details offered as to the logistics of reading while feeding highlight the logistical difficulty of the writer's own project of engaging with art in public while nursing a young child. The text, thus, urges the reader to take into account the various precarities and complexities of everyday maternal praxis.

Moreover, the entrance into the text of two further bodies—the reading maternal body and feeding infant body—creates a visual heterogeneity in which bodies, infants, breasts, body parts, subjects, and objects proliferate.

Each is perceived at a further remove and is conveyed through the mediums of prose and visual art. This profusion brings to the fore the vexed question about maternal representation that is staged in the original text.

The fragmentation and blurring present in the original is dramatically heightened by both the presence and the response of the maternal reader in this secondary text. This is echoed and thus compounded in the splintering produced by the counterpoint between the two maternal “*T*s” (italicized and non).

As we become aware of the analysis being performed by this secondary reading, I wonder if that feeling of deflation is replaced by others, maybe one of consolation, or even one hope, which opens us up to a plethora of critical possibilities within the arena of matricritics.

Endnotes

1. Elkin argues the following: “The new books on motherhood are a countercanon. They read against the literary canon with its lack of interest in the interior lives of mothers, against the shelves of ‘this is how you do it’ books, and against the creeping hegemony of social-media motherhood.”
2. Braidotti says that “one speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate sociosymbolic changes in their condition” (25). The paucity of matricentric-feminist theory obliges me once more to borrow and rephrase feminist theory.
3. The postcritical here refers to that endorsed by Felski: “We are seeing ... the emergence of another regime of interpretations: one that is willing to recognize the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than to denounce mystifying illusions. The language of attachment, passion, and inspiration is no longer taboo” (187).
4. As such, Zambreno’s work could equally be read as an analogy for the work being done by motherhood studies to forge a place within academia.
5. The work of Lisa Baraitser and Alison Stone has done much to revise the psychoanalytic “othering” of the mother. Petra Bueskens also argues that “mothers are contiguous, contextual subjects who pose a potent alternative to the disembodied, individualist models of subjectivity founded in the post-Enlightenment, western canon, including in the canon of psychoanalysis” (197).
6. Here, I refer to “Self Portrait/Nursing” by Catherine Opie and Cindy Sherman’s “History Portraits” series, which includes several revisions of Madonna and Child paintings.
7. Moreover, Maggie Nelson says the following about the queerness of the pregnant body: “Isn’t there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one’s ‘normal’ state, and occasions a

- radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one’s body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?” (13-14).
8. This is a method used by Sara Ruddick in her book *Maternal Thinking*, where the experiential and everyday maternal is championed over ontological representation; similarly Lisa Baraitser’s work relies on anecdote to think about the psychology and ethics of being a mother.
 9. Kristina Darling writes: “In recent years, a vibrant artistic landscape, populated with multifarious hybrid writing by women and non-binary authors, has taken a turn for the dense, the difficult, the forbidding and the inaccessible ... the sentences fit together, but the words don’t cohere in the way that we think they should. We are offered clean syntactic constructions that resist the implicit logic of grammar. Disorder begins to inhabit the orderly linguistic structures we once thought we knew.”
 10. Yasmin Gunaratnam, and Carrie Hamilton describe a feminist approach to research and knowledge making as the following: “one that recognised and overturned systemic gender disparities, validate women’s ‘experience,’ rejected hierarchies between the researcher and research participant, and had emancipation and social change as its purpose.”

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A Motherly Society: Scandinavian Feminism and a Culture of Sexual Equality in the Works of Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal

*As a key polemic figure in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Ellen Key (1849–1926) established the concept of “collective motherliness” (“samhällsmoderlighet”) and extended the meaning of motherhood from a biological category defined by the birthing of a child to a female societal force, thus bringing forth (or giving birth to) a new and better society.¹ A few decades later, Swedish author and activist Elin Wägner (1882–1949) developed a theory of matriarchy in her pivotal work *Alarm Clock* (1941), and that same year, Swedish sociologist and politician Alva Myrdal (1902–1986) proposed government policies that would promote the welfare of mothers and their children in her book *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy* (1941).*

*These three Swedish feminists—Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal—*influenced the cultural landscape of Sweden in the late-nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century, and helped create a foundation for the Swedish welfare state. *My aim is to show how their works contributed to the Scandinavian culture of sexual equality and respect for motherhood (and by extension parenthood). I also aim to elucidate the lasting relevance of their work. This article is part of my ongoing book project on Scandinavian feminism. It is, therefore, open to constant revision, rethinking, and rediscovery of the impact of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal.*

The mother is the most precious possessions of the nation, so precious that society advances its highest well-being when it protects the functions of the mother.—Ellen Key

If women, at the bottom of their being, have constant qualities, hidden under a surface of adaptation, now is when they are needed. The highest authority among people used to be the mother's authority. That is lost.—Elin Wägner

The risk is great that society will proceed so slowly in solving these problems of woman's existence that new and even more desperate crises may invade the whole field of women, family, and population.—Alva Myrdal

Why is motherhood not acknowledged as a subject position in constituting gendered identities? Why do we not see maternity as an interlocking structure of oppression as we do with race and class and include it in our gendered analysis of oppression and resistance?—Andrea O'Reilly

Introduction

As a key polemic figure in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Ellen Key (1849-1926) established the concept of “collective motherliness” (“*samhällsmoderlighet*”) and extended the meaning of motherhood from a biological category defined by the birthing of a child to a female societal force, thus bringing forth (or giving birth to) a new and better society. A few decades later, Swedish author and activist Elin Wägner (1882-1949) developed a theory of matriarchy in her pivotal work *Alarm Clock* (1941), and that same year, Swedish sociologist and politician Alva Myrdal (1902-1986) proposed government policies that would promote the welfare of mothers and their children in her book *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy* (1941).

These three Swedish feminists—Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal—influenced the cultural landscape of Sweden in the late-nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century, and helped create a foundation for the Swedish welfare state and its women and family friendly policies. Although their ideas often overlapped thematically, they sometimes had conflicting ideas about women's roles in society and their roles as mothers. My aim, however, is to show how their work, despite these differences, contributed to the Scandinavian culture of sexual equality in general and to a culture of respect for motherhood (and by extension parenthood) in particular. In addition, I aim to elucidate the lasting relevance of their work as well as the guidance it offers for a path towards a better Scandinavia and a better world. This article is part of my ongoing book project on Scandinavian feminism. It is therefore open to constant revision, rethinking, and rediscovery of the impact of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal.

Ellen Key and “Collective Motherliness”

Ellen Key was born into an upper-middle-class family on 11 December 1849 at Sundsholm mansion in the Swedish province of Småland. Her father, Emil Key, was a local politician, a landowner, and the founder of the Swedish Agrarian Party. Educated at home by her mother and a foreign governess, Ellen grew up reading Camilla Collett and Henrik Ibsen, both Scandinavian writers whose work tried to improve social equality and gender relations. Key’s mother, Sophie Posse Key, came from an aristocratic family and often disagreed with the political views of her husband. Thus, Ellen was exposed early on to her parents’ disagreements, and as a result, she became an analytical thinker and a prolific writer. Her earliest notable work, the pamphlet “On Freedom of Speech and Publishing” (1889) addressed questions on individualism and freedom of speech (Lengborn). A few years later, Key turned her attention to women’s position in society and published “Misused Female Power” (1896). This essay (originally a lecture) created massive public debate and even outrage in the Swedish women’s movement. In the essay, Key argues that women, in their quest for equality, had misplaced their innermost feminine being to the detriment of themselves and society as a whole. Provoking heated debate and anger among her fellow suffragists, Key argued that the women’s movement had lost sight of the peculiar spiritual, emotional, and physical reality that pertained to women. A few years later, in her groundbreaking and internationally acclaimed book *The Century of the Child* (1901), Key claims that children need to be educated by their mothers—the real leaders and creators of a better world (Arnberg). Professing that motherhood was “the most perfect realization of human potential that the species had reached” (Taylor 2), Key “called the mother-child bond the purest of all human relationships and [defined] motherhood [as] ‘the most perfect human condition, where happiness consists in giving and giving is the greatest happiness’” (qtd. in Taylor 187). In her works, Key addresses women on both a national and international scale, and she engages with women as mothers within the working classes as well as the middle and upper classes.

Influenced by contemporary thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and his idea of the will to power, Key asserted that the desire for achievement and self-determination was the fundamental driving force of human existence; they defined and legitimized each individual’s right to self-development.² Key firmly believed that women’s will to power (or maybe more correctly will to become) was different from that of men. According to her, women’s peculiar ability for love, synthesis, and devotion made them invaluable in the process of building a better society. Criticized for her seemingly essentialist approach, Key maintained that society would not be changed for the better by a women’s movement that fought for women’s rights to behave and be like men.³

As Claudia Lindén points out in her article on Ellen Key's motherliness and its relation to Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas, Key viewed women as the new superior beings—the *Übermensch* of the twentieth century. Nietzsche called for the new human being, and Key heard him more clearly than many others. As a result, she built an entire feminist theory in which woman as the collective mother had become the new superior human being for the new times (Lindén 48). Highlighting the concept of motherliness in Ellen Key's writing, Lindén points out that Key's concept of motherliness transcends the narrow confines of the essentialist-constructivist dichotomy (48). Inspired by Nietzsche's deconstruction of the body-soul dichotomy (in Christianity as well as in the rationalist-empiricist tradition), Key formulated an argument for understanding motherliness, rather than motherhood, as the apex of personal fulfillment and cultural empowerment for women. In Key's writing, collective motherliness becomes the perfect metaphor for the self-actualization that was necessary not only for women's personal fulfillment but for the fulfillment of society as a whole. Challenging such enlightenment thinkers as Rousseau and Descartes—and their ideas about the mutual exclusivity of nature and culture, body and soul, emotion and reason, women and men, etc.—Key (and Nietzsche) understood nature as inevitably integrated and intertwined with culture. Lindén points out that Key uses Nietzsche's thoughts on women, motherhood, and pregnancy (also denoting the fertility and fruition of the ideas of the philosopher/writer) and infuses them with cultural significance for women and, by implication, for society in general.⁴ Motherliness, for Key, is not confined to biological motherhood. Instead, it is an expression of the peculiarity (*egendomlighet*) of women—a peculiarity that will be lost if engaged in a thoughtless competition for equality with men. According to Key, collective motherliness is the most authentic and, therefore, most desirable state of being for women. In her view, women could not become fully developed and contributing citizens without becoming fully themselves as the collective mother (*sambällsmoder*). In marriage as well as in public life, women's peculiar ability to love was necessary to produce a higher reality, a next stage in the evolution of a better, freer, and more harmonious society.⁵

In contemporary feminist studies, Ellen Key is commonly referred to as a maternalist because she propagated for the implementation of motherliness into the public apparatus through the engagement and involvement of women as mothers.⁶ But the reach of Key's concept of collective motherliness goes deeper than the mere implementation of motherly principles (such as care, love, and nurturance) into public policy and government. In her worldview, women's ability to love, care, and nurture stem from and are conditioned by the innermost being of their authentic selves. Women's authentic selves are inextricably rooted in their natural and cultural manifestation as collective mothers. Ellen Key's maternalism is, thus, steeped in the desire to enable

women to be authentic and in the belief that the transformation of society towards a higher goal could only be accomplished if women became authentic to themselves.

Key uses the metaphor of a living organism—the human body—to describe society. In this analogy, the government is the brain and the people, or constituents, are the cells of the nervous system. Individually, each cell communicates important information and its needs to the brain (the government). Key's point about authenticity is that whole system can only work well if the cells communicate their real authentic needs. For Keys, problems arise in patriarchal society because it only listens to the needs of men. In patriarchal society, women's needs and mothers' needs are co-opted and redefined into acceptable needs by a patriarchal filter. In other words, in a patriarchal society, the brain (the government) is getting the wrong information (Arnberg 115). As a result, there is a lopsided government and a lopsided world. The only remedy to this situation is that women become authentic human beings and that they are heard when they communicate their authentic needs. As Key herself put it: "But what the organism's health to the highest degree demands is that the female cells maintain and keep their peculiar (female) character, because otherwise, society will not reach its highest stage of development" (qtd. in Arnberg 115).

Elin Wägner: Alarm Clock

Elin Wägner was born into a middle-class family in Lund on May 16 in 1882. Elin's father was a teacher of philosophy and the principal of a private upper level secondary school. Her mother, Anna Wägner, who was the daughter of a minister in Tolg, in Småland, tragically died in childbirth when Elin was three years old. Despite her young age at the time of her mother's passing, Elin would grow up and feel the utmost affinity with the maternal side of her family, spending much time in the home of her maternal uncle. When Elin was sixteen years old, her father had no plans for allowing her to study further (although he later supported her journalism, and helped send her to Germany to learn the language). In a lecture to female undergraduates, Wägner would later refer to her upbringing by saying: "I believe that I have grown up among the most proper and charming contempt for women imaginable, one that was hardly aware of itself and therefore, with the infinite naturalness and the obvious way in which it was manifested, hurt so much more" (Leppänen, *Elin* 18).

In 1903, when Elin was twenty-one years old, she won a prize for a short story, and as a result, she started to work as a writer at the daily newspaper *Helsingborgs posten*, where she published under a pseudonym. Subsequently, Elin would go on to write political pamphlets, articles, and fiction. In 1908,

she published *Norrtullsligan*, a novel about the lives of underpaid female office workers in Stockholm who decide to go on strike to call attention to their exploitative working conditions. Her next novel, *Pennskaftet* (1910), became her most famous work of fiction. Readers follow the story of Penwoman, a journalist involved in the Swedish suffrage movement of the early 1900s. After women in Sweden won the right to vote in 1920, Wägner established the Fogelstad School—a citizen school for women, where women from all societal levels enrolled to learn more about their political and civic rights. Always a prolific writer, Wägner would go on to publish several novels, short stories, and social commentaries about patriarchal society and its effects on the lives of women. *Alarm Clock*, published in 1941, was Wägner’s arguably most important but least understood work. In it, she discusses the lost authority of the mother in Western civilization and traces this loss to the historical denial of the existence of former matriarchal societies. Calling the book her “polemical pamphlet,” Wägner experienced disillusionment upon its publication because of the lack of recognition and interest it received, both from the public and from literary circles (Leppänen, *Elin* 20). Elin Wägner passed away in 1949.

Alarm Clock was published fifteen years after Ellen Key had passed away in 1926. When it came out in 1941, World War II was raging around the Scandinavian countries, and the presence of war greatly contributed to the book’s sense of urgency. In *Alarm Clock*, Elin Wägner means to awaken us to an impending ecological and humanitarian catastrophe. Well ahead of her time, Wägner makes the connections between peace, respect for the earth, and gender equality that would later become the trademark of ecofeminist studies. *Alarm Clock* is for Wägner an urgent call to action linked to the survival of the planet, democracy, and peace. For Wägner, just as for Ellen Key, this urgency is due to women’s lost authenticity and selfhood—a loss so deep and pervasive that women themselves fail to realize its destructive consequences. *Alarm Clock* presents a dire situation in which women’s reclaiming of their self-efficacy and political agency is inextricably linked to saving the world from the patriarchal destruction of war, poverty, and environmental degradation.

In *Alarm Clock*, Wägner wishes to “make a contribution to women’s self-assessment, [and to provide] an analysis of our situation ... summing up our problems and our possibilities, our dreams and plans for the future” (qtd. in Clareus 98). Using the alarm clock as a metaphor, she contends that “there is a thought which can get you up out of bed in the morning, and it’s this: time is short, and the contact can be broken at any moment” (Clareus 98). She further states that “what has to be said before we are cut off is first of all this: Women have every reason for reassessing how far most of what they accept as natural, and have bowed to as inevitable, really is natural and inevitable. That

means examining the society we live in, our situation there, and the attitudes we adopt to it" (Clareus 98). To reassess their authentic selves, women must reevaluate their history. Using the natural world as an analogy, Wagner asserts that "nowadays, most people drink water from lakes they have never seen" (Clareus 99). Commenting on the ignorant consumer who is unaware of the origin and quality of the drinking water, Wagner draws a parallel to the female citizen who only knows her own place in society through a distorted or polluted sense of the past. History, she says, is a "synthetic product" in which reality is "broken down into its component parts, and put together again" by historians in male-dominated institutions (99). In this process, the reality "which contains the [real and true] history of women" is "discarded as irrelevant": "Men's and women's history is as closely interwoven as the warp and weft of a piece of cloth. But a history has been created which only uses the weft. The result of this is pressure on women on such an enormous scale that it virtually makes history itself" (Clareus 99). The exclusion of women's experiences from historical accounts of the past brings about all the more devastating consequences, according to Wagner, because it is "not recognized by anybody" (Clareus 99). Indeed, it is so pervasive that "nobody is aware of its existence" (Clareus 99). Comparing the eradication of women's experiences from historical accounts to the manipulative rewriting of history in Germany's wartime propaganda during World War II, Wagner claims that "psychology these days is very much concerned with the importance of suggestion. Yet, history radiates a suggestion which makes women insecure, docile, scared of intervening even when their most basic interests are at stake, and nobody notices" (Clareus 99).

For Wagner, the remedy for patriarchy's erasure of women's self-agency is to create an impetus for a feminist vision of the future through education about matriarchal societies of the past. Thus, she believes that one can "restore the balance" (Clareus 100) that had been lost in patriarchal society by challenging the notion that women's natural and inevitable place has always been a submissive one and the idea that male leadership in the development of culture is inevitable. After researching ancient Crete and Minoan matriarchy, Wagner concludes as follows: "For me it is conceivable that women could abandon their submissive role, because my views have been influenced by the glimpse I have had of the period in which women were the creators of culture. But I would never have had that glimpse unless something that had been hidden was exposed" (Clareus 100). In Wagner's view, "exploitation of nature is connected to the oppression of women and ... this in turn affects women's ability, and desire, to become full political citizens" (qtd. in Leppanen, "At Peace" 38). Prehistorical matriarchal societies, governed by a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, had as their objective to "preserve life" (Leppanen, "At Peace" 38), whereas patriarchal civilizations continuously

subjugate and exploit both women and nature. Wägner writes that “Men are strongly engaged on all fronts: to keep women down, to conquer the universe by their thought, to subjugate nature step by step, to keep each other at bay” (Leppänen, “At Peace” 38). A healthy balance can be created only through the reclaiming of women’s history, leading to the formation of women’s personal and political self-agency and a more peaceful world.

To reclaim women’s authenticity means to reclaim the authority of the mother. Wägner emphatically claims: “If women, at the bottom of their being, have constant qualities, hidden under a surface of adaptation, now is when they are needed. The highest authority among people used to be the mother’s authority. That is lost” (Leppänen “At Peace” 39). Women must “emancipate themselves from the repressive weight of patriarchy—they have to unlearn what they have been taught” (Leppänen, “At Peace” 39), not to go back to another golden era, but to get through to a better world. Only through the “pooling of female resources” could women “make the bridge on which the train of history will be carried over to the other side of the abyss” (Clareus 100). A “breakthrough of female influence is necessary to restore the balance” in the world (Clareus 52).⁷

Alva Myrdal: Nation and Family

Alva Reimer was born into a middle-class family in Uppsala on 31 January in 1902. Alva’s father Albert was involved in local politics, and she grew up in a house full of political conversations. However, despite the progressive nature of her father, Alva had to fight for her education. Her mother, Lowa, who was a traditional woman, did not think that girls needed an upper level education. It was not until Alva got a job and offered to pay for her education herself that her parents let her go to upper secondary school. Alva eventually continued her studies at Stockholm University, from which she graduated with a BA in 1924. Later on, she would go on to study early childhood education at Yale and at the University of Geneva, before she went back to Uppsala University and received her master’s degree in 1934.

In her book, *Nation and Family* (1941), Alva Myrdal addresses problems of a shrinking population and increased poverty in early twentieth-century Sweden. The aim of the book was to discuss and introduce new social and economic policy reforms that would benefit Swedish families as well as the nation. Interestingly enough, in an interview later in life, Myrdal explained that her visit in the United States in 1929 and 1930 served to radicalize her views and deeply influenced her stance on gender equality and children’s welfare. Early on, Alva came to “identify with the downtrodden in general”:

Although it began women first, I did not develop into a militant feminist. The identification became broader, more social, with the poor. Of this I became more conscious ... when we were in the United States [in] 1929-30. Seeing the difference between millionaires and slums shocked me and ... my husband [so much] that we became socialists.... From 1930 to war, and really to 1947, when we went abroad ... it was [a] period filled by preaching the social gospel ... for the workers against capitalism, for the underdeveloped countries against the industrialized, and of course, for the children against all that hampered their well-being and growth. (qtd in Herman 333)

One of Myrdal's goals in *Nation and Family* was to elucidate and seek to remedy women's loss of empowerment in the industrialized nuclear family. In her earlier book, *Crisis in the Population Question* (1934), she describes three developmental stages of family life in Sweden since the early 1800s: the agrarian family, the early industrial family, and then the industrial family. According to Myrdal, the late nineteenth-century women's movement could be viewed as a protest against women's gradual loss of power in the industrial family. In the agrarian era, women maintained a certain amount of economic power, as they themselves were responsible for production (as workers in the fields or as producers of food). However, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, production moved out of the homes and into the factories. The home became a commodity, and women became unpaid workers in the home or underpaid workers in the factories (Myrdal 298). It is against this backdrop of social and historical development that Myrdal outlines and proposes much needed reforms and policy changes for Swedish society. According to Myrdal, transferring the responsibility of childcare from the family to society was a direct way of remedying a lopsided dynamic in which too much power belonged to the male breadwinner at the expense of women and children (298-99).

As an advocate for children's rights, women's rights, and human rights, Alva Myrdal promoted both Ellen Key's and Elin Wägner's ideas about empowering women as mothers and creating a more egalitarian and peaceful society. Early on, her role was vital in the establishment of an egalitarian welfare system in Sweden through the implementation of policies concerning social equality in the school system (Herman) and universal affordable daycare for all families.⁸ Later, in 1982, Myrdal won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with disarmament at the United Nations. Myrdal's view of women's gradual loss of power in the industrialized family is an example of a feminist reassessment of history by centering women's experiences, as advocated by Wägner in *Alarm Clock*. Additionally, Alva Myrdal was in many ways the epitome of Ellen Key's vision of collective motherliness. Although Key had envisioned a world in which the state would support mothers' care for their own children (rather

than subsidized daycare centres as promoted by Myrdal), both of them highlighted women's need for independence and children's need for individualized care. As a politician and thinker, Myrdal advocated for women's freedom as individuals as well as for the welfare of children and families. The emphasis she placed on the importance of care, cooperation, nurturance, and women's need for authenticity made her an advocate for the very principles that Key viewed as foundational in women's peculiar will to power.

Myrdal pursued her objectives with a rational approach. As Sondra R. Herman points out, Myrdal was "known for a 'scientific approach' to children with a consistent commitment to rational upbringing ... [she] never worshipped the domestic goddess of a warm, traditional ... isolated home" (332):

Instead, she believed children constituted a public as well as a parental responsibility. She wanted knowledgeable teachers applying the principles of developmental psychology in the classroom. Her cool rationalism expressed both her personality and her reverence for the values of the modern Enlightenment and social science. She had no second thoughts about applying reason to the emotion-laden area of family relationships. Not even World War II destroyed her faith in the ability of ordinary people to mold society for the good. Social scientists should join with political activists and the public in democratic planning. Such planning, she was convinced, was fully compatible with individual freedom, even in areas most people considered private, such as childrearing. (332)

As a scholar, politician and thinker, Alva Myrdal in many ways exemplified Elin Wägner and Ellen Key's vision of the ideal woman as a "self-sustaining educated woman," and her vision of the future demanded that all women in society be able to reach this kind of self-reliance. Myrdal's critical leadership in the United Nations with nuclear disarmament as well as her work to lay the foundation of the Swedish welfare state both epitomize Ellen Key's vision about societal collective motherliness and Elin Wägner's ideas about the new woman's vital role in creating a better and more peaceful society.

Conclusion

In her keynote speech to her induction into the Motherhood Hall of Fame at the Museum of Motherhood in 2014, Andrea O'Reilly defined matricentric feminism as a feminism that takes as its point of departure the needs and concerns of the mother. Commenting on the frequent neglect of motherhood studies in feminist academic discourse, O'Reilly further asked "Why is motherhood not acknowledged as a subject position in constituting gendered identities? Why do we not see maternity as an interlocking structure of

oppression as we do with race and class and include it in our gendered analysis of oppression and resistance?” She concluded by stating that a mother-centred feminism is urgently needed and long overdue because mothers, arguably more so than women in general, remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism. Keeping O’Reilly’s astute observations in mind, it is interesting to note that the works of Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal all address the crucial importance of including the needs and perspectives of mothers in any progressive action plan aimed at creating a better and more just society. In fact, the works of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal emphatically insist that including the mother’s subject position as a point of departure is a condition of possibility for any theory that claims to promote empowerment for all people (not only women) and progress for society as a whole.⁹ The mother, or motherliness-as-subjectivity, is inextricably linked to women’s authentic selves, and women’s authenticity is indispensable in a healthy society.

In their work, Key, Wägner, and Myrdal call for a holistic approach and a paradigm shift towards a transformed society in which motherliness (past, present, and future) have a legitimate place at the centre of all feminist theory, public policy, and democratic family planning. In my ongoing research on the impact of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal on Scandinavian feminism, I aim to further explore their work in the context of matricentric feminism.

Endnotes

1. Key did, however, note that Nietzsche’s philosophy left too little room for important qualities such as empathy and co-operation, and her use of Nietzsche’s ideas were also adapted to her own understanding of the special and important role of the mother-child relationship in society and the female principle. As Thorbjörn Lengborn points out, it is “important that she recognized the weakness in his system: its complete recklessness. She agreed with Nietzsche’s strong emphasis on the rights of the individual and of the personality. But at the same time, she alienates herself from his lack of feeling and consideration for others” (3).
2. Longborn also says the following: “Ellen Key assumes that men and women have different qualities, determined by their nature. She speaks of the ‘female principle’ which ought to play a special role in the future aims of society.... This principle is necessary for the creation of favourable conditions for the individual’s development towards freedom and happiness. At the same time, she supports suffrage for women. Even here, she insists on equality between men and women” (5).
3. As Lindén points out in the summary of her article: “In Nietzsche, she [Ellen Key] recognizes a fellow thinker in trying to move beyond the mind/body dichotomy. At the very centre of Nietzsche’s thinking are

- metaphors of motherhood, pregnancy and birth, that speak of philosophy as a creative force. Key re-uses these metaphors in her feminist thinking when she constructs her concept of motherliness not as a biological effect or experience but as a creative force within culture” (62).
4. Eva Borgström provides an analysis of Key’s views in the works “*Missbrukad kvinnokraft*” and “*Naturenliga arbetsområden*” (*Tvenne föredrag*, Albert Bonniers förlag, 1896).
 5. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel define maternalism in the following way:

We apply the term [maternalism] to ideologies that exalted women’s capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality. Maternalism always operated on two levels: it extolled the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women’s public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace. In practice, maternalist ideologies often challenged the constructed boundaries between public and private, women and men, state and civil society. (1079)
 6. In Wägner’s own words: in this new world, “bastards would be obliged to be decent, rather than decent people being obliged to behave like bastards, as at present” (qtd. in Clareus 52).
 7. However, Ellen Key had advocated against communal daycare centers. She feared that they would fail to take into account children’s needs for individual self-development and diminish the important bond between mother and child.
 8. In her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, O’Reilly discusses the exclusion of matricentric feminism “from academic feminism, and the ensuing confusion of mothering with motherhood, and the conflation of matricentric feminism with maternalism and gender essentialism” (186). My research aims to further situate Key, Wägner, and Myrdal in this context and to elucidate their contributions to feminist discourse.

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Mothering, Resistance and Survival in Kathleen Mary Fallon's *Paydirt* and Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*

*The systematic removal of Indigenous Australian children was officially exposed over two decades ago, and the Australian Federal Government made an official apology for the practice in 2008, yet the removal rate of Indigenous Australian children by authorities remains disproportionately high. Child removal, inequalities in health, educational, and financial outcomes, and the pervasive ongoing cultural and systematic hostility against First Nations Australians, combine to create a hostile external culture for Indigenous children to grow up in. This article examines how the struggle to raise Indigenous Australian children within this hostile external context manifests in contemporary Australian literature, with respect to two texts: *Paydirt* (2007) by Kathleen Mary Fallon and *Mullumbimby* (2013) by Melissa Lucashenko. Both novels have partially autobiographical elements and feature women mothering teenage Indigenous Australian children. In each novel, the threat of child removal is used as a framing device, and reconnection to traditional Indigenous Australian culture forms both a remedy and an essential component of the survival of the children concerned. This article provides a close reading of the themes and narratives of these novels in relation to the Australian political and cultural context in order to examine how it is that the texts' authors integrate their characters' maternal practice with their essential resistance to hostile external forces and cultures.*

How does the struggle for individual and cultural survival within a hostile external social context manifest in contemporary matricentric Australian literature? This article examines the question with reference to *Paydirt* by Kathleen Mary Fallon (2007) and *Mullumbimby* by Melissa Lucashenko (2013).¹ Both novels depict determined single mothers raising Indigenous children within a culture that contests their children's very identities and they bring their children resilience, strength, and survival within a hostile

mainstream culture that disproportionately threatens them due to their racial backgrounds.² A study of these particular texts is apt given the partially autobiographical nature of their content regarding mothering Indigenous Australian children. Additionally, the supremacy of maternal work in each narrative, as well as the authors' refusal to subsume the respective protagonists' mothering beneath a more classical individualist quest, makes these texts suitable for analysis in the context of matricentric feminism. This article examines these texts with regards to the Australian historical and cultural context, especially the systematic forcible removal of Indigenous Australian children and the historical and continuing genocidal erasure of their culture. The article also looks at the literary context of each text as well as their decidedly matricentric nature.

Paydirt and Mullumbimby

Paydirt tells the story of Kate, the white Australian foster mother of Warren—a seventeen-year-old originally from Thursday Island in the Torres Strait—and Flo, Warren's biological mother, from whom he was removed by the state and institutionalized at age three. Former nurse Kate has been mothering Warren since he was five, but the authorities intend on reinstitutionalizing him on the cusp of adulthood, ostensibly on medical grounds. Warren, who lives with permanent disability, is inaccurately labelled by the state as "blind and profoundly retarded" (4), or as Kate's mother Dellmay states, "*black, blind and profoundly retarded*" (110). Although Dellmay has prejudiced motives, hers is perhaps a more truthful assessment of the state's low expectations for Warren: the intersections of Indigeneity and disability are a cynical but accurate explanation for the chronic systematic dehumanization that he has suffered. In an attempt to mitigate this threat of secondary removal, Kate is taking Warren to Brisbane to meet Flo, who lies ill in hospital, in the hopes that their reconnection will provide him with a sense of self and family and help him avoid reinstitutionalization. As Kate says, "he's guilty of turning eighteen and you're his only hope, Flo, you're his biological mother, he might listen to you" (15). Structurally, although the characters often address one another, the novel consists of four separate monologues; Kate and Flo open and close the novel respectively.³

Mullumbimby tells the story of Jo Breen, a Bundjalung woman who, postdivorce, has moved back to Bundjalung country with her thirteen-year-old daughter Ellen to seek connection to land and culture.⁴ Jo becomes embroiled in a Native Title battle between two local Aboriginal families, both of whom have claims to the local land. First by choice and then out of maternal necessity, Jo embraces local traditional Aboriginal culture and language in the hope of steering Ellen in a positive and fulfilling direction through connection to the land and culture.

Although romance is not entirely absent, it is incidental to these texts' plots, which are both driven by single mothers connecting, communicating, and conspiring. And even though the absence of the voices of Indigenous fathers from these narratives might be considered problematic—particularly due to the gendered specificity of Indigenous Australian cultural education—prioritizing the voices of Indigenous mothers (Jo and Flo) brings forth the kinds of women's stories that are largely absent from Australian cultural dialogues.⁵

“White Australia has a Black History”⁶

The British invasion of Australia began in 1788, when Captain Arthur Philip landed eleven ships in Sydney Cove. Indigenous Australians were immediately affected by European violence, diseases, and the theft of water, land, and resources, but they also actively resisted between 1788 and 1960, in what has come to be known and documented as the Frontier Wars (Reynolds; Ryan et al.). Indigenous Australians continue to actively resist the ongoing negative effects of white invasion. There is a resurgence in activism surrounding the removal of Indigenous children, the institutional treatment of incarcerated Indigenous youths, and the increasing momentum for a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament as well as a treaty between the Australian Government and representatives of Indigenous Australians (Messer and Brookman 1; Mayor).

In 1997, the landmark Bringing Them Home Report (BTHR) detailed the systematic institutional removal of Indigenous Australian children from their families—known as the Stolen Generations⁷—and the resulting disconnection from traditional cultures and long term trauma that they suffered. The BTHR labelled the practices “genocidal,” “in breach of binding international law,” and “from late 1946... a crime against humanity” (239), and emphasized that “mixed motives are no excuse” (237). Furthermore, the labelling of the child removal practices as genocidal prompted fresh debate about the usage of the term “genocide” with regards to the treatment of Indigenous Australians (Tatz 1999; Langton 2001; Behrendt 2002; Veracini, Curthoys and Docker 2002). In 2007, the Little Children Are Sacred Report prompted the commencement of the contentious, ongoing, and harmful “Northern Territory Intervention⁸” (Zhou 2017). Despite the prominence of these reports and the Australian Government's subsequent National Apology to the Stolen Generations (2008), Indigenous Australians today face disproportionately high rates of youth suicide, sexual assault, domestic violence, juvenile detention, incarceration, and forcible child removal; there are also large disparities in wealth and health outcomes.

Although a formalized record of the children affected by the Stolen Generation has been kept in reports such as BTHR, recorded and publicly

accessible stories of the mothers whose children were removed are minimal. A discussion of *Paydirt* and *Mullumbimby* in this context is pertinent due to their matricentric plots. In *Mullumbimby*, Jo tries to reclaim her culture under the looming threat of systematic power imbalances, including forcible removal by authorities, whereas *Paydirt* presents a dialogue between two mothers of a child who was forcibly removed (Messer and Brookman 2). The maternal protagonists are aware of and resist the aforementioned systematic challenges faced by Indigenous Australians.

Literary Contexts

Both novels have autobiographical elements and represent a form of “coming to voice” for each author (hooks 1989). Lucashenko is of Russian, Ukrainian, and Indigenous Australian heritage; her Bundjalung great-grandmother was removed from country by authorities (Lucashenko, “Q&A”). She writes that all her books “reflect one version of modern Aboriginal life,” something that is also evident in her other novels, particularly *Too Much Lip* (2018). The *Mullumbimby* narrative is in part a reversal of her own journey on Bundjalung land, to which she moved with her daughter and then-husband but was forced to leave postdivorce (Lucashenko, “If I Live to Be 100”).

Fallon’s personal story is also intertwined with that of Kate in *Paydirt*. Fallon, a white Australian, fostered a five-year-old Torres Strait Islander boy named Henry, whom she met when working as a nurse at a home. Fallon has written about this experience across several media, including personal reflections, a short story, a film script, and a play. *Paydirt* was published during a year of governmental change in Australia, when the public discourse was increasingly in favour of an official apology to the Stolen Generations. In part, Fallon’s story charts this changing social discourse regarding Indigenous removal. Teenage Warren publicly refers to himself as having been “stolen” (59), but for Kate, the situation is more nuanced, as Warren would have been institutionalized in a place the nurses referred to as “the Tip” if not for her fostering. As she says, “even a fuck-up like me’s better than the Tip” (16).

Although at face value the narrative might lend itself to the “white saviour mother” story archetype, Fallon uses the four separate, unconnected monologues of her protagonists to dissect Kate’s experiences and critique the paradigm with regards to the experiences. Comparing the white saviour mother narrative of the Hollywood film *The Blind Side* (2009) to her script for the film *Call Me Mum* (2006), Fallon writes the following: “The pure, naïve, ‘missionary’ story *The Blind Side* told was exactly what I did not, could not and would not tell in *Call Me Mum*. How could it be, written in the context of the Bringing Them Home report and the Stolen Generations narratives?” (“Broken Mothers”). Instead Fallon situates both *Call Me Mum* and *Paydirt*

within a complex and evolving Australian cultural context, which lays bare the long-term reality of a white foster mother, which has often been absent from Australian dialogues surrounding the Stolen Generations (Messer and Brookman 3). In *Paydirt*, the personal transcends the political, as accusations of Warren being a “White Man’s Burden” (43) and Kate “an assimilationist bitch” (10) are at stark odds with the genuine love, care, and intensive mothering that she describes, particularly in her quest to reunite him with Flo against the wishes of the authorities. Additionally, although it may appear problematic for Fallon to place the experiences of a white mother (Kate) beside the recollections of a disenfranchised Indigenous mother (Flo), she uses the characters’ respective monologues to explore colonial cause and effect: the pervasive cultural racism of white Australians and the effects of that racism on Indigenous Australians’ everyday lives; the violent suppression of Indigenous people both physically and culturally; and the dearth of appropriate cultural knowledge that Kate finds when trying to mother an Indigenous child away from his family. Presenting the monologues of a white Australian mother and Torres Strait Islander mother of the same child side by side also recalls Indigenous Australian academic Marcia Langton’s description of “Aboriginality” as:

a social *thing* in the Durkheimian sense ... [arising] from the experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in a cultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book. (Langton and Bowers 81)⁹

In airing the pervasive racist cultural dialogues of white Australia side by side with Indigenous hurt, shame, and inequality, Fallon openly links them to present a picture of modern Australia as a complex weave of racially determined power, privilege, trauma, poverty, and danger.

The Systematic Forcible Removal of Indigenous Children

For the protagonists in each text, the child removal authorities present as a menacing force that affects the mothers’ actions and words. The fear of removal of their children becomes an invisible guiding hand in the narratives and the potential for forcible removal is used as a framing device in each text. In *Paydirt*, forcible removal is woven into Warren’s past, present, and future. Warren was removed from Flo as a three-year-old for medical treatment but was soon permanently condemned to a life in institutions, as he was labelled not only “blind and profoundly retarded” but also “violent and crazy. Brain damaged” (11). “They never said he’d be gone forever,” says Flo (147), and her

grief at not being able to mother him permeates her chapter. Both Kate and Flo recall the predatory tactics of the bureaucrats, who lied to Flo in calling Warren “a vegetable” and patronized her when she objected to him being fostered (47, 126), while the threat of a secondary removal from Kate is “the immediate danger” (5) that drives the narrative. Among Kate’s appraisal of her maternal history, acting to mitigate this removal gives her a sense of purpose (46). For Kate, reinstitutionalization would undo her maternal work:

And now, after all that, here we are, back in the same position. Another [social worker] has your future all planned, baby. Forget that TAFE¹⁰ music course, she told the co-ordinator you weren’t an *appropriate candidate*.... If they Section Nine you their Woodbrook Rotary Bush Bash Minibus won’t be dropping you off to play gangsta rap with your Black bros, I can tell you that much sonny boy ... there’s not a damned thing I can do about it. (23)

Despite mothering him since he was five, Kate’s legal status as Warren’s mother is tenuous. Thirteen years of mothering means little to the authorities, but Kate aims to ensure Warren’s survival as an autonomous individual, which she surmises is contingent on reconnection with his parents’ traditional culture. Supporting Warren’s Indigeneity and survival means embracing Flo and their joint cause, despite Kate’s maternal reservations (5, 38-39). In closing the novel, Flo provides answers to Kate’s questions about mothering Warren in his first three years while linking the personal with the political and the historical. Flo’s monologue situates forcible child removal within the broader pattern of systematic power imbalances and hostility faced by Indigenous Australians.

The opening scene of *Mullumbimby* depicts Jo reading what Ellen has drawn on her younger cousin’s arm. Among the messages are, “Better pay or I ring DOCS,”¹¹ a reference to the child welfare authorities, which depicts how normalized messages like this are for Indigenous Australian children. As in *Paydirt*, forcible child removal acts as a contextual framing device—a mechanism to show the reader the kind of normalized hostility that a young Indigenous child grows up in. The threat of removal also arises when Ellen is in hospital later in the novel:

“Miz Breen, has Ellen tried to hurt herself before, to your knowledge?” asked a mental health nurse. Jo opened her eyes and tried to focus. Christ. Now it begins.

“No. Never.”

“And she wasn’t at school. You say you weren’t at home with her...”
A meaningful pause.

... A different tact was required. She swallowed the tears. “Is there a Koori liaison?”

“Are you part-Aboriginal?” The nurse seemed surprised.

Are you part-fuckwit?

... The nurse standing in front of her wasn't unsympathetic, but Jo could feel Ellen being dragged inexorably in the direction of the psych ward or DOCS or both, if she couldn't find a Goorie in a uniform who understood that you might have certain inexplicable reasons to stick both your hands in an open flame and still not be exactly mad. And that, far from neglecting Ellen, she had been trying to find her some help. (266)

Jo has an acute awareness of how insensitivity to Indigenous cultural beliefs and traditions can have devastating effects on families and the importance that Indigenous cultural awareness and connection have in mainstream contemporary Australia.

Genocidal Cultural Erasure

Aboriginal peoples in Australia are the keepers of the oldest stories and the oldest story systems in the world. Aboriginal story systems and songlines imbue Country with meaning... My mother and grandmother always taught me about the importance of stories in understanding and knowing and that it was through stories that we learn the truth about the world.—Jill Milroy (Milroy 1-2)

As Indigenous women, the roles of Flo and Jo include the cultural education of their offspring; thus, the cultural severance brought by colonization and child removal makes their maternal roles heavier and Kate's role as an ally crucial. They are saddled not only with the regular load of educating their children but also with the responsibility of resisting the multigenerational genocide wrought by white invasion. Connection to and understanding of the land is integral to Indigenous Australian culture, so cultural erasure has been an integral part of the systematic child removal wrought on Indigenous Australian families.

The BTHR says that the systematic cultural erasure as part of the removal of Indigenous children from their families was variously referred to as “merging,” “absorption,” and “assimilation” in government policy and discussions (25). The report also refers to the effectiveness of this erasure: a three-year longitudinal study undertaken in Melbourne in the mid-eighties revealed that children who were forcibly removed were less likely to have a strong sense of their Aboriginal cultural identity, more likely to have discovered their

Aboriginality later in life and less likely to know about their Aboriginal cultural traditions (12). But this tactic has not been condemned to history; mainstream news outlets still report similar examples of deliberate cultural dispossession as a result of removal.¹²

Dispossession is prominent in both *Paydirt* and *Mullumbimby*; traditional culture must be relearned, rebuilt, retaught, and deliberately replicated by the Indigenous mothers for the survival and growth of their children. Cultural learning is a deliberate part of their maternal practice, a means of strengthening their children and giving them context so that they can thrive as Indigenous children in mainstream contemporary Australian society. In *Paydirt*, Warren's cultural dispossession manifests in the medical regression he suffered while in institutional care (129). Kate expresses that although her focus was on improving Warren's health, there was little support for maintaining his cultural connections. Supposed experts she has confided in—such as her therapist (9) and “a drunk land-rights lawyer at a party” (10)—have been more likely to chide her for her own racial identity, with few offering constructive advice: “[Link-up] said they didn't have the resources to deal with white foster parents and it was outside their ‘brief’... I couldn't work out whether it was because I was white or because he was an Islander ... that they wouldn't talk to me” (3). Warren's cultural dispossession is also evident in the example of what Kate calls Warren's “little nonsense song” (12, 19), which he sings as “whale car knock/ie” (12, 19, 67), but which Flo says is a (misremembered) traditional song, “*awaial gar naki*,” taught to Warren by his father (137). Kate sang Warren's version to him to comfort him as a child (19), which further underscores the cultural disconnection inherent in the system regardless of professed good intentions. But Fallon also exposes that in the context of the white foster mothering of Indigenous children, increasing social awareness about child removal as genocide can be almost counter-productive in some situations: “we know first hand the effect the singular, overarching ‘stolen’ narrative can have on a teenaged child searching for an identity as all young people do” (“Broken Mothers”). This manifests in *Paydirt* when Warren is informed by a journalist that Kate's insistence he wear deodorant and brush his teeth to “make [him] white like her” amounts to what he mistakenly calls “Similar Relationsist Genderslide” (60).

In *Mullumbimby*, Jo's grandparents were taken away “to assimilate [their] families and fuck up [their] connections to the land” (50). Jo found herself “dragged” by her ex-husband Paul into his “tight white world” (4), and so has made a conscious choice, postdivorce, to embrace her Indigenous culture and heritage and help situate her daughter on country. The impact of white invasion on her Aboriginality was so substantial that her now deceased elder Auntie Barb took her aside for instruction in what she called “*You are a blackfella 101*” (11).¹³ Jo's memory of this instruction, “a lot of it forgotten” (11), forms a

deliberate cultural practice, particularly in her use of Bundjalung, Yugambah, and Australian Aboriginal English language in daily speech and thought. Lucashenko provides a glossary of this language at the end of the novel, thereby inviting the reader to engage with a (re)learning and replication of traditional culture (283).

As Flo speaks of the cultural lessons she will pass on to Warren, she explores the institutional oppression of Torres Strait Islanders by the white authorities in policy and in practice. Here Flo unleashes a tsunami of grief histories of cultural suppression, segregation, police brutality, and the general oppressive systematic mistreatment of Indigenous Australians, and the ensuing personal effects of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and violence that were rife in her marriage with Warren's father. Lucashenko describes the difficulty that many Indigenous women face in exposing "Black-on-Black violence":

In the situation where Black men are dispossessed, brutalised by police, and generally as poor and unhealthy as Black women ... [t]alking about the bashings, rapes, murders, and incest for which Black men themselves are responsible... is seen as threatening in the extreme. (Lucashenko "Violence" 379)

Although Flo's recollections paint a bleak and honest history of the white treatment of Indigenous Australians, and the ensuing effects of that oppression in the community, she resolves to suppress that bleakness; she hopes that by protecting Warren from the negativity, she will strengthen him: "all my sad stories will go to the grave with me.... I'll never burden you with them love" (158). As a mother-teacher, Flo possesses agency, and self-censorship is part of her maternal practice. The repeated refrain "la cook-a-racha," which refers to her skill as a cook, becomes a metaphor for serving Warren positive cultural lessons to nourish his brain and body into adulthood as well as a vehicle for resistance. The notion of positivity from grief is not subliminal; it is a conscious, recognized dichotomy in the text and is something reflected in *Paydirt's* afterword by Mer Islander Ricardo Idagi:

The characters in this book are a mirror image of us. The book exposes the scars we harbour deep within us; scars we dare not reveal ourselves for fear of shame, guilt and backlash from our society and our community... We feel a sense of relief that someone as bold as the author has spoken for us. (163)

For Flo, "shame has come back. But it's not just shame, it's pride" (153). Mothering Warren once more by providing him with positive stories is not just nourishing for him but restorative for her, akin to natural justice: "Things are returned. Evil is reversed" (153).

In *Mullumbimby*, Jo is both student and teacher, practicing what she has

learned while replicating it by mothering; she is aware that “her version of culture” (42) may be different to that of someone who has grown up on country. Even though Jo actively embraces Bundjalung culture, she also refuses to allow its importance to surpass that of her maternal work. When Jo’s romantic interest Twoboy asks her to compromise Ellen’s wellbeing by forcing her to participate in his Native Title claim, Jo calls on the strength of her foremothers:

The army of women clustered close around her. She could feel them softly breathing.

“You can do it, bub. Talk straight, now,” said Aunty Barb...

“I’d rather sink that blade into your neck,” Jo said quietly, pointing at the knife box. “Now go...” (252)

This represents a powerful matricentric feminist moment for the book. Ellen’s survival and nurturance surpass the romantic plot element and the individualist goal of a male character. In Jo’s maternal resistance, as in *Paydirt*, we are shown both an assertion of the validity of maternal work and a child’s right to be mothered.

Literary Matricentricism

Jo’s mothering is also centred when the culturally significant pattern on Ellen’s hands frightens Ellen to the point that she thrusts her hands into a fire in a bid to erase them. In desperation, Jo begs for cultural answers from a local elder: “This jalgani wasn’t going to give up her fight anytime soon... She was ready to kill somebody if she had to, to protect her jahjam” (277).¹⁴ In achieving answers, Jo not only provides her child with a sense of cultural identity and purpose but also mitigates the immediate potential threat of intervention and removal by DOCS.

Centring the maternal goals also brings strength to the mothers of *Paydirt*. Although they never meet or converse, Warren’s two mothers present a conspiratorial, anticipatory, and hopeful intercultural maternal dialogue. The separation of their respective expression gives the characters the freedom of honest self-reflection and the voicing of doubts, regrets, and their respective truths, which are often uncomfortable. The stories that these women tell become a vehicle for healing. Together (but also apart), they not only work towards a common maternal goal but also air grievances that have not yet been remedied in white Australia’s relationship with Indigenous Australians.

The strength of Kate and Flo’s maternal dyad is reflected in Flo’s insistence that she and Kate call one another “Mum,” with reference to Islander traditions (4,141, 160). Calling one another “Mum” not only brings Torres Strait Islander culture to the forefront of the novel but also reiterates the place of

mothering at the forefront of their quest. It also gives them a greater degree of intimacy through which to cathartically confide in one another:

I want to tell you Flo, Mum, tell you, look, I haven't made much of a fist of mothering him either. (Kate 46)

You've grown him up well, my little sick, ruined Bub ... like a monster when I last saw him Mum.... I'm so happy that my poor baby found someone to love him and look after him. (Flo 160)

Conclusion

In *Paydirt* and *Mullumbimby*, the universality of mothering is centred by each author as a means to comment on the past, present, and future status of Indigenous Australians and to explore what it means to mother an Indigenous child in a still hostile white Australian society. The consequences of white invasion continue to wreak havoc against Indigenous Australians, which presents a problematic world for Indigenous children to grow up in, since they must navigate around systematic forcible removal, ingrained cultural racism, multigenerational trauma and poverty, and a severance of connection to culture and country.

By centring mothering, Fallon and Lucashenko provide a window into what it means for First Nations Australians to physically and culturally resist, survive, and thrive within this volatile environment. Connection with traditional Indigenous culture is not only necessary for their children's survival but also a profound statement of maternal and anticolonial resistance. Through their dual pursuits of protection for their children and reconnection with traditional culture, these matricentric texts present strong narratives that not only recognize the sins of the past but also hope for the future.

Endnotes

1. Lucashenko explores white hostility against Indigenous Australians, including instances of cultural erasure, in other scholarly and fictional contexts, particularly with regards to cultural and familial disconnection. Her short story "Dreamers" (2017) explores it from an historical context, after the 1967 Referendum, whereas her most recent novel *Too Much Lip* (2018) draws on the contemporary experience of an Indigenous Australian family in a regional context, focusing on the systematic power differentials that affect their lives acutely.
2. "Indigenous Australians" refers to First Nations peoples of Australia. It is used as an umbrella term for two groups of First Nations people in Australia: Aboriginal people (of the Australian mainland and Tasmania)

- and Torres Strait Islanders (from the many islands of the Torres Strait to the North of the Australian continent)
3. The other monologues are from the perspectives of Warren and Kate's parents, Dellmay and Keith.
 4. Bundjalung country, which includes the regional town of Mullumbimby, spreads across an area of northeastern New South Wales and southeastern Queensland.
 5. "If Aboriginal Australians have been invisible generally, then this has been doubly true for Aboriginal women" (Lucashenko "Violence" 1996).
 6. "White Australia has a Black History" is a decades-old slogan used by Indigenous activists and others in Australia to invoke the (often willful) cultural ignorance to the atrocities committed against Indigenous Australians after white invasion. In 2016 an activist wearing a t-shirt with that slogan on it was refused entry to Australia's Parliament House until they turned the offending shirt inside out (Pearson).
 7. "Stolen Generations" is an important term in the lexicon of Australian history, culture, and politics. It refers to the historical removal of Indigenous children as described in the BTHR. It continues to be used in contemporary dialogue to describe the continued removal of Australian children, particularly as a term of warning against those who would remove children but still claim that the Stolen Generations is purely an historical event. There are important distinctions between what would typically be described as a Stolen Generations case and the situation that is described in *Paydirt*. Fallon herself does not accept that her case qualifies as a Stolen Generations case. However, her text does recognize that her experience cannot be read in isolation from the Stolen Generation experience or the negative effects of colonization on Indigenous Australians.
 8. The "intervention" was based in the Northern Territory, an area of Australia with a high proportion of Indigenous people and Indigenous townships. The Australian Federal Government dispatched uniformed troops into these areas, suspended the Racial Discrimination Act, compulsorily acquired rights over Aboriginal land, instituted bans on alcohol and pornography in selected predominantly Aboriginal communities, instituted "income management" for all community residents receiving welfare payments, linked income support payments to children's school attendance, and abolished heretofore successful employment programs. Community police presence was increased and customary law ceased to be considered in sentencing and bail applications (Perche).
 9. Though not entirely unproblematic in relation to contemporary debates about cultural appropriation and the need for diverse voices from nonwhite backgrounds to speak for themselves, Fallon anticipates this objection to a certain extent by including an epigraph by Mer Islander Ricardo Idagi (163).

10. TAFE stands for “Technical and Further Education”, a set of public vocational education institutions in Australia.
11. “DOCS” refers to the Department of Community Services, the government department responsible for child removal in New South Wales, where *Mullumbimby* is set. It is now named Family and Community Services (FACS), although DOCS is still used colloquially.
12. See, for example, reporting by the journalist Dan Conifer.
13. Lucashenko herself grew up divorced from her traditional culture for a substantial part of her life, which she explains in “Not Quite White in the Head”:
A dark teenager in Joh[Bjelke-Petersen]’s Queensland, I was quizzed constantly about where I was “from”, and given careful instruction in the following mantra: Your father is Russian. Your mother is Scots, Irish and English. When I was 14 my mother confessed, lightly, as though her attention had lapsed: we were Aboriginal. In the same decade, the Government stopped removing Aboriginal babies in Queensland.
14. *Jalgani* means woman., and *Jahjam* means child in the Bundjalung language.

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TESSA PYLES

Centring Complex Maternal Emotion in *The Babadook*

“If it’s in a word or it’s in a look,
You can’t get rid of the Babadook...
I’ll wager with you.
I’ll make you a bet.
The more you deny,
The stronger I get.
You start to change when I get in.
The Babadook growing right under your skin.”
—The Babadook

Jennifer Kent’s horror film The Babadook shines a spotlight on maternal ambivalence, which is easily read as horrifying in a culture that demands mothers feel or express nothing but love for their children. However, Kent asks her audience to look beyond maternal ambivalence as a representation of bad, mad, or monstrous mothering and instead as an act of resistance to one of the most intimate forms of female oppression—motherhood. Read this way, The Babadook challenges what Adrienne Rich named the “institution of motherhood.” I argue that The Babadook moves beyond the institution of motherhood and into the realm of the emotional and psychological ramifications the institution engenders. I engage Barbara Almond’s The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood to help convey the experiences of what she refers to as “the dark side of motherhood.” It is in this dark space that Amelia, the film’s protagonist, finds herself. Like so many mothers, Amelia has no outlet to honestly express what and how she feels about motherhood and about her child. As a result, she denies and represses her feelings. But monsters are not often born from the expression of feelings but from their repression, and the more her feelings are denied the stronger the monster—the Babadook—grows. Ultimately,

The Babadook challenges the many cultural and emotional restrictions placed upon mothers. More so, it asks those of us who are mothers to consider loving and maybe even nurturing the monster within.

The “Horror” of Liberating Representation

The excerpt cited above is from an ominous poem in a pop-up children’s book, which makes unexplained appearances throughout Jennifer Kent’s horror film *The Babadook* (2014). However, throughout the film, the monster—the Babadook—is not only growing stronger within the book’s story; it is also growing stronger in Amelia (Essie Davis), the film’s central character, who is a single mother to seven-year-old Samuel (Noah Wiseman). Recognizing her own story in the words and images held within the pages of the book, Amelia tries to destroy it. Alarmingly, even after the book is destroyed it continues to reappear, and with each reappearance, the written and illustrated content of a mother emotionally and then violently escalating is added, making manifest the warning: “The more you deny, the stronger I get.” As horror films are meant to do, *The Babadook* terrifies. However, the primary source of this terror is not derived from graphic violence or shock; rather it is the raw portrayal of a woman who is trying to mother within the suffocating social constricts of acceptable maternal emotion.

Though amplified by the supernatural, Amelia’s experience of motherhood is a common story many mothers live, and the monsters of their stories are as real as the Babadook. Not only is the Babadook a manifestation of Amelia’s denial and repression of her feelings, it is also a manifestation of cultural collective angst embedded within notions of acceptable maternal feelings and actions. For those who struggle within and against the emotional constraints of motherhood, the recognition of oneself in Amelia—a woman who becomes monstrous as she represses the darker elements of her maternal feelings—can be experienced as representation and validation of something mothers are all too often terrified to say aloud. Ultimately, this film posits that such complex maternal emotion is not monstrous. What is monstrous is the expectation that mothers deny the reality and expression of that complexity. In a society that wants its mothers to be only beacons of selfless love and comfort, centring the representation of a mother as an emotionally complex being, especially in relation to her child, can seem terrifying. Yet the representation is also liberating.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, *The Babadook*’s writer and director Jennifer Kent states the following: “We’re all, as women, educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it’s not always the case. I wanted to show a real woman who was drowning in that environment” (qtd. in MacInnes). Kent recognized the need to offer a

candid representation of an experience of motherhood not often told, a perspective that coincides with Andrea O'Reilly's call for a "matricentric feminism." As O'Reilly explains, the need for a mother-centred feminism "is to emphasize that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women's role and identity as mothers" (2). Tangled within the "problems," as O'Reilly outlines, is the construct of maternal love—a love expected to be selfless and free of any complex feelings (e.g., resentment, regret, dissatisfaction, and hate). By centring Amelia and her emotionally tumultuous experience of motherhood, and specifically the denial of her emotions, *The Babadook* demonstrates the need for and the possibility of acknowledging the many dimensions of motherhood in stories about mothers.

In *Maternal Horror Film* (2013), a study primarily concerned with the function of the cinematic representation of motherhood within the horror genre, Sarah Arnold explains that it is common that "these gothic-inspired films repress the maternal in order to deny her [the mother's] authorial power. They do this by limiting the subjectivity of the mother and framing the film from the point of view of the child or by constructing the mother as an absent presence" (Arnold 70). Kent actively inverts these practices. *The Babadook* does not limit Amelia's subjectivity; instead, the story is told from her perspective. In a joint interview with Kent, Essie Davis, the actress who portrays Amelia, explains, "Jen really wanted a film where everyone, everything, was seen through Amelia's eyes. Amelia had to be in this incredible truthful place ... there's this heightened element of how she feels she's being seen by these other extraordinary characters, and that's what I also think is quite beautiful about this film" (FilmQuote Compile). By telling Amelia's story of motherhood from her perspective, the film does not reproduce "patriarchally informed constructions of maternity" (Arnold 17); instead, it unveils and disrupts these constructions. The "incredible truthful place" Amelia inhabits throughout the film can also be read as a frightening but liberating place because she does not function as a villain mother or as a cautionary tale, at least not as a means to reinscribe social and cultural—patriarchal—mores. Instead, she serves as a caution against their limitations and the harm they do to mothers and motherhood.

Maternal Ambivalence and Monstrous Expectations

Though nearly seven years have passed, Amelia is still heartbroken and reeling from the traumatic and untimely death of her husband. This trauma is at the core of much of her inner turmoil and denial of her feelings. As becomes evident throughout the film, this is because those closest to Amelia have set

limits on how or what she can feel—not only about the death of her husband but also about her difficult relationship with motherhood and, therefore, with Samuel. Their relationship is made more complex by the fact that Samuel, who was born the day his father died, is a precocious but challenging child for whom others have no patience or compassion. In short, the people best positioned to provide understanding and support to Amelia and Samuel—family, teachers, and doctors—instead treat both like social pariahs. As a result, Amelia has quelled her feelings and does her best to present as a woman and mother unbothered by her circumstances, especially her son.

For example, in the opening scenes, Amelia is awakened from a nightmare that is forcing her to relive the death of her husband when she hears Samuel cry out, “Mum, I had the dream again!” Amelia instantly opens her eyes, and then, with Samuel clinging to her side, she dutifully looks under his bed and in his closet to assure him that there are no monsters in hiding. After he is satisfied of his safety, she sits next to Samuel on his bed and tenderly reads to him. Although there are no monsters in his room that night, before he falls asleep, Samuel looks to Amelia and both prophetically and protectively tells her, “I’ll kill the monster when it comes. I’ll smash its head in.” Samuel knows what, at first, Amelia does not know or cannot face—the monster is coming.

Within these first scenes of the film, Amelia does her best to temper the complexity of the feelings she has for and about Samuel. Her attentiveness to Samuel’s needs is reflective of a culturally expected response of a mother to her distressed child. However, the extent of this bond, or more precisely, the complicated feelings that exist within it, are quickly evident. After Samuel falls asleep next to Amelia, he is grinding his teeth and has draped one of his legs over her body. Unexpectedly, Amelia has a look on her face not of irritation but disgust. She removes his leg from her body and rolls, back towards him, as far away to the opposite side of the bed as she can manage. The following morning, the struggle to deal with her complicated feelings for Samuel become even more evident.

Exhausted from the lack of sleep, Amelia is struggling to get herself and Samuel to work and school on time. Despite this rush, Samuel is trying to show Amelia the weapon he created to kill the monster—a contraption he wears on his back, with a handle that allows him to catapult objects at the monster. Frustrated by his obsession with monsters, Amelia kneels in front of Samuel and pleadingly says, “The monster thing has got to stop, alright?” She addresses this issue not only because of her frustration but also, as is later revealed, because of the frustration and reaction of those who provide care for Samuel, namely her sister and his school. In response to his mother’s plea, Samuel gently touches Amelia’s face and then leans forwards to hug her. She receives and returns this hug, but when a comforted Samuel moans “Mmm” in her ear, Amelia pushes him away and yells, “Don’t do that!” However, very

quickly, and with a look of resigned guilt on her face, she forces a gentle smile and cheerfully asks, “Ready?” These first few scenes between mother and son are telling; they speak to a common experience mothers are far too often terrified to acknowledge.

Amelia tries to be a loving and caring mother, and she is; however, her looks and actions also convey feelings of disgust and disdain for Samuel. The latter of these are culturally marked as abnormal or unnatural for mothers, so to experience these feelings can be terrifying. In *The Monster within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, Barbara Almond draws from her experiences as a psychologist who has treated many mothers who struggle with complex maternal feelings as well as from her own experiences and feelings as a mother. She explains that “conflict is the bedrock of human psychology and is always manifested in some form of ambivalence.... It is a completely normal phenomenon” (xiii). Yet ambivalence is not deemed normal or acceptable for mothers. As Brid Featherstone writes in *Motherhood and Ambivalence*, “the idea of mothering in particular arouses anxieties which may be managed through defences which, reproduced at a cultural level, are manifested in the idealization and denigration of mothers—neither set of images faithful to reality” (1). The cultural manifestation of these anxieties is often expressed in the binary of good or bad mother. In other words, mothers who are deemed good are idealized, whereas mothers who are deemed bad are denigrated. Although this binary holds tremendous cultural power over mothers as they strive to be perceived as good, it is in no way an accurate reflection of reality.

In “*Bad Mothers*,” Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky write about the inconsistencies of what or who defines bad mothers in the twentieth century, as well as the elasticity of the term. As they state, most believe “‘bad’ mothering is like obscenity: you know it when you see it” (2). Yet as the authors further explain, “the ‘bad’ mother label does not necessarily denote practices that actually harm children. In fact, it serves to shift our attention away from a specific act to a whole person—and even to entire categories of people” (3). The similar inconsistency surrounds the notion of the good mother. In *The Good Mother Myth*, Christy Turlington Burns describes the good mother myth as “an insidious burden working against our [women and mothers’] empowerment and freedom” (x), and Avital Norman Nathman adds that “the myth of the ‘good mother’ is one continuously embedded in our lives, passed down from generation to generation, shape-shifting to fit the nuances of culture and society but always imbued with a fabled ideal of what constitutes the perfect mother” (xiii-xiv). In other words, what constitutes bad and good mothering is neither clear nor stable. Yet the fear of being labelled bad, which drives the desire to be labelled good, hinders the understanding of the normalcy of complex maternal emotions as well as the healthy expression of those feelings.

In “The Production and Purposes of Maternal Ambivalence,” Rozsika Parker reinforces the universal experience of maternal ambivalence as well as the effects of a culture that refuses to acknowledge its regularity, which causes many mothers to experience compounded feelings of guilt and shame. She writes the following:

None of us find it easy to truly accept that we both love and hate our children. For maternal ambivalence constitutes not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side. However, much of the ubiquitous guilt mothers endure stems from difficulties in weathering the painful feelings evoked by experienced maternal ambivalence in a culture that shies away from the very existence of something it has helped to produce. (17)

Amelia is hyper-aware that she exists in a culture that does not condone, or even acknowledge, the validity of her feelings. As a result, the guilt over how and what she often feels towards Samuel as well as her frustration for the pretenses she has to keep up is palatable. For example, in an awkward scene set in a grocery store, Amelia’s ambivalence and the turmoil it causes is on display. She assumes that Samuel is being a nuisance to another customer and says, “Sam, don’t bother the lady.” The woman responds, “No, no, no. That’s alright,” but quickly says to her own daughter: “We have to go home and see Daddy, though, haven’t we?” To this Samuel matter-of-factly states, “My dad’s in the cemetery. He got killed driving Mum to the hospital to have me.” As neither woman knows what to say, the stranger cheerfully adds, “Well, your mum is very lucky to have you, then, isn’t she?” Beyond the painful memory this exchange evokes, as the woman walks away, Amelia stands still while her eyes convey and betray her inner thoughts: she does not know or necessarily believe that she is lucky to have him. He is certainly not a fair exchange or a consolation prize for her dead husband.

Each of these scenes, as well as many others throughout the film, contradict the expected reactions from a mother. For some, Amelia’s angry and ambivalent reactions to Samuel might be what is horrifying about this film, but it is important to ask why that is the case. As Briony Kidd discusses in her analysis of *The Babadook*, “Mothers are socially conditioned to restrain hostile feelings towards their children, and, in turn, film audiences are not used to seeing expressions of these feelings” (9). By showing the range of Amelia’s feelings, the film provides a representation of motherhood that though perhaps disconcerting or even horrifying is very real. As Kidd plainly states, “Like life itself ... *The Babadook* reminds us several times [that] motherhood can be treacherous” (8). The film conveys and confronts some of what makes mother-

hood treacherous and then suggests that the easier journey will not come by denying the monsters but by embracing them.

“The More You Deny, the Stronger I Get”

Kidd describes the Babadook as “a shadowy, spindly figure with a long black coat and a black hat ... truly a frightening presence, funny name or not—and more so because it’s not clear what he wants. Perhaps he’s just an evil thing that’s moved into their lives because they’ve left a gap. Because he can” (8). I argue that he is much more. The Babadook plays a dual role. He is a manifestation of the external pressures placed on Amelia, specifically as they relate to her motherhood as well as the complex feelings that engulf her personal experiences as a mother, including maternal ambivalence. Both of the Babadook’s roles bleeds into and feeds the other. Ultimately, what the Babadook wants is what Amelia wants, and even needs—to quit having to deny the existence of feelings those around her think she should not have. Until Amelia acknowledges and confronts the monster, he only grows stronger.

Above, I discuss Amelia’s maternal ambivalence and the ways she denies herself full expression of her feelings. Part of the reason that she cannot be more honest is because of her fears of others’ perceptions and judgments of her and of Samuel. Yet her fears are for the most part rooted in reality. For example, during a heated exchange between Amelia and her sister Claire, in which Amelia points out that Claire never asks about her life or visits her home, Claire readily admits “because I can’t stand being around your son!” Arnold points out that “one of the motifs apparent in a great number of maternal horror films is that of the monstrous child as a product of the Bad Mother” (71). Kent plays with this motif and uses it as a means through which to challenge the bad mother trope rather than to reinforce it. Although Samuel can be difficult at times, particularly concerning his obsession with and fear of monsters, he is not a bad or monstrous child. Yet nearly everyone around him treats him as if he is a lost cause.

In one scene in which Amelia has been called to the school and is shown a monster-killing weapon Samuel had snuck into school, a weapon that could have gravely harmed another child, Samuel’s teacher and principal do not refer to him by name but instead as “the boy.” They do this repeatedly, and each time they say it, Amelia’s anger grows. Finally, she demands, “Please stop calling him ‘the boy.’ His name is Samuel.” This scene is juxtaposed with a later scene when the monster has begun making appearances in their home. At one point, Amelia goes to the basement and sees the Babadook who has taken the form of her dead husband. She moves to him and quickly melts into his embrace. As he comforts her, he says, “We’re gonna be together. You just need to bring me the boy.” She asks, “You mean Samuel?” The monster, in the

shape of her husband repeats in an ever-increasing monstrous voice: “You can bring me the boy. You can bring me the boy. You can bring me the boy.” Finally, Amelia shouts, “Stop calling him ‘the boy,’” before running out of the basement. The Babadook is reenacting the very thing that causes Amelia distress and feeds her fear and anger. Amelia’s reaction to Samuel’s dismissal by those who should help care for him is to be fiercely protective. However, her protection of Samuel is complicated because even while she defends him, her disdain for him grows; she fears, or knows, that the others’ hatred of Samuel is a manifestation of their assessment of her as a mother. Eventually, this fear causes Amelia to misinterpret and reject genuine care and concern.

The only character in *The Babadook* who constantly expresses genuine concern and even love for Amelia and Samuel is their elderly neighbour, Mrs. Roach. Early in the film, Amelia and Samuel come home one day, and Mrs. Roach sees that Samuel looks forlorn. She soothingly asks, “Who do we have here?” Samuel sadly responds, “Hi, Mrs. Roach,” to which she responds, “You look tired little one. You’ve been in the wars today?” He quietly answers, “A few wars.” Amelia, wanting to show that she has a handle on the situation adds, “He’s had a big day, that’s all. He’s just exhausted.” Mrs. Roach says, “Poor little sweetheart. You look tired too love. You ok?” Amelia responds somewhat jovially, “Nothing five years of sleep won’t fix.” Although Amelia is clearly putting on a brave face, as her responses to Mrs. Roach do not match the emotions she has conveyed throughout the day, she does not seem to resent Mrs. Roach or to question the motives of her concern. However, as the film progresses and as Amelia loses her battle to suppress the monster, her feelings of inadequacy and resentment grow.

After the pop-up children’s book, *The Babadook*, reappears for a third time, and after receiving a frightening phone call from the monster, Amelia leaves Samuel with Mrs. Roach before going to the police station to report being stalked. After the police officer dismisses her and treats her as if she were crazy, Amelia is overwhelmed, frustrated, exhausted, and angry. Upon her return, Mrs. Roach asks, “Did you get your things done?” Before Amelia can respond, Samuel blurts out, “Mrs. Roach has Parkinson’s. That’s why she shakes like this,” and then he demonstrates the movement. Amelia scolds, “Samuel, you don’t have to say everything that goes through your head!” To her admonishment, Mrs. Roach gently replies, “Oh, it’s alright, love. He wanted to know, so we talked about it. He sees things as they are, that one. Oscar [Amelia’s deceased husband] was the same. He always spoke his mind.” Amelia then snaps, “Do you have to keep on bringing him up?” She storms off and grabs Samuel by the arm practically dragging him back to their house as he whimpers, and Mrs. Roach looks on with concern. Without meaning to, Mrs. Roach—a woman who is the epitome of gentle, patient, and maternal love, a culturally defined good mother—has gotten under Amelia’s skin.

In the following scenes, the extent of how Mrs. Roach makes Amelia feel about herself as a mother manifests through an infestation of roaches.

Upon entering her home, Amelia notices how messy it is. In the kitchen, there are dirty dishes piled up in the sink as well as on the countertops and table. She starts to wash the dishes but then sees large roaches crawling all over them. Then she notices one crawling on her and hastily knocks it to the floor. As she watches it fall, she notices more roaches crawling across the floor from underneath the refrigerator. She pulls the fridge from the wall and then peels a small area of loose wallpaper from the wall to reveal a large hole from which an intrusion of roaches pours. She falls back from them horrified. In the following scene, Amelia has unexpected guests. She apologizes for the mess and explains about the infestation, despite regular fumigation. She begins to explain where she found the infestation, but stops mid-sentence when she realizes that the hole she had seen before was in fact not there. This scene reveals the depth of Amelia's shame and guilt for not being a good mother to Samuel. The roaches are not an indictment of Mrs. Roach; rather they were a physical manifestation of how, intentionally or not, Mrs. Roach and others make Amelia feel. The extent of how Amelia knows she is being seen by those around her becomes even more apparent when she has to take Samuel to the doctor.

After an incident at Claire's home, Amelia is driving home and Samuel is in the backseat of the car looking at something Amelia cannot see and is screaming for the Babadook to get out. Meanwhile, Amelia is screaming at Samuel to "stop" and to "be normal." Samuel is so overwhelmed and scared he has a seizure, something that has not happened to him before. At the doctors, Amelia is crying. When the doctor tells Amelia she can make an appointment for Samuel to see a specialist, she pleads for immediate relief. She asks, "But can you just give me something for now, just to make him sleep? Um, just until ... just until we get an appointment. Please? I haven't slept in weeks and neither has Samuel, and when we go home tonight, this whole nightmare will start up again and I am really ... I'm not coping." At this point, it is clear that while Amelia is concerned for Samuel, she is also crying (literally) for help.

Although the doctor does comply with her request, he does so begrudgingly, and he passive-aggressively shames her. He responds to her request by saying, "I can give you a short course of sedatives. Just until the tests come back. Most mothers aren't too keen on them unless it's really bad." To this, Amelia quickly and desperately replies, "It's really bad." Even with the doctor, someone who should have Samuel and Amelia's best interest at heart, Amelia is not allowed to talk about how and what she is feeling and experiencing. She is not given room to be sad, to be frustrated, or to be at a loss about how to cope.

According to Almond this is not at all an uncommon response, even among therapists. She explains this issue as well as its impact on mothers in the following way:

Therapists who work with children see maternal ambivalence as a serious problem for the child, sometimes as *the* problem. The problem it creates for the mother takes second place. Even in the mother's psychotherapy, the therapist's concern about the child may compromise empathy for the mother's conflicted situation. Women's reluctance to talk about hatred—the negative side of their ambivalence—has a real basis in society's idealization and protections of children. At the same time, the strains of raising a difficult child tend to be left mostly at the mother's door. (141)

Although the doctor Amelia asks for help from is not a therapist and may not even be their regular doctor, he is a reflection of what Almond explains above. He is another element of a society that is deeply invested in ideals of motherhood rather than its realities. In evoking “most mothers,” he is telling Amelia that there is something wrong with her and that she is not living up to what is expected of her. She is not a good mother. Amelia is trapped in an institution that demands her silence. Up until that moment in the doctor's office, she could not and did not speak her feelings aloud. Yet when she does admit that she is “not coping” and when she asks for help, the person who could ensure professional help for both she and Samuel belittles her. Thus, Amelia reaches her breaking point. She has denied all that she can for as long as she can, and the monster has grown strong enough to take over.

After a night of no sleep because of the ever-encroaching monster, Amelia calls out to work and crawls back into her bed to sleep. She has only just closed her eyes when Samuel enters the room and says, “Mum, I took the pills, but I feel sick again.” Amelia just lies there breathing deeply as if she is trying to keep herself under control. Samuel continues, “I need to eat something. I couldn't find any food in the fridge. You said to have them with food. I'm really hungry, mum.” Between each of his sentences Amelia's breathing becomes louder and more intense, until she finally says with extreme irritation in her voice, “Why do you always have to keep talk, talk, talking? Don't you ever stop?” Samuel begins to reply, “I was just,” when Amelia cuts him off and demands, “I need to sleep.” Samuel ignores her clear frustration and continues, “I'm sorry, mummy. I was just really hungry.” At this Amelia begins to move. She rolls over to face him, and as she sits up, the rage in her voice builds as she slowly growls, “If you're that hungry why don't you go and EAT SHIT!” Samuel runs fearfully out of the room.

Although at first she lies back down to sleep, Amelia immediately feels guilty about what she yelled at Samuel. She gets up and finds him crying in his room. She gets close to him and says, “I'm so sorry. I don't know why I said that. It was terrible. I've had absolutely no sleep. I didn't know what I was saying. I'll cook you something, ok? What would you like?” Samuel responds, “I'm not hungry anymore.” At this point in the film, Amelia is, as Kidd writes,

“not just menaced by the malevolence of the Babadook: she’s possessed by it” (10). Indeed, from the time the book first appears and she begins to lose her ability to control all of her feelings, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the distinction between when Amelia is in danger and when she is possessed. Both happen simultaneously. This lack of clarity is an important aspect of what is horrifying about this film. Amelia is not an otherwise good mom caught up in a bad situation and eventually possessed by an evil monster. She is always both at different parts of the film. Even when she is clearly possessed by the Babadook, she never ceases to be Amelia. The complexity of her feelings for Samuel are not suddenly gone.

This is apparent when later Amelia, as possessed by the Babadook, is trying to get hold of Samuel and coolly says, “You don’t know how many times I wished it was you, not him that died.” Samuel pleadingly responds, “I just want you to be happy.” Amelia retorts in a mocking tone, “‘I just want you to be happy.’ Sometimes I just wanna smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out.” Of her own experience working with mothers dealing with feelings of ambivalence towards their children, Almond writes that women often “express anger at their offspring with murderous words: ‘I could have killed her!’ ‘I felt like hitting him over the head with a baseball bat!’ And they mean it. But they don’t do that” (190). Acknowledging that mothers can and often do have these thoughts about their children can be disturbing and difficult to understand. However, like many thoughts that run through anyone’s mind throughout any given day, the greater majority of mothers never act on them. When Samuel hears these words, he tells Amelia, “You’re not my mother,” but she immediately and vehemently roars, “I AM YOUR MOTHER!” In other words, Amelia is telling Samuel, “I am all of this. All of the love and the hate. All of me is your mother.” Ultimately, acknowledging this together is what saves them both.

When Samuel traps Amelia in the basement, and she is trying to break free, he tells her, “I know you don’t love me. The Babadook won’t let you. But I love you, Mum. And I always will. You let it in. You have to get it out!” Amelia struggles but finally makes her way to her knees and vomits a mass of black bile onto the basement floor. In this moment, both believe they are free, but then Samuel remembers the rhyme: “You can’t get rid of the Babadook.” Amelia has to continue battling the Babadook, but as she does, she begins to see the monster for what it is. Finally she screams, “You are nothing. You’re nothing! This is my house! You are trespassing in my house!” In that moment, the Babadook flees to their basement and Amelia and Samuel follow it down to lock it inside, but, the Babadook cannot be gotten rid of.

Conclusion: Nurturing the Monster and Claiming Motherhood on Our Own Terms

Within her book, Almond poses and then works to help answer the question, “so what is a mother to do?” That is, what is a mother to do about what she may think, feel, and experience within the institution of motherhood, especially if her experiences are not deemed as normal. To this question, Almond offers the following: “The final assumption that I am making is that this painful issue can be ameliorated in a variety of ways, if women can come to accept that their feelings do not make them unnatural pariahs, unfit to be mothers, unfit to be part of the human race” (238). In her own analysis of *The Babadook*, Kidd echoes Almond’s stance: “As many a psychoanalyst would have had it, repression is the real toxin, not negative feelings in themselves.... There’s no way to eliminate these aspects of life, but, in facing them head-on, in paying tribute ... we can at least keep them under control” (10). It would be easier for women to accept the complexity of their maternal emotions if society and culture would loosen the expectations placed on mothers and motherhood. Until then, we might need to follow Amelia’s lead. After all, by acknowledging the Babadook for what it is, by embracing it, and even by nurturing it, the monster loses its power over her.

Thus, what *The Babadook* reveals about the monsters of motherhood is terrifying, illuminating, and potentially liberating. Towards the end of the film, Samuel and Amelia are outside and are working together to collect worms. Amelia takes their collection to the basement, places it on the floor, and steps back expectantly. The Babadook comes out of the darkness, grabs the bucket, and retreats. Although the monster still scares her and is still present, she knows that it no longer has control over her or her relationship with Samuel. In fact, when she visits the Babadook, she feeds it, and offers it comfort, which is in effect the comfort and acceptance she is offering to herself. At the very end, Amelia and Samuel are outside in their yard and celebrating Samuel’s birthday. Both are smiling, happy, and enjoying each other’s company. Both are also recovering from the wounds each inflicted upon the other during their battle against, but also for, each other. In this powerful moment, they acknowledge their wounds and acknowledge their healing. Amelia and Samuel now know what the monster is, but it never goes away. They keep it in their basement and care for it, even nurture it. In this way, the monster is in their lives but on their own terms, because “you can’t get rid of the Babadook.”

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The Lost Songs of Motherhood

“Oh hard is the fortune of all womankind
They’re always controlled, they’re always confined
Controlled by their parents, until they are wives
Then slaves to their husbands the rest of their lives”
—Waggoner’s Lad (traditional, Appalachian, multiple sources)

This is taken from a well-known traditional ballad from Appalachia, first recorded in 1916 by the ethnomusicologist Cecil Sharp, and part of the vibrant ongoing living tradition of Old Time music still practiced today. It’s some of the music I grew up with as a first generation Australian child born to an American mother who had taken her fair sampling of folk music in the sixties. As I grew up and became a musician myself, I loved the unusual melodies, the singing style, and the fast grooves, but I found the words quaint and dated—nonsense songs that at best perhaps contained a hint of hard times long gone past but had little relevance to me as a woman today.

Then I had children.

The Appalachian Mountains is a chain that runs from the top right hand corner of the USA to the bottom. They were settled by English, Scottish, and Irish people, as well as slaves hailing from West Africa (who brought the banjo with them) from the early eighteenth century. There were few stores, and the economy was largely nonmonetary. Big social events included square dances or barn dances. Life was relatively isolated, and the men would often be gone for days at a time, leaving the women alone on the mountain with their children and their songs. A small look at these songs through the lens of motherhood forms the basis for this article.

First we need a definition for music, which can indeed be slippery. Music is

often lumped together with art. But it can be other things, which are older and deeper. It literally forms the soundtrack to our lives. It has a spiritual depth that can break you open and put you back together again. But it is first and foremost a language, which encompasses all those things, as well as banality and humour. It can be Shakespeare, or Donald Trump, or Twitter. But in our mainstream neoliberal society, music has undergone a change in the last few generations and has now become firmly packaged (with the exception of high art which requires prohibitive hours of relentless focus and financial cost) as a product.

The music you hear in day to day life—from shopping centres, to the radio, to Spotify—has been filtered through a cost-profit analysis. Women are often the singer and the product for sale, but these songs are often written or co-written, produced, and directed by men, who effectively control the narrative being piped into our ears in public spaces and in our homes. Women peak at sixteen years of age in these songs, whose themes centre on sex, youth, and the thrill of the chase. The whole thing is an exercise in fuckability—to a good beat and bassline. Where are actual women's voices in this? Elders' voices? Mothers' voices? Where are the songs for you once you become a mother, and the chase is over? The dominant cultural dialogue is male. Where is the discussion of the soul and the inner lived experience of womanhood? It's a separate topic in itself.

Music has not always been this way, with a big, centralized corporate interest dictating what is available to consume and participate in. Music has always been integral to culture. People have shared songs and tunes (and danced to them) for as long as there has been a community. These songs are encoded with information, wisdom, and culture. And to quote Michael Pollan, "culture is just a fancy word for your mom."

There is nothing older than singing, and in that, there is nothing older than a mother singing to their baby. In the Appalachians, the women had brought their songs with them from the old country, which they then mixed with African slave music and Native American music (large part Cherokee).

Child ballads (named for Francis Child, the collector) are a collection of English storysongs that date back as far as the thirteenth century. While they went dormant in England, they were retained in the New World. Known colloquially as murder ballads, they were long, sprawling songs (fifty verses or more) that were sung while working or for entertainment. They are relatively graphic and deal frequently with every flavour of domestic violence you can imagine: husbands kill wives; wives kill husbands; mothers kill babies or terminate pregnancies in a variety of ways; and women are sentenced to eternal pregnancies by their evil mother-in-laws and never give birth. They are dark, and they got darker as they moved to the New World. Songs were treasured as heirlooms and passed down. They evolved, and new ones were written against a backdrop of an isolated existence with no birth control, strict patriarchy and

religion, and the generalized violence that comes with a frontier. Women had lay midwives (“granny women”) but could not always access them. Nutrition was sporadic, and children were plenty, so the women sang as an escape, as an art form, and as an interwoven part of their lives. You don’t need to look at these songs very hard, once viewing through a maternal lens, and see an element of trauma processing here. These murder ballads, by the way, where known locally as “love songs.” I’ll let you ponder that.

What’ll I Do with the Baby-O

(traditional, recorded by Jean Ritchie, Kentucky)

Chorus

What’ll I do with the baby-o, what shall I do with the baby-o
 What’ll I do with the baby-o, when she won’t go to sleepy

Wrap her up in calico,
 give her to her daddy-o
 (repeat)

Chorus

Tell your daddy when he gets home
 to give old Blue a chicken bone
 (Repeat)

Chorus

Dance her north and dance her south
 Pour a little moonshine in her mouth
 (Repeat)

Wrap her up all warm and soft,
 toss her in the old hayloft
 (repeat)

Every time the baby cries
 Stick a little needle in the baby’s eye
 That’s what I’ll do with the baby-o
 When she won’t go to sleepy-o

When I had my daughter in 2014, I was amazed by the songs that came pouring out of my mouth. They were my mother’s songs that had been sung to me as a child. If had you asked me before I gave birth, I don’t think I could have recalled a single one of them. It was like they were embedded in my DNA, and I felt compelled to sing them on and inoculate my daughter with them. It was a powerful feeling.

Moreover, as I sang this particular song to my squalling babe, I was stunned to realise that here was this song. I had performed and recorded this song years earlier as a cute “bagatelle.” It was loaded with sensible and earthy practical suggestions—get the dad to do household chores, dance the baby around, or feed them a drop of alcohol. But the song concluded with the frustration of still holding a yowling infant, the suggestions being successful, and the final conclusion of poking the baby in the eye. I felt heard and held not only by the nameless mother who had written it but by the generations of mothers between me and her who had added suggestions while rocking their own infants and learning the art of motherhood. And I felt less prone to poking the baby in the eye. For the first time, I felt I saw these women’s power and wisdom, and I started looking at their songs in a new light, as important documents. For me, my own matrescence provided a new context for interpreting and discovering songs, and the women who had sung them. And they were waiting for me.

Lullabies are interesting creatures. Who is the singer? Who is the audience? What is their purpose? The baby doesn’t understand the words, although the voice is soothing. According to Holly Pester,

The sound of lullaby is the cry of reproductive work. The lullaby is the mother’s (the sister’s, the maidservant’s, the nanny’s) work song. Like any shanty or marching chant the rhythms of her body set the tempo of the song—rocking and jiggling the baby into slumber—co-ordinate the act of material effort (in the scene of supposedly immaterial labour). Here, as with washing, cooking, loving, sympathizing, comforting and breastfeeding, the woman’s body performs as a resource to soothe and oil the mechanics of capital. This is care work shown for what it is, sweating, muscular movement-task. (114)

I would also add that in the case of traditional music, having “work songs” that describe the breadth and depth of the motherhood experience offers wisdom, learnings, solace, and a feeling of comradeship among mothers stretching back through time. Every long lasting occupation has its work songs.

Lullabies weren’t my first introduction to mother’s songs though. My first pregnancy ended in a spectacular twelve week miscarriage with all the bells and whistles—haemorrhage, hospital, shock, and two D and Cs. It was one done on the spot with no pain relief or anaesthesia. I was ejected back into the regular, nonchildbearing, working world with little ceremony and a sea of people who didn’t know what to say, so said nothing. Imagine my surprise when Child ballad 74 popped up in my iTunes.

In this ballad of many verses, Lady Margaret and sweet William have a wonderful wedding, described in detail, and William lies down to bed and has a disturbing dream in which he lists all the ways in which he is contented with his life, kisses her cold hands, feet and lips, and then wakes up.

Lady Margaret Sweet William (Child 74)

Well the night passed away, the day came on
 And into the morning light
 Sweet William said "I'm troubled in my head
 By the dreams that I dreamed last night
 Such dreams, such dreams as these
 I know they mean no good for I dreamed that my bower was full of red swine
 And my bride's bed full of blood"

He asked "Is Lady Margaret in her room?
 Or is she out in the hall?"
 But Lady Margaret lay in a cold, black coffin
 With her face turned to the wall

I sat bolt upright. The recording I had was sung by a man. No further explanation is given for her cause of death. Blood features heavily in love songs. In my own small scale social experiments – men do not hear the implication in these verses. Women (especially those with experience of miscarriage or haemorrhage) do. Context is important.

The importance of the mother to mother audience can't be diminished. Most murder ballads today are performed by men, which obscures the original meaning and makes the songs sound funny and quaint, if not creepy. I know that when I was younger, other female musicians and I were uncomfortable and embarrassed to sing these songs publicly, but we couldn't articulate why, even though the songs were fabulous and an important part of the repertoire. Most of us learned some in private, though, as we were drawn to the content.

If you feel I'm drawing a long bow and seeing things that aren't there in these songs, take this song, "My Love Has Brought Me to Despair," which tells of a well-off woman who has fallen pregnant out of wedlock (alluded to be the fact that she can no longer tie her apron).

**My Love Has Brought Me to Despair
(Berzilla Wallin, Madison County NC)**

There is a flower I've heard say
that'll cure false love both night and day

And of these flowers I did pull
Until I got my apron full

I gathered black, I gathered blue
But none of these flowers could I find
That could cure false love or ease my mind

It's out of these leaves I made my bed
And out of these flowers a pillow for my head

It's down she lay and nary word spoke
Until her aching heart was broke

And in the green meadows around
I thought I heard some doneful sound

Speaking the unspoken. To the uninitiated, this song could be about a young girl who had broken up with her boyfriend and who is now trying to pick a posy to superficially brighten up her day. Who heard that? I guarantee that I would have prechildren.

As well as the bone-deep acknowledgement of how an out-of-wedlock-pregnancy will be life-ending for this woman, this song contains at least partial information on how to end a pregnancy. Black and blue cohosh is a well-known emmenagogue and an abortefactants. And she picks an apron full—perhaps the dose required? I'm tantalized by the fact that there seems to be a line missing there. Perhaps Berzilla when confronted by an outsider man, with wax recorder in her face and singing this most intimate song, held something back.

Another great example of hidden meanings is the “Riddle Song,” a child ballad originally from fourteenth-century England.

Riddle Song (Traditional)

I gave my love a cherry
 That had no stone
 I gave my love a chicken
 That had no bone
 I gave my love a ring
 That had no end
 I gave my love a baby
 With no crying

How can there be a cherry
 That has no stone?
 How can there be a chicken
 That has no bone?
 How can there be a ring
 That has no end?
 How can there be a baby
 With no crying?

A cherry when it's blooming
 It has no stone
 A chicken when it's pipping
 It has no bone
 A ring when it's a rolling,
 It has no end
 A baby when it's sleeping
 Has no crying.

Is this baby napping or a stillborn? It's a slow, contemplative melody, sung solo.

To anyone who hasn't mothered a baby, a baby with no crying can be a good thing. I played this song with a band and toured it. We sang it hundreds of times, without this possibility ever occurring to us. It wasn't till I was firmly ensconced in mothering until I realised the patently obvious; that you want your baby to cry.

There are more, hundreds more.

I would contend that modern Australian women have had our work songs, which should be our birthright, taken from us and replaced (because you have to replace songs, or they flourish underground) with Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, and Justin Bieber. What effect does that have? What meanings and themes

and understandings are unavailable? We don't even know what insights we are missing. We have no songs to sing in the dark.

Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not wisdom. Appalachian women's love songs are peppered with wisdom of the relationship between life, love, sex, birth, and death under patriarchy, and, perhaps they contain a roadmap, or at least touchstone or reference, for surviving.

Transmitting and sharing songs and truths like these to our daughters and to our sisters mean our wisdom and learnings are retained through the generations. Mothering in the absence of this wisdom (held and passed on by elders) means we are left to reinvent our own wheel, painful truth by painful truth, for our own children in our own houses on our own, with no feeling of being heard or reassurance that others have gone through similar and survived. This also limits our ability to progress socially. Our songs are important.

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Using Photovoice to Understand the Experiences of Life as a Mother in Thetford, Norfolk, England—A Community-Based Participatory Action Research Method Embodying Matricentric Feminism

Using photovoice to demonstrate a matricentric approach with mothers involved in community research illustrates a powerful example of a methodology that aligns with matricentric feminism and exhibits its value. The purpose of this community-based participatory research was to gain insight into the experiences of mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Thetford, Norfolk, England, where there are pockets of high deprivation. The researcher provided disposable cameras to a group of mothers and asked them to photograph their experiences as well as the issues affecting them as mothers. Once the photographs were developed, the mothers discussed the photographs through unstructured interviews. The results produced sixty-four photographs, and the discussions yielded further stories. There were four main themes discovered upon analysis: crime and safety; housing; appropriate areas for children and environment; and surroundings. The author recommended further research in this locality to acknowledge the strengths and assets mothers demonstrate while mothering and to encourage using a matricentric feminist lens within scholarly work for further policy development and community empowerment.

Matricentric Feminism—A Mode of Feminism for Mothers

Matricentric feminism is a relatively new mother-centred feminism that explores mothers and mothering through a matrifocal lens (O'Reilly *Matricentric Feminism*). It attaches significant value to the subject of mothers, mothering, and motherhood through scholarly inquiry, and it seeks to increase

research from the perspective of mothers while deemphasizing the child centredness that has previously been assigned to this scholarship.

To foster a deeper understanding of the differing ways of mothering, research is needed that connects readers to narratives and experiences that they have not had themselves in order to deconstruct certain assumptions and misinterpretations. To challenge the potential misrepresentation of mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and illustrate the realities of their lives, which are sometimes ignored in favour of more privileged experiences, it is essential to offer alternative perspectives. There is a common assumption that compliance with local and national policy initiatives will improve outcomes for marginalized mothers, but this is inaccurate. Focusing on statistics only will not allow us to know mothers, as they can sometimes reinforce the negative stereotypes assigned by professionals and politicians. Neither do the statistics help us to understand the layers of complexities that shape the lives of mothers; they only offer epidemiological data offering a superficial understanding of the actual experience of mothering. O'Reilly (*Twenty-First Century Motherhood*) highlights the omission of mothers' actual lived experience despite feminist theorists researching the effect policy has on areas of their life.

This research project not only offers insight to the experiences of mothers living in Thetford, Norfolk, England, using photographs and discussion in the hope of facilitating change but also provides an example of matricentric feminism research. A review of the literature has revealed that this is the first research project of its kind working with mothers in Thetford. The project used the empowering methodology of photovoice in which participants take photographs and use the images created to inform social action. Photovoice is a process by which people can create visual images and accompanying stories that may promote knowledge and dialogue about personal and community issues through the discussion of their photographs. This methodology has been used in a range of contexts to assist communities in uncovering barriers and to help them use local resources to strengthen their health and wellbeing. The method was developed by Caroline Wang, a professor and researcher with the University of Michigan and has been used among many different populations including rural Chinese women, the homeless, and urban populations (Wang and Burris; Wang et al.).

Photovoice

Photovoice encompasses three theoretical frameworks: empowerment education, feminist theory, and documentary photography. Social researchers recognize photovoice as a vital tool for community-based participatory research (CBPR) because of its accuracy in gathering information (Graziano).

Feminist theory respects and encourages women to use their understanding and experiences to become advocates, and documentary photography is the tool that provides the vulnerable or powerless people the ability to their story (Cataloni and Minkler). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that photovoice only allows us to view a community at a certain place in time. Participants use photo images to capture aspects of their environments or experiences and share them with others. The pictures can be used with captions composed by the photographers to illustrate the realities of their lives.

Background

The aim of the research was to gain insight into the experiences of mothers living in the town of Thetford using photovoice, with the research could be a starting point to build community relationships allowing reflection of what it is like to be a mother there. Overall, the situation looks encouraging when the levels of deprivation in Thetford are assessed. However, the town suffers from hot spots of deprivation, which are mainly concentrated on two specific estates: Barnham Cross and Abbey (Child Health Profile for East and West Thetford). The Abbey estate, where this research was undertaken, has suffered from a poor reputation, as negative connotations have been associated with its former name: Abbey Farm. The estate is still identified as the most deprived in Thetford. The west side of Thetford where the Abbey estate is located, fares significantly worse than the rest of England in crucial areas, including breastfeeding, income deprivation, violence, domestic abuse, teenage conception, and child poverty (Health and Well Being Profile).

However, due to the diverse population of Thetford, many of its problems resemble challenges often faced by more urban locations. The rural setting of the town limits the expertise and solutions required to address many of the issues. The most recent commissioning plan for Norfolk and Waverney Clinical Commissioning Group 2016/2017–2018/2019 has detailed the future direction of supporting children and young people; it identifies that the child health profile will be used to identify key priority areas over the next two years (Norfolk and Waverney Clinical Commissioning Group). However, without engaging in conversations with the people affected by these issues, it will remain challenging to develop and implement locally appropriate interventions.

For this study, recruiting participants involved a combination of distributing flyers and snowball sampling. The flyers explained the project with the main heading, “Exploring what it is like to be a mother in Thetford. Your community, your views!” The recruitment criteria included mothers over the age of eighteen who lived in the town of the Thetford.

The introductory discussion with the participants focused on points they wished to explore, including consent forms, photo release forms, ethics, and

potential risks and how to minimize them. A second meeting was also arranged. At the second meeting, consent forms were collected, ethics and time frames were discussed and time for any further concerns to be discussed was offered. A time was arranged to collect cameras. Disposable cameras and log books were distributed to the participants. A brief instruction was given, but there was no formal photographic training given. Each camera and log book was labelled with a letter to protect identity. The collection of the cameras was arranged a week later.

The films were developed and returned to the participants within several days. Each participant went through their own photographs with the researcher and an unstructured interview followed of their thoughts, feelings, and photographs.

Data

The data for this project yielded sixty-four developed photographs overall; notes from the memo books participants were provided with as well as recordings and notes from unstructured discussions around the photographs were also collected. There were no specific themes set for participants prior to the photographs being taken, and they were given the freedom to photograph what was personally relevant to them. A suggestion to photograph both positive and negative aspects of being a mother in Thetford was the only loose proposal. Following the development of the photographs each participant discussed their photos individually alongside any notes they had taken during the project.

Reoccurring themes appeared across the photographs and notes. These were housing, environment and surroundings, crime and safety, lack of appropriate areas to go with children and the community centre. When split into the naturally occurring themes there were 11 photographs focusing on crime and safety, 10 photographs focusing on housing, 15 photographs focusing on appropriate areas to go with children, 27 photographs focusing on the environment and surroundings and one photograph of the local community centre. These areas were all problematic to the mothers living on the estate and impacted their lives and mothering. The enthusiasm for taking the photographs was obvious from the outset. The mothers felt they had a lot to capture that reflected their day to day experiences.

There were no personal photographs taken, and the mothers were very clear on what they wanted to photograph. They expressed a desire to photograph other members of their communities who they thought were behaving inappropriately, but they completely adhered to the rules of not photographing another without consent. The participants were really excited to get their photographs back and to look through them. They were surprised how well they had turned out.

Here are a few comments the participants made about issues of concern to them.

Housing

Concerning the housing situation, one participant said the following:

The housing here is so old. A lot of it needs knocking down and rebuilding. They won't do it though. The houses are not good. There aren't enough. Maybe that's why we have people living in tents behind my house and along the river. They had even put up a washing line. My kitchen is falling apart.

Another commented about the poor housing in the area: "My friend lives in those flats with her baby and there are mums with babies in those. They are damp and on my friends the security lock doesn't work so anyone can get it. We are just left. No one cares."

Environment and Surroundings

About the surroundings, one participant said the following: "What is the point? We feel undervalued. Maybe devalued. People give up. There is no consistency with anything here. They set things up then six months later take them away."

Another had this to say:

The shops on this estate are awful. I wish we could have a green grocer. It's so far to go to the big supermarkets. We could go and grab a cabbage or some veg if we needed to. It would encourage people to eat healthier. A green grocer would be welcomed. There are so many green spaces on this estate. We could use some to have allotments. We could even have chickens and get eggs and grow flowers. I wish we could have veg and flowers. The young people here would love to do that. We could have a community that grew things and sustained itself.

One participant talked about the stigma associated with living in Thetford: "People judge you straight away when you say you're from Thetford. They judge you when they know you live on the Abbey. What sort of future does that give our children?"

Another participant spoke about the contrasts present in Thetford:

It's such a contrast here. Look at the beauty of Thetford. I have these people camping behind my house. I could make a holiday brochure advertising the lovely woods. "Come to Thetford and camp." It's because there are housing issues and alcohol issues and drug issues. The beauty of all these areas is spoilt. We can't take the children and go and sit and have a picnic somewhere. It's not like that now.

Community Centre

One participant spoke about

The Abbey Community Centre should be the centre of the Abbey community. It's the only community centre left in Thetford. It was the hub of the community. We ran a cafe from there, and people came. The young and old. We had the tear away the lads sitting down with old ladies having lunch. We used to have specials. We never paid ourselves a penny, but we did manage to give one girl from the estate a paid job working in there. We had to pay ... rent but ... our landlords refused to service the extractor fan in the kitchen. We couldn't afford it, so we had to close the cafe. Everyone came there for everything. They had computers there people could use. Now they charge outrageous hire charges. I thought it was about localism ... but there is no support here to do anything.

Unstructured Interviews

The unstructured interviews deviated slightly from the traditional group discussions of many photovoice projects due to difficulties in arranging a time and place when all participants could attend. As a result, the unstructured interviews took place individually, and at this stage, there has been no group discussion. However, this did create an opportunity to have deep and meaningful discussion of most of the photographs each participant had taken, as they were free to express and explore their own thoughts openly without fear of what another participant might say or think.

The photovoice project was modified to meet the needs of the participants. The recruitment process over such a short time period was challenging, and a higher number of participants might have yielded more data. However, the data gathered were rich, and there was plenty of time to spend with each participant, which allowed them to say what they wanted.

The participants were not given guidance or training on using the cameras as is sometimes the case. This is an aspect of photovoice projects that should not be dismissed, but the lack of direct instruction could be considered a strength in this project, since it ensured the project developed organically. Using an unstructured style of interview allowed participants to direct the conversation and discuss the issues they felt were most important to them.

The impact of the project on the participants and the researcher is not easy to measure, but it is most heartwarming to witness the vision of community change these mothers want to try and bring to their lives after this initial small pilot project. These women thought and talked about issues affecting the community, not just personal ones. As a result of the project, the participants

have begun enquiring how they might make an action plan to use a disused community shop as a green grocer and apply for funding to initiate allotments to grow produce for it.

Local government and policymakers are tasked with addressing problems in communities. However, there is often a lack of understanding of the obstacles and issues faced by local citizens resulting in actions that often have no impact on the very people the policy was meant to help. For the development and design of more locally appropriate interventions, a platform to empower local people to reach out may allow them to initiate change. To gather local information, this type of community-based participatory research can be implemented to provide an accurate account of the community.

The researcher discovered participants of this project are willing to take control of their communities and lives to make improvements to their wellbeing. These mothers must be viewed with awe, as they demonstrated such a willingness to participate in this research; not only did they list the issues they faced, but they also offered their own ideas for potential solutions. Through their discussion, the participants long to break away from the stereotypes they are labelled with in their communities and to raise their aspirations. With further support, they could have an impact on changing this poor reputation Thetford has, which seeps into many aspects of the lives of people living there. The Report to Norfolk Health and Wellbeing Board (2014), which covers the Joint Health and Well Being Strategy 2014-2017, highlights “creating a healthier physical environment” and “promoting behaviour change” as priorities. This involves increasing access to healthy food choices, making the most of a potential planning system to create a healthier environment, and creating opportunities to engage with communities. These responsibilities fall on the local council. If it tried to engage with local mothers and families, these plans could be implemented. As it stands, local leaders work from the top down, and they impose their ideal of what they believe is going to put things right in these communities without giving the members a voice. Nowhere in their reports do the local leaders address any of the issues that emerged from this photovoice project.

This project provided an opportunity for marginalized or disadvantaged members of a community to share their experiences of what it is like to be a mother living on a deprived housing estate through photographs. Participants were able to bring their own voices to this project and represent themselves. This is especially important because communities and their members can be isolated from policymakers and local government and they do not always have the confidence to vocalize their experience.

What is unique about this type of research is that it illustrates an alternative perspective of mothers facing deprivation and offering insight into their lives. Reproducing or repeating research that portrays mothers using the same

narrative each time is simply a reproduction of knowledge. By choosing to find ways that help mothers tell their stories and experiences, researchers can shape and shift the more dominant narratives that are heard and make positive progress. The academic and activist Verónica Gago insists that mothers need to come together collectively to find solutions and not place such emphasis on mothers independently solving their problems. In order to do accomplish this, it must be acceptable for all mothering stories to be shared.

It is difficult being a mother and navigating all that comes with it, and by firmly placing all of the responsibility the individual mothers alone, the problems associated with being a mother cannot be addressed. The context and structures mothers are mothering in must be acknowledged, which again reiterates the fundamentals of matricentric feminism.

Mothers from poorer backgrounds can be targeted, blamed, and shamed for societal failings without question. Continually insinuating that the problems of society can be assigned to bad mothers perpetuates a dangerous narrative. There are unrealistic expectations placed upon mothers; society expects mothers to fulfil and carry out numerous roles, many of which contradict one another. Deborah Levy refers to this as neopatriarchy and writes about the contradictions that the government repeatedly disavows. She describes neopatriarchy as requiring mothers to be *“ambitious, maternal but erotically energetic, self-sacrificing but fulfilled—we were to be Strong Modern Women while being subjected to all kinds of humiliations, both economic and domestic”* (Levy 23). This is unrealistic, and society should stop pretending mothers are or should be perfect.

There are many conflicting parts to being a mother, yet society applauds the stories of the so-called good mother while casting judgement on the mothers who are deemed bad. Idealized stories and images are unhelpful and ultimately cause more harm to mothers. Sarah LaChance Adams has written extensively on the complexities of maternal life and is adamant that mothering should be understood more broadly.

This is why I strongly advocate an interdisciplinary approach to studying mothering. We ought to be making use of all available perspectives and avoid relying on popular assumptions about motherhood or on the experiences of a few if this investigation is to be adequate from a feminist point of view. None are harmed more by the maternal ideal than mothers and children (23).

She is keen to point out that mothers also have failings just the same as everyone else and that mothers and children will suffer if their realities are ignored. LaChance believes “that if we care for the well-being of children we *must* care for the well-being of their caregivers.”

A recent publication by Jacqueline Rose (2018) encourages more researchers

to consider alternative aspects which may reassure mothers it is okay to be honest about mothering. To keep ignoring the untold aspects of mothering will ensure nothing will change. Neither is it helpful to place lesser value on the experiences of mothers from less fortunate backgrounds. The challenges all mothers face are acceptable to talk about. The strengths all mothers hold are okay to talk about, even if those strengths are found in mothers from outside of the most commonly heard voices. It is essential to invite alternative stories of mothers who are heard less often in order to provide different perspectives. Mothers are already usually bound by the dominant culture they are expected to adhere their mothering to; therefore, repeatedly giving opportunity for only one aspect of their story to be revealed is detrimental to their mothering. This applies not only to mothers but to their daughters and their daughters' future.

The constructed narrative of the bad or dangerous mother continues to influence institutional areas that include law, governance, economy, and child protection. In order to confront the misplaced assumptions and judgments that come from continually portraying aspects of some mothers from a negative moral standpoint, scholars must reject the labels attached to descriptions of mothering. Miri Rozmarin confirms the importance of giving voice to the words of different mothers to gain deeper understanding of their positions. Something many scholars are reluctant to do.

There is a very real possibility that some of the voices of mothers we neglect to hear could be from the most courageous mothers. The most commonly accessed portrayals often shared to influence policy and governance can cause considerable concern. Exposing these experiences is perfectly justifiable, as no one can deny the existence of situations where women are mothering under duress, but scholars must be cautious of blurring the lines in how these experiences are represented, especially when portraying women who are from poorer backgrounds as victims.

Conclusion

This research has laid the foundations for further photovoice projects and has given community members the belief they can implement change. The participants want to take community action, and it is hoped this project alongside further research will help inform decision makers and local leaders about the areas of concern highlighted. Strong foundations have been built that may foster further community-based participatory research and help demonstrate the needs of the community to various influential bodies.

Community engagement from local councillors and policymakers would help foster relationships with community members. Further exploration could be done in this community by investing more time in the community over a

longer period, which could help build trust and could help recruit a larger number of participants from a specific area in the town.

If scholars adopt a matricentric framework based around authenticity, authority, autonomy, and advocacy, there could be a shift not only in the way mothers who are mothering outside of the so called normal discourse are perceived but also in the way they view themselves. This framework would allow mothers to challenge and alter the norms they are bound by.

In conclusion, photovoice is a positive example of utilizing a research methodology that enables mothers as participants to provide positive insight and understanding about mothering in difficult circumstances. If research methods that involve and include the lesser known voices of mothers in communities can be implemented in future research, this will not only strengthen understanding but will show the value of adopting a matricentric feminist lens to enable the voices of mothers to become stronger.

The previous scholarly work undertaken has deepened my passion to undertake research that seeks to further expand the breadth of mother's narratives that must be heard and retold again and again in order to enhance the evidence needed to ensure there is support for mothers in the planning of their communities. In essence, in order to create a strong matriarchal social system, we must undertake more research that is matrifocal in its focus, which would allow us to oppose the assault on mothering that some mothers face.

Additional Note

It is important to highlight that this is a small pilot project that was designed to build relationships with mothers living on this estate in the hope of creating future projects together to gain a deeper understanding about mothering in areas of high deprivation. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how using a matricentric-friendly method can facilitate the foundations on which more in-depth research can be done. As a result of this pilot project, the author is currently conducting matrifocal narrative case studies using photo elicitation in order to understand her own experience of mothering in extraordinary circumstances and the experiences of other mothers and their mothering. Ethical approval was sought and given from the Ethics Board of the School of Health Sport and Bioscience, University of East London. There were no financial incentives or gains offered or given to the participants.

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LORINDA PETERSON

A Matricentric Feminist's Approach to Art Activism: Killjoy Tactics in *Rape Stories from the Family Album*

I am a matricentric feminist as described by Andrea O'Reilly in her text Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice. Matricentric feminists are evolving in response to new feminist understandings and motherhood theories; they do not pre-exist. I am a feminist killjoy as prescribed by Sara Ahmed in "A Killjoy Manifesto." Feminist killjoys are assigned to pre-existing conditions, often because they are assembled around circumstance. I also produce comics and sequential art in a reflexive praxis that has value in the disciplinary sense rather than aiming at market value. In this article, I discuss six drawings from my book Rape Stories from the Family Album. I consider them through a matricentric feminist lens highlighting how they reflect an activist art praxis that mobilizes feminist killjoy tactics. I will focus my discussion around my traumatic memories of learning about my three daughters' rapes as represented in the drawings. Where necessary for sense making I will introduce aspects of comics art and trauma memoir.

Introduction

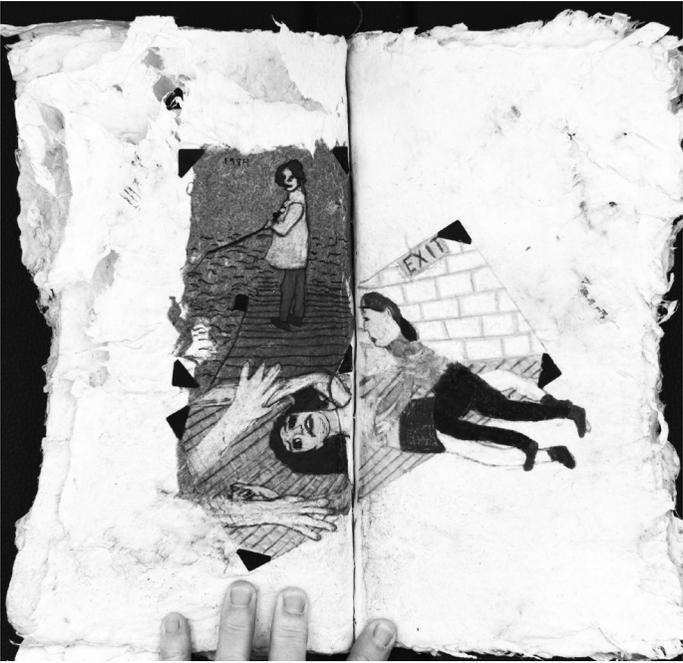
I am a matricentric feminist as described by Andrea O'Reilly in her text *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*. Matricentric feminists are evolving in response to new feminist understandings and motherhood theories; they do not pre-exist. I am a feminist killjoy as prescribed by Sara Ahmed in "A Killjoy Manifesto." Feminist killjoys are assigned to pre-existing conditions, often because they are assembled around circumstance. I also produce comics and sequential art in a reflexive praxis, which has value in the disciplinary sense rather than the financial sense. Alana Jelinek writes in

This is Not Art: Activism and Other “Not-Art” that “disciplinary art practice is understood specifically as the material and intellectual negotiation with, and performance of, the conditions of modernity” (133). I aspire to create art that falls outside neoliberal norms and in Jelinek’s words “has resistant or disruptive potential for this moment” (150). My art is the product of traumatic mothering experience, and it is both activist and matricentric in the sense that it not only attempts to effect social change for my children but also reflects the agency in how I live my own life (O’Reilly 127). It represents my killjoy manifesto. To be a killjoy is to cause disturbance by “recognizing inequalities as existing” (Ahmed 251). Killjoys are assigned to “expose the happiness myths of neoliberalism” (257)—those that maintain happiness by facilitating violence and oppression. In this article, I discuss six drawings from my book *Rape Stories from the Family Album*. I consider them through a matricentric feminist lens highlighting how they reflect an activist art praxis that mobilizes feminist killjoy tactics. I focus my discussion around my traumatic memories of learning about my three daughters’ rapes as represented in the drawings. Where necessary for sense making, I introduce aspects of comic art and trauma memory.

The Images – Story #1



The Images – Story #2



The Images – Story #3



My recent art praxis confronts traumatic maternal experience through a series of handmade books. The sequential images in each book, like the six I have included here, resemble comics but without the words; they rely only on the images, their relationships, and the spaces between them for meaning. Comics blur the line between fact and fiction in transcribing worldly phenomenon to produce art. They depend on moments of presence within the frames and absence between the frames to create the nonlinear narrative that carries the audience outside the moment into a sense of suspended animation somewhere between the real and the imagined. In this way, comics are especially powerful as vehicles for trauma memory. Jill Bennett claims in her text *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* that “the imagery of traumatic memory deals not simply with a past event or with the objects of memory but with the present experience of memory” (24). Trauma memory is embodied experience; it lives in and learns to co-exist with its host in the present.

The six graphic panels preceding this text comprise part of my book *Rape Stories from the Family Album*. References to *Rape Stories* in this article refer specifically to these six images. The panels reimagine my three daughters’ rapes at the intersection of matricentric feminism, art activism, and killjoy experience. Through comic art, I confront a private family history unfolding publicly in my graphic representations. They are my experience of my daughters’ rape stories. As a mother, and with their permission, I use my creative praxes to endorse the truth in my daughters’ rapes over and against their shame, fear, and loss, and despite the social and political authorities that chose to ignore them. My oldest daughter was raped by her paternal grandfather when she was twelve years old. My middle daughter was raped in a hallway by two of her classmates in her public school when she was twelve. My youngest daughter was raped by an older acquaintance in her high school stairwell when she was thirteen, and as the drawing indicates symbolically, she suffered serious mental health issues as a result. The six panels featured here depict knowledge of the rapes as revealed to me by my daughters. Each story consists of two panels drawn on handmade paper I created to look like pages in an old photograph album. Each image is pinned with black corner caps that were made popular before photo albums were constructed from sticky pages with clear plastic coverings. Symbolically, the caps provide an idea of history, a context. Rape stories are not unique to our time. The caps in my book give the album a sense of collage; they are frames piecing together experiences and images that could otherwise be removed and forgotten. After all, this is what is expected of rape victims—to forget and to move on. However, just as the traumatic memories of rape are etched into my daughters’ bodies, my drawn images telling their stories are pushed deep into the heavy paper with coloured pencil, only to be removed when the paper crumbles.

The first of each pair of drawn comic panels shows my daughters through their life stages from infant in my arms, to child, and to adolescent, though not in chronological order. Comics are characterized like this by nonlinear time, which allows for the unpredictable surfacing of memories. The second of each pair presents a figurative representation of my daughters' rapes. Although I have words in this article that say my daughters have been raped, I have none to describe how the myriad emotional, sensory, and psychological implications of these traumatic events impacted my maternal experiences of my daughters' journeys since. Images in their nuanced affect allow me to express this. In their essay "Affect," Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn describe affect as bodies' processes "gestur[ing] towards something that perhaps escapes or remains in excess of the practices of the 'speaking subject'" (9). We speak through images, sometimes more loudly than through words. Affect is a state, a movement between what was and what is, a becoming. Affect moves an art audience from the representation of traumatic events that happened in the past to their own interpretations of the images in present time. Simon O'Sullivan claims that art continues producing affect because after the deconstructive reading, the art object remains. He describes affect as moments of intensity, reaction in/on the body at the level of matter or what Giles Deleuze describes as a bloc of sensations waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant (126). In this way, art tells stories powerfully. This is what I intend with my drawings: to provide an opportunity for my daughters' stories of rape violence to reach public audiences and to add to current discourse about rape and the culture that supports it.

Matricentric Feminism

Rape Stories from the Family Album is the initial project in my multi-year engagement with representing traumatic maternal experience through art. By maternal experience I mean my matricentric experience and practice of mothering. Motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly claims that matricentric feminism is racially, culturally, ethnically, sexually, and geographically defined across race class, age and ability. Accordingly, every mothering experience embraces a particular set of circumstances. Matricentric feminism "is difficult to define ... other than to say that it is explicitly matrifocal in its perspective and emphasis—it begins with the mother and takes seriously the work of mothering" (6). *Rape Stories* is active mothering. Through these drawings, I celebrate my daughters' resilience in telling their stories. Their words are translated by my hands as I draw, colour, and validate their experiences. What emerges is activist art through the lens of feminist theory and the practice of matricentric feminism (130). The experiences of rape that unfold and the agency I employ in the process of creating the drawings illustrate what

O'Reilly calls a "politicized activists' view of motherhood" (121). I am owning my power as a mother—emotionally informed and embodied. O'Reilly argues that "the rage or grief that a mother feels as her child is threatened radicalizes and mobilizes the mother and can move her to social action and political resistance" (127). These drawings are an active maternal response to realities no mother wants to inherit. Through them, I acknowledge my rage, but mostly my grief, for transgressions against my daughters.

This project is part of the "twenty-first century motherhood movement with its own specific mandate and objectives" (O'Reilly 106). It is made possible by motherhood scholarship that has previously laid the foundation for contemporary maternal activism. Maternal activism is performative in the sense that it demands action. By revealing violence graphically, *Rape Stories from the Family Album* actively points a finger not only at rapists but also at a society that even in 2019 upholds the testimony of rapists against the truths of the people they rape. Recent examples include missing and murdered Indigenous girls and women, accusations of sexual assault against former CBC radio host Jian Ghomechi of which he was subsequently acquitted, and the delayed trial of film producer Harvey Weinstein on charges of sexual assault. *Rape Stories* is my call to action for all of us. It is simple—stop condoning and hiding sexual and other violence against girls and women. Take up a pen, or a paint brush, or a megaphone, and speak. Women's voices in the recent #MeToo Movement among other social media platforms encourage women who have experienced rape to speak up. As matricentric feminist theory emerges and transforms, there is room for actively participating outside the institution of motherhood. As empowered mothers we can act with agency, authenticity, autonomy, and authority. It is time to move outside the attachment to patriarchal social, legal, and law enforcement institutions that seldom convict rapists, and stop letting them shame women and girls who have experienced rape.

Without all the work of maternal scholars over the decades, I could not have inherited the particular feminist horizon *Rape Stories from the Family Album* problematizes. Matricentric feminism has developed as a natural extension of maternal theory cultivated within the patriarchal institution of motherhood; it demands that motherwork be acknowledged and advocates for mothers' rights. Patriarchal maternal theories and motherhood myths must be critiqued so activist scholars can identify the difficult stories, the messy stories, and the true stories of mothers' experiences that do not fit within them. Matricentric feminism widens the lens of maternal experience. It puts its political focus on mothers' practices of mothering rather than on the biological condition of giving birth. It provides me a place and a sense of safety in exposing violence and rape for the purpose of creating disturbance and unhappiness that could lead to social change. *Rape Stories from the Family Album* represents one

strategy for such change. It rests in political agency predicated on the pain and suffering of my daughters (Patrice DiQuinzio 61) and on the pain, suffering, and loss I experience as a result of the violence against them.

Gun control and racial justice activist Lucy McBath, whose son was killed in a 2012 shooting, provides a similar example of matricentric feminism. She headed to the US Congress, after narrowly winning a 2018 election in the State of Georgia. McBath's mothering practice extends far beyond her son's death just as mine extends beyond my daughters' rapes. In a *New York Times* article she proclaims, "Six years ago I went from a Marietta mom to a mother on a mission.... What I'm doing today is still mothering my son's legacy. I'm extending what I would do for my son to my community" (qtd.in Herndon). McBath is a matricentric feminist activist. What McBath is doing through national politics I am doing through art, from positions of agency that honour our children. These are killjoy tactics. We are acting from positions of privilege to make room for change. Sarah Ahmed claims that "we have to create room if we are to live a feminist life. When we create room, we create room for others" (265). Matricentric feminism cannot bring back McBath's son or relieve my daughters of their rape experiences. It can, however, help to sound the gong on transgressions against our children and to unsettle the flow of violence.

Art Activism

Rape Stories from the Family Album is the work of a feminist activist artist. It is art "that deliberately self-defines as a form of creative emancipation" (Tolmie xvi). The act of creating these drawings validates my daughters' experiences and makes them visible to the world. I am producing art that is personally motivated to destabilize and resist the status quo; it grounds the issue of rape in matricentric feminist practices of mothering. Autobiographical writing and art by extension are situated within multiple subjectivities that locate us in relation to privilege and oppression in our lives. Although privileged by whiteness and feminist politics, and not taking this for granted, I am, nonetheless, among the oppressed as both a woman and a mother in today's society, perhaps more as a mother since feminism is just now addressing mothers from the perspective of mothers. In "Interrogating Privileged Subjectivities," Bob Pease suggests that that when we write autobiographically, we highlight our subject position (77)—the places from which we critique privilege and oppression. *Rape Stories* provides such critique by disturbing the silence that protects rapists and by exposing rape in a way that says you will see and you will not be happy. As art activism, *Rape Stories* is shaped equally by my mothering experience at a specific time in history, a reflexive process of filtering this experience through my body as trauma memory, and my attempt at representing that experience in art. It brings together what Tina Rosenberg

in “On Feminist Activist Aesthetics” says are “the aesthetic and socio-political impulses that attempt to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining [rape] culture as represented by those in [control]” (5). Rape violence is controlled by silence that promotes invisibility. *Rape Stories* breaks the silence and makes visible. Any harm or violence towards our children affects our mothering and determines how we mother forward in the day to day. By speaking through art, I am actively mothering. I am circumventing the institution of motherhood and other institutional powers that would silence me, including some schools of feminism. My art represents a rebel tactic aimed at rapists by exposing through these drawings the realities that I claim to exist.

The three sets of drawings are designed to focus on the mother and children. In each set, I carefully set aside mother blaming and prefer instead to show representations of my children’s innocence and my active nurturing of them. To these images, I juxtapose a more emotional representation of the impact rape has had on my daughters. The mother is never represented as the cause. The children are never represented as the cause. The drawings are intended to disrupt the hegemony of power and to introduce the notion of girls’ bodies as contested spaces in the disembodying and re-embodying practise of identity formation following rape trauma. In the process, bodies are emptied of feeling, identity, and trust. They attack others and themselves, and after subjective annihilation, they slowly become redefined. If they remain resilient, rejecting scripts that provide power for rapists, they can become aware and accept themselves again—and now defined through a politicized and agential interpretation of their experience.

In terms of activism, my work aims to create knowledge about what exists but is not openly discussed, to raise awareness about rape, and to advocate for a more specific representation that calls out rapists through art. Derek Attridge argues in “Once More with Feeling: Art, Affect, and Performance” that “simply to challenge existing norms does not guarantee the creation of an artwork ... the otherness that characterizes the work of art has to have a particular relation both to the culture into which it is being introduced and to the culture within which it is being received” (332). The purpose needs to be apparent and relevant. *Rape Stories* blurs the boundaries across a particular history between social reality, visual production, and life writing. The history and culture within which it is introduced are mine at the point of production. It is a history that until now has been silenced by fear. The culture within which it is being received is the twenty-first-century motherhood movement. Audre Lorde once wrote, “your silence will not protect you” (41), and Ahmed adds that our silence could protect them. And by them, she means those who are violent or those who benefit in some way from silence about violence. “Silence about violence is violence” (260), she writes. We have to find ways to

communicate violence even when people do not want to listen, ways in which the violence becomes evident. Ahmed suggests we might need to use guerrilla tactics like writing down the names of harassers, putting graffiti on walls, or red ink in the water. There are many ways to cause a feminist disturbance; feminist speech can take many forms (260). *Rape Stories from the Family Album* is my choice of feminist disturbance. It undermines male authority over female bodies by speaking it in confrontations that leave little to the imagination.

Killjoy Tactics

I am in Sarah Ahmed's words willing to cause unhappiness if reading rape stories makes people unhappy. If my daughters' rapists recognize themselves in my work, I may have caused their unhappiness, but their unhappiness is not my cause (257). My cause is truth in an unjust world. *Rape Stories* is motivated by the personal and the private. The drawings are activism rooted not in the academy but in mothering practice and art practice, and they are my killjoy manifesto, how my story unfolds into action (255). Activist art is one instrument in the feminist struggle for equality across race, class, and gender. But feminist activist artists cannot only produce what Ahmed calls a killjoy manifesto; they can also be a killjoy manifesto themselves. A manifesto repeats something that has already happened, and Ahmed claims that "a killjoy manifesto must be grounded in an account of what exists. It is about what we come up against. It is a politics of transformation, a politics that intends to cause the end of something; it is not a program of action that can't be separated from how we are in the worlds we are in" (251). Killjoys are called to action, to become manifestoes, through what they perceive as injustice. Ahmed further states that "killjoys are assembled around violence; how they come to matter, to mean, is how they expose violence" (252). And rape, especially of one's children, is perhaps the greatest injustice and violence a mother can know.

Ahmed's *Feminist Killjoy* blog represents activism rooted in social media rather than in the academy, which was her initial platform. In a blog entry titled "Resignation," she describes what led to her break with academia. "I felt a snap: I call it feminist snap. My relationship with the institution was too broken. I needed a real break: I had reached the end of the line." Informed by knowledge of both life and art praxis viewed through critical lenses, *Rape Stories* comprises part of the research-creation for my PhD. My art, like Ahmed's blog, is embedded in a quest for social justice and works outside the institution of motherhood and outside institutions where bricks and policies speak louder than bodies. I "snapped" when there was no justice for my daughters when their voices were heard by authorities and silenced. Feminist killjoys will speak out against social injustice.

Ahmed suggests that “if you are letting violence come out of your own pen, to travel through you, you have to let the violence spill all over the page” (253). As a feminist killjoy, my drawings spill, and I am joining the call to “end the institutions that promote and naturalize violence” (253), especially sexual violence against girls and women. According to Ahmed, “to be involved in political activism is to be involved in a struggle against happiness. Historically mothers were not positioned to own this kind of power. The struggle over happiness provides the horizon in which political claims are made. We inherit this horizon” (255). Social beings long to be happy and will protect happiness even over truth and justice. But to be politically active mothers in the twenty-first century means to recognize the kind of horizons Ahmed identifies: the things we want to change. We have inherited these horizons from a long history of patriarchal rule and motherhood theory. We must then push towards them as part of our mothering practice often creating unhappiness by revealing ugly truths. As a feminist and a matricentric mother, I am strategically positioned to be a witness for my daughters’ struggles against violence and to provide voices for them. Matricentric feminist mother-artists are ideally situated to become the killjoy manifestos that tackle escalating and unchecked rape violence against their daughters. As a feminist killjoy I am both creating and created through art activism.

The figure of the feminist killjoy often comes up in situations of intense pain and difficulty. Ahmed claims that “when you are seated at the table, doing the work of family, that happy object, say, you threaten that object by pointing out what is already there in the room; you are not being inventive. But what a feeling: when all the negative feeling that is not revealed when the family is working becomes deposited in the one who reveals the family is not working (Ahmed 254). The six drawings from *Rape Stories* are that kind of intervention. They expose rape in family homes and in schools and private and public institutions where children should feel safe. The drawings are ugly and beautiful. They subjectively embody my maternal responses. They are autobiography and memory.

Conclusion

Matricentric mothering like feminism, is lifetime praxis; neither is limited to time. As a mother of adult children, I can attest to this. In an interview with *Truthout*, Ahmed contends that, “feminism is ... above all else, about *how we live*.” Both praxes can embody experience, especially traumatic experience intergenerationally. I am a single, white, lesbian, mother, who has been affected by domestic abuse violence. My daughters’ trauma recalls my trauma. I embody maternal practices like listening to my daughters’ accounts of their rapes and letting them vibrate through my killjoy being. I view mothering

through hands-on day-to-day experience; I reflect on it, turn it into art, and theorize it through scholarship. Through comic art, I put colour, shape, and texture to maternal experience that I could not otherwise express. Hillary Chute in "Comic Form and Narrating Life" calls comics "unsynthesized narrative tracks" (108), which independent but necessary to each other. Such is the process of piecing together life after trauma, of attempting to reconstruct a new whole from damaged parts. Chute continues that "embodiment in comics may be read as a kind of compensation for lost bodies, for lost histories. Comics resurrects, materializes" (112). My daughters were lost to themselves through the violence of rape. They have been resurrected; rape is recorded as part of their history. Engaging with the experiences represented in *Rape Stories from the Family Album* empowers me as a mother, an activist artist, and a feminist killjoy. The matricentric feminist lens provides a way for me to look beyond the earlier tropes of patriarchal maternal theory that were necessary initially in helping me identify the horizon I push against and find a place for my messy mothering story that did not fit.

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Placenta, the Sculpture, and the Invisible Blood of Women

Placenta is a giant, soft model of a human placenta, made from knitted sections of fabric pieced together around a free-standing frame. It was knitted by women out of hand-dyed yarn made from discarded t-shirts. The #placentaproject drew together a team of women (and a handful of men) who believed that it was a socially useful thing to create and exhibit a giant human placenta in order to enliven the amount of public conversation and understanding of the bodily work of women. The work of the sculpting process used a domestic craft as an act of protest—a monument to the unpaid and uncounted labour of women. This article describes the narrative of the process of the sculpting work and explores personal themes about the invisibility of women's reproductive blood, both in health and in society itself. It also describes the anatomic and physiological learning that took place in the process of sculpting and exhibiting the work, which led to a more deeply felt awe at the work of women that often goes unnoticed. Placenta is on tour around Australia and was recently exhibited at the Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement Conference, held in Sydney, in July 2019.

Placenta is a giant, soft sculpture of a human placenta. It was knitted by a team of women using large handmade needles and yarn made from over nine hundred recycled t-shirts; the entire process included washing, cutting, sewing, dyeing, and then finally knitting. The #placentaproject team was sourced via word of mouth, regional radio, and a Facebook group. The knitting was shared among the women, each of whom knitted one or two sections; the artist knitted the remainder of the pieces and constructed the finished sculpture. But the question many viewers had, as they stood near the sculpture when it was exhibited, was why it was knitted in the first place.



Indeed, the process of trying to find a venue to exhibit the sculpture left the same question floating in my mind. It seemed that this giant reminder of woman's bodily contribution to the species' survival was too strange and too uncomfortable to even consider exhibiting. The beauty of the textile, dyed all in reds and purples, as well as texture of the knitting did not matter because it was still a placenta. Finding a venue to exhibit the work was an anxious struggle. The original focus of the work had been a simple enough concept: to make a huge, hands-on-hips statement that women's contribution is so much bigger than society recognizes. Choosing the mundane domestic work of laundry and craft as the technique for the sculpture was deliberate to highlight that this domestic work contributes greatly to the economy. The choice of the placenta as the form for the sculpture was to highlight the corporeal contribution of the maternal body, so much more than merely a biological incubator. These are not new themes, but the sculpture realized them in a very literal way; they were not hidden by the symbolism that is usually employed by artworks that address the reproductive viscera of a woman.

This article is a narrative about the creation and exhibition of *Placenta* as well as the philosophy underpinning the work that evolved as the project took shape physically. Yet these ideas only crystallized once the work was in the public space, as conversations with mothers, midwives, obstetricians and other healthcare specialists revealed the very invisibility that the work addressed. That invisibility was of the placenta itself in the social psyche as well as the invisibility of the reproductive blood of a mother not only in the health context of the birthing ward but also in the realm of public consciousness.

Placenta—What Is It?

I had previously worked with a human physiology professor to create a suite of medical illustrations that included all the anatomical structures related to human reproduction. This included the structure and function of the placenta, and how it received the mother's blood and donated it to the developing baby. Somehow. However, when I considered artwork that could demonstrate how important mother-work was, the placenta seemed an obvious choice that was not connected to the vagina, since the vagina was already well represented in the aesthetic as being both the site for menstruation and birth as well as a site often charged with sexual connotations (Stevens). Conversely, I saw the placenta as an icon for the recognition of the maternal, but I made an incorrect assumption (despite my previous work on human reproductive physiology) that the baby's blood must surely come from the placenta somehow. This was based on a personal, idealistic concept of mother-as-hero that I had constructed through appreciating the lengths to which mothers earnestly work for their offspring.

The ongoing study into how the sculpture could aesthetically represent a mother's work revealed some of the mysteries of how the placenta works, and with it, a newfound awe at the extent to which the developed world has allowed the reproductive work of mothers to fade out of existence. For example, the dark purple-red chunks on the maternal side of the placenta (the cotyledons) are formed in the first trimester around specialized cells that engineer the speed and amount of maternal blood that enters the placenta's spaces (the extravillous trophoblasts or EVT_s) (Ander et al.). The action of these cells relies on the exact conditions of the lining of the uterus at the time of fertilization—the lining that is shed and replenished with every menstrual cycle. Towards the end of a pregnancy, these cells have retreated somewhat, allowing up to 150 ml (about 5 fl oz) of maternal blood (per single uterine spiral artery) to rain into the space, to send nutrients, and to receive waste from across the baby's blood vessel walls. The maternal blood 'donation' is extreme. On a daily basis, the maternal blood volume needed to support the pregnancy rises to as much as two normal blood donations (1250 ml or 44 fl oz) more than a nonpregnant adult (Hyttén). Far from being where the baby's blood began (as previously thought), the placenta is this sophisticated manufacturing plant that channels volumes of the mother's blood not directly into the baby; instead, the blood must be broken down into all the components necessary for development and in a size that can pass through a cell membrane. This way, the mother's blood never mixes with the baby's blood because that would start an internal blood cell war. Thus, the biological work of the placenta is highly complex, even to the extent that the latest researchers admit that many of the specific workings of the human placenta are still unknown (Mayo).

Placental Disgust

If medical science still puzzles over the role of a human placenta, the general population does much more so. In the birthing suite, minutes after a newborn baby emerges, the placenta is also birthed, and generally (following inspection by the attendant midwife or obstetrician) it is then discarded as hazardous waste when the new family leaves the hospital. During the knitting work for the sculpture, many midwives described conversations in the birthing suites with newly delivered mothers in which they offered the woman's own placenta for her and her partner to view. Despite the midwives' enthusiasm for the organ, many new parents openly expressed disgust for it. Like the final sculpture, the real placenta is too strange, too bloody, and too out of place. The new parent's disgust towards the placenta, which only a few minutes prior had been so vital to their new baby's development, perhaps indicates an underlying phenomenon of the developed world—a generalized discomfiture with

women's bodies and women's blood. This discomfort has perhaps created a slow, gradual decline of knowledge that second-wave feminists had gained about their own reproductive apparatus through self-exploration (Burke and Seltz).

Conversations around the sculpture revealed a generalized lack of knowledge about the placenta, as many thought that the placenta was a bag in which the baby grew; some did not even know that they would birth a placenta. Conversely, conversations with mothers who identified with a specific cultural group that did not identify with the Western tradition of birthing were not only comfortable with the placenta as its own entity but also had language to draw on to describe their thoughts and feelings about it. Although these conversations represent anecdotal generalizations, there is a wide basis of anthropological literature that reveals cross-cultural traditions relating to the birthing of the placenta, and the ongoing ritualized respect shown to the organ (Meyer). In the ongoing promotion of the sculpture to prospective yet doubtful exhibitors, it became a source of horrified amazement. Often this conversation was in conjunction with a laughing protest—"You'll have to do more than a placenta to shock us!"—even as they described that the artwork was unsuitable for their organization.

The Invisible Placenta in the Developed World

The invisibility of the placenta in the Australian context to some extent reflects eighty years of a hospital birthing tradition (Pascoe). This tradition is firmly established and includes the ubiquitous clearing away of the mess of birth by the attendant midwives, who procedurally and strategically remove blood and visceral matter to reduce the threat of pathogens that may be present. Helen Callaghan describes this process—now a habitual act on each midwives' to-do list—as being while necessary to maintain a safe workplace; it is also a result of the widely held notion in gynecology that women's reproductive bodies are dirty and full of germs. In conversation with an obstetrician who came to see the *Placenta* sculpture, it was interesting to note that she did not feel that blood and viscera were invisible in the birthing suite, for she saw blood "all the time." However, perhaps this is not what the new mother remembers about her own birthing process, as she herself is a product of the norms of the developed world that require women's reproductive blood to be hidden. This requirement starts early in the dialogue of health education in schools with girls who are approaching puberty (or who may have already begun menstruating), when the concept of the privacy of the menstruating body is asserted and the subtext of the mess of reproductive blood begins (Department of Education). It is perhaps not surprising, then, to hear that newly delivered mothers are shocked and disgusted by such a large and bloodied mass as the

placenta, even though it has been a part of their own bodies for nine months. This reaction illustrates well the human response to blood and detached body parts—a primal revulsion designed by evolving human societies not only to protect the group from danger but also to create real boundaries between what is notionally clean and what is defiled (Douglas; Rozin et al.). This human response is a learned emotion; not only is it perpetuated in the social group by facial expressions and physical withdrawal from the disgust stimuli, but it also felt individually by increased sweating and as a slight drop in blood pressure (Stevenson et al.; Tybur et al.). The social cues for women to be disgusted by their own reproductive emissions are strong. Thus, watching women as they walked around the giant *Placenta*; touching it and deep in thought, was rewarding. Perhaps this giant strange thing could enact one of those strengths of shared art: the reconstructing of meaning by elevating the mundane (Crossley; Lee). By using a domestic craft for the sculpting and nominating a birthing by product usually discarded as its subject matter, *Placenta* highlights mothering work as nothing less than monumental.

Domestic Work, Emotional Work, and Body Work

As the sculpture progressed, slowly, over two and a half years, it was itself an act of mothering work and was typified by the domestic. The first task was to sort the cotton t-shirts from the polyester ones—polyester does not absorb dye pigments—and then to cut them down to rectangles and then to sew new, red seams to create a cylinder of fabric. This process was a constant reminder of the work of women. In cutting and sewing the recycled t-shirts, I thought of the many women employed in the garment industry, mostly in developing countries where there are no employment benefits, and where familial responsibilities must be managed around long working hours. I also thought of the women who had bought the t-shirts, repeatedly washed them, and then discarded them to thrift stores. So many women contributing work beyond what was paid for. The smell of the unwashed garments was strong, and wafted up as the overlocking sewing machine chewed through the new seams. The t-shirts that were put aside for the project—all nine hundred of them—were chosen because they couldn't be sold, due to damage or printed graphics, such as “Fun Run 1995” or “Lionesses Club of Walhalla.”

The next process was the creation of dye baths of deep crimson, with a mix of pigments of golden yellow, deep red, and, sometimes, warm blue. These dye pots were like vats of blood, which were remarked upon by visitors and children alike. Depending on the textile knit and fibre type, the fabric that emerged was richly vibrant—deep purples and browns for the maternal side of the placenta (which is made up of the cotyledons that are big chunky masses centring around the treelike, uterine spiral arteries) and paler oranges and

fire-engine reds for the baby's side of the placenta (which is all smooth and musclelike, with ropey blood vessels branching across the surface). Finally, the yarn was cut, knitted, and assembled, which was reminiscent of the energies of generations of women who knit, click-clacking their way to vast sheets of useful fabric. As I worked on the sculpture, I found I had perhaps an over-romantic picture of all the women in history who had used these technically proficient skills to clothe their loved ones. They had earnestly employed their craft energies, hidden in their homes, and uncounted by history; and had indeed done all these things even while bleeding. These thoughts became like a litany, and with it more resolve in my mind to see this huge sculptural placenta installed like a giant red flag of monument to women's hidden work of labor and blood: how many women in history have used this technically proficient skill to clothe their loved ones?; how many mothers, across so many centuries, have employed their energies while hidden in their homes and who have been uncounted in written history?; and how many women have knitted while bleeding every month? The thoughts, like an emotional litany, building more resolve to see this huge sculptural placenta erected like a giant red flag of monument to women's hidden work of labour and blood.

It Is Personal: Mourning Baby Mothering and Questioning the Disappearance of Blood in the Developed World

It was not until the sections were complete and were wrapped in cloth (with essential-oil aromatics to stave off the deeply-absorbed human scent from returning) that the weight of the personal started to reveal itself to me. In carrying the wrapped, knitted fabric mass, the loss of the sweetness of baby mothering was a profound shock. My own days mothering babies were gone. The simplicity (although less so at the time) of those baby's bodily needs to be met felt sweeter than ever, yet they also felt bittersweet because only now were my tactile senses recalling their value more fully. I recalled memories of birthing lying back, passive, with so little autonomy, of trying to fully experience the birth process from a place of fear yet hope and of remembering the placenta, which loomed so large and bloodied, feeling its significance and yet not knowing how to honor the work of it, now accomplished. Instead of mothering babies, I now mother young teens, with all the complexities of negotiation as they forge their way into their own social spaces. It is now their turn to experience the social rules for women's reproductive blood, as described and modelled in their separate educational and social environments. They are growing up in a society that still counts no value in domestic labour or in the bodily or emotional work of women (Jung and O'Brien; Robertson et al.). "In conversation with children and young people, as they were walking around, touching, and playing under the giant Placenta, I would say "this was the first

thing you made!"; and then I would describe how all the nutrients and oxygen came out of the birthing mother's blood and through the placenta to make them grow.

The phenomenon of women's reproductive blood, rendered invisible by the norms of the developed world, requires more research and many unanswered questions remain. Why does the field of public health know everything physiological about human blood, but researchers still know nothing about the human reaction to blood or the population-wide, sociological results of defining the life of the body (i.e., blood) as inherently dangerous? Why do cultures in the non-developed world place more significance in the meaning and psychological concepts of blood than the developed world, which has a frenetic obsession with removing it, cleaning it, and declaring it hazardous? Why does the developed world place celebrate those who donate blood (approximately 600 ml or 20 fl oz per donation) but disregards the daily blood donation of a pregnant woman or, indeed, the monthly donation of a menstruating woman whose uterine lining requires complete remanufacturing every twenty-eight days or so days? How is it that the taboos surrounding a woman's reproductive blood donation to the species is still so prevalent that young women are disgusted by their own profoundly technical reproductive systems that require so much emotional and physical work? These questions reveal the problems with the West's technically and medically proficient maternal health systems that require a lack of human emotion and stubborn blindness to the social significance and social necessity of the birthing process.

Conclusion

The *Placenta* is a giant sculpture originally intended to alert various audiences to the incredible contribution of women and mothers to their families and communities. Work began on the sculpture before there was strong understanding about the mechanisms of the placenta, but this knowledge grew as the physical structure grew, which created an incredible awe at the amount of mother-work involved, including the physical and systemic effort of the daily, bodily donation to the developing baby and its placenta, via the mother's blood. The sculptural work also created with it a sense of the endless litany of domestic labour, done mostly by women, to ensure the health and welfare of their communities. During the creation and exhibition of the sculpture, the learned emotion of disgust was encountered repeatedly. Disgust is a socially perpetuated emotion, which protects the social group from pathogens that may be in the blood or from the bodily fluids of the reproductive process. The hospital birthing tradition and the societal requirement for the invisibility of menstrual blood have both aided in the disappearance of the work of maternal blood from the public consciousness. The social discomfort

of various health organizations for whom *Placenta*, the sculpture, was offered for exhibition free of cost, shows the current status of taboos relating to the blood of women. It is hoped that *Placenta*, and other artworks that seek to challenge these taboos in viewer's minds will continue the shift towards a societal affirmation of the inherent value of women.

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The Gift: Matricentric Feminism, Physiological Mothering, and Art Practice

In this article, I explain how the specific politics of mothering shaped my understanding and approach to feminism and how I engage with these ideas in my art practice. I discuss two of my artworks and outline how these works function as tangible realizations of matricentric feminist concepts, specifically the invisibility and disparagement of motherwork and the mother-baby dyad. I suggest how the specific use of the ceramic material creates layered meanings and how my artworks function as concrete objects that speak about intangible ideas.

In addition to this, I examine my mother's mothering practice and how she and my father unintentionally raised their children in a matricentric feminist manner. I contend that growing up in a family that respected, protected, and supported the mother-baby dyad laid the groundwork for me to achieve empowered mothering. I extend this analysis to my own marriage and assert that the re-establishing of subjectivity necessitated by physiological mothering practices is beneficial to the entire family unit. Physiological mothering practices bolstered by matricentric feminism create a space for the renegotiating and dismantling of traditionally gendered roles within the family. I argue that by centring matricentric feminism in social discourse, this dismantling of patriarchal structures can extend throughout society.

My first pregnancy was dramatically unplanned. It activated a feminist coming to coming to consciousness within myself, meaning that for me, feminism and mothering are intrinsically, fundamentally and profoundly connected. When I finally encountered the term “matricentric feminism,” it felt like coming home. In this article, I discuss how my art and art practice materialize matricentric feminist concepts and how they demand acknowledgment of long overlooked mothering practices that centre on the mother-baby dyad. Additionally, I reflect on how my mother provided me with a model of empowered mothering and how having this model laid the foundation for me

to achieve empowered mothering for myself. Finally, I examine how this process has shaped my marriage and how the practice of matricentric feminist mothering creates daily opportunities for dismantling patriarchal structures within the home. When considering these issues, it is important to acknowledge my position as a white, cisgender woman in a heterosexual marriage. I cannot solve our society's problems from my own resources, and I will not co-opt the experience of my marginalized allies under the guise of elevating their voices. My work is born from and addresses the issues of my own experience, which though coming from the most privileged end of the marginalized spectrum is still marginalized. I acknowledge that nonbiological mothering can also be a site of empowerment; however, this is beyond the scope of my experience and, therefore, will not be discussed in this article. In the words of Petra Bueskens, "matricentric feminism is a gift to the world" (ix). My hope is that by making art about my feminist maternal experience and feminist female embodiment helps to dismantle patriarchal motherhood and to share the gift of matricentric feminism with all people.

In 2019, the mother role is more or less seen as optional, a nonessential role for society. Indeed, the attitude that motherhood reduces a person's capacity to succeed in the world continues to persist. This attitude is not completely unfounded; it is difficult to succeed in the West's nine-to-five capitalist patriarchy when you are the primary carer for young children. This situation is compounded in the art world: female artists are always acutely aware of the stereotypes attributed to women in this field. An artist colleague of mine once voiced the vague insecurity that she does not "make enough vaginas." Conversely, as an artist who tends to make a lot of artwork that references vaginas, I too feel that sense of insecurity in that I might make too many—rendering myself a specific type of artist.

The dismissal of this kind of heavily feminist and female subject matter is rooted in misogyny. Having a vagina defines an individual's life in a way that ownership of a penis does not—the notion that female biology is inherently inferior continues to persist (Braun 23). In this way, the repeated representation of the vagina in art, as well as other symbols of female biology, remains significant as a means to combat the erasure of women in art.

In *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock address the enduring struggle feminist artists have always had to contend with around visual representation of the female body. Imagery of the female body is fraught with the symbolism of patriarchal history, and as a result, the representation of it can be problematic. Furthermore, as society's understanding of gender identity expands, it is clear that being biologically female is not the only way to be a woman. Despite the many privileges of being a cisgender woman, this kind of body is still oppressed under patriarchy. By using one's own body in their artwork, an artist employs

a “significant psychological factor” that converts the body from object to subject (Parker and Pollock 135). In this way, to use one’s own female body in one’s own art disrupts accepted patriarchal modes of female behaviour, particularly in the context of the art world, where men are artists and female bodies are models.

This idea is accepted and even championed by mainstream feminism; however, the suggestion that the maternal body and experience are rich, diverse, and significant subjects for art making is not met with the same level of approval. As artist and writer Rachel Epp Buller puts it,

What sometimes surprises me is how difficult it seems to be to bring critical attention to experiences that are quite widespread: often, art around the maternal body (both by me and others) seems to be pigeon-holed as private production—in other words, if one is making work related to the family it must surely be only about one’s own family and not about any larger cultural issues that should be taken seriously. (qtd. in *Loveless* 5)

Maternal art, particularly imagery of a mother and child, is readily dismissed as sentimental and as lacking in critical thought. The attitude that mothering is an emotional and intuitive practice that does not require thought has long been held. Sara Ruddick’s concept of maternal thinking, however, challenged this attitude by asserting that mothers do in fact think and that mothering is decisive work with inherent political importance (24). Buller goes on to voice her interest in “the ways in which maternal perspectives might help us envision structural changes that could benefit all of us” (qtd. in *Loveless* 6), which is an interest that I share and see unfolding within my own work.

Matricentric feminist art practice requires a realignment of self-perception as an artist— where, when, and how I work. I work with ceramics, textile, photomedia, and video, and in addition to this, I make art from materials that literally would not exist if I were not a mother. *Becoming Mother: Baby and Me* (Figure 1) is comprised of my daughter’s umbilical cord stump and placenta; it is sealed in plastic bags and presented in a gallery setting. It is the literal connective tissue between me and my child: the organ that grew to sustain her and the remnant of the umbilical cord that connected us. This material would not exist if I were not a mother, and, therefore, mothering—and all that comes with it—has allowed me to make art that I otherwise would not be able to.



Figure 1. Allegra Holmes, *Becoming Mother: Baby and Me*, 2017. Umbilical cord, placenta, and plastic vacuum bags. Photograph by Meg O'Shea.

My installation *The Usual Work* (Figure 2) addresses and comments on the disparagement of motherwork and maternal perspectives. The installation is comprised of twelve stoneware plates, each hand built on a plaster mould made from casts of my maternal grandmother's dinnerware. Photographic decals of enlarged sections of images of my children cover the interior surfaces of the plates. Three platters hang vertically on a wall, one beneath the other, with thin brass plate wires curling over the rims. Beneath the last plate, a

forty-centimetre-wide table extends 1.6 metres out from the wall, and three cotton doilies (crocheted by my paternal grandmother) are draped over the table, with a stack of three plates placed upon each one. The images on the plates are of two distinct stages in my mothering experience.



Figure 2. **Allegra Holmes**, *The Usual Work*, 2018. Ceramic, photographic decal, cotton, wood, and brass. 240 x 160 x 40 cm. Photograph by Allegra Holmes.

On the wall, the plates bear images of my two children sharing a bath (Figure 3). On the table, the three stacks of three plates bear images of my then nine-month-old son, cradled in my arms alongside my exposed breast, after I have just nursed him to sleep (Figure 4). Many mothers share moments like these with their children, yet for much of society, they remain unseen. The images recorded on these plates are emblematic of the hidden maternal experience. To enshrine them on the plates is to bring them out of my memory, out of from the realm of the two-dimensional photograph, and onto the three-dimensional plate—a tangible object. The mould used to make the plates deteriorated during use, resulting in irregular and broken rims (Figure 3), which creates a sense of fragility, chaos, desperation, and tiredness, presenting the images as vestiges of times passed. In making *The Usual Work*, (Figures 3 and 4) I was tuning into the knowledge that this stage of my life, where I am a mother of young children, will end and that each time I bathe my children or breastfeed them to sleep, I am closer to the last time they will need me to do these things.



Figure 3. Allegra Holmes, *The Usual Work* (detail), 2018. Ceramic, photographic decal, and brass. 34 x 26 x 3cm. Photograph by Allegra Holmes.



Figure 4. Allegra Holmes, *The Usual Work* (detail), 2018. Ceramic, photographic decal, cotton, and wood. 34 x 26 x 6 cm. Photograph by Allegra Holmes.

The Usual Work emphasizes the reality of the maternal perspective. The images of my children are taken from my literal perspective at the time—my seat at the side of their bath and my view looking down on them when they have fallen asleep at my breast. The viewer is positioned in the place of the mother and witnesses the ordinary, routine, and daily work of mothering as it is performed. The installation draws on the notion of the display plate by mounting three platters onto the wall with brass plate wires. Their positioning on the wall, with their scalloped edges and the thin brass wire curling around their rims, evokes domesticity, tempered by the confusing partial images present on the surfaces of the plates. In expanding these photographs and selecting specific sections to display on each plate, the viewer's proximity to these moments of maternal work, care, and love is increased. The enlarged images focus on the shapes made by my children's limbs connecting, the patterns made where their bodies meet the water, and the tenderness with which the sleeping baby embraces the maternal breast. The images require thought and contemplation to discern what is happening; they force the viewer to spend time observing and thinking about maternal labour.

This work draws on ideas of high and low art, art and craft, mother and artist, utility and decoration, and the representation of the mother and reality of mothering. Plates are utilitarian; they are necessary objects used on a daily

basis and, therefore, are not considered art. Mothering is crucial to human survival, yet it can feel as though there is no place for the mother who does not comply to patriarchal standards or the requirements of liberal feminism. Within academic feminist discourse, discussions of mothering are also often overlooked. In this way, the plates are representative of the mother and mothering. Presenting images of my lived experience of mothering as art compels the viewer to engage in critical thought around these experiences and challenges the ideas of what art can be and who artists are. Through displaying images of my mothering practice—a practice that is informed and bolstered by matricentric feminist theory—I am resisting the patriarchal script that insists such practices are of no significance.

I assert that mothering practices stemming from the mother-baby dyad are inherently activist ones, as they directly challenge patriarchal norms. Western society insists on the male-dominated model of subjectivity that we exist as cerebral, disembodied individuals (Campo 54). Women can and do engage in this disembodied way of living; however, once one becomes pregnant, one's embodiment becomes unavoidable. Pregnancy begins the process of reconnecting the pregnant individual to their physiological body. The pregnant subject becomes aware of their embodiment in a way that they previously were not. As Rosemary Betterton explains:

Susan Hiller defines the “other” as those things against which we define ourselves. But what if that otherness is enclosed in our bodies, as yet unknown, neither friend nor enemy, growing inside our own flesh and blood? Such monstrous imaginings are the stuff of fairy tales and horror films, and yet, an ontological awareness of the body's alienation from itself and an emergent new relationship with an unfamiliar being is familiar to many pregnant women. (81)

To have the “other” within one's body is completely oppositional to the male model of subjectivity. Pregnancy involves a relinquishing of all prior understandings of one's self and embodiment. For many, pregnancy is the beginning of the mother-baby dyad, a dual subjectivity that is antithetical to individualism. It is a paradoxical experience accompanied by the persistent espousal of naturalness without any acknowledgement of the splitting of subjectivity. Mainstream discussion surrounding this split mostly focuses on resealing it, which creates a boundary between the mother and baby and enforces the idea of an individualistic identity. Proponents of attachment parenting advocate for practices that require removing this individualism. The issue is that even within these discussions of attachment parenting, there is still a language that suggests this stage is temporary and that one will eventually return to being a contained, solitary subject. I argue that there needs to be emphasis on the notion that mothering and parenting practices

that support the mother-baby dyad have the power to reshape not only our individual subjectivity but also society as whole.

Pregnant embodiment has an end date, which allows the opportunity to side step the challenge of re-establishing one's subjectivity. During my first pregnancy I spent much of my time looking forwards to my nonpregnant future, when I would not only have my child in my arms but also, supposedly, have the return of my old body, my old self, and my old life. There was no such return. Once my son was born, rather than reverting back to my old body, I moved from being a pregnant body to a lactating one with no official end in sight. It was this process of an open-ended approach to breastfeeding that required a true reshaping of my subjectivity and how I functioned in society. My last experience of life with a young baby was twenty years earlier, when my younger sisters were babies and I was a small child myself. None of my friends had children, and representations of motherhood in popular culture were unrealistic, misleading, and generally misinformed.

What I did have was a mother who gave birth to her first child in a mission hospital in Zambia in 1986; she went on to have four more births: a full term stillbirth, a Caesarean section, and two vaginal births after the Caesarean. All her vaginal births, including the stillbirth, were unmedicated. My mother breastfed all four of her living children to natural term; she also bed-shared and was a deeply attached and responsive mother. Although I have always had a close, loving relationship with my mother, during my first pregnancy, a veil lifted and I began to appreciate her in a new way. This feeling increased with the birth of my son (at which my mother was present), as I learned to breastfeed a baby that would not latch for the first few weeks of his life and as I grappled with extreme sleep deprivation for almost two years and resisted sleep training. My understanding of my mother deepened when I miscarried, when I became pregnant again, when my first baby finally, completely weaned after almost four years of on-demand nursing, and when my daughter was born and I became half of not just one dual relationship, but two. My mother has been my greatest advocate and champion in regards to my mothering experience. In a society that does all it can to keep women divided, the bond between my mother and me is not only a gift to my existence but also an act of resistance to the patriarchal status quo.

It is easy to assume that empowered mothering simply means that a mother should continue her life as it was before children, but the reality is far more nuanced than this. Matricentric feminism has intersectionality built into it; it acknowledges that empowered mothering depends on the context in which the mothering is being performed. A key aspect of matricentric feminism is the emphasis placed on the notion of empowered mothers raising empowered children. Andrea O'Reilly states the following: "The quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her

daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist” (24).

Liberal feminism would unfairly frame my mother’s experience as patriarchal motherhood, assuming that her commitment to the mother-baby dyad stemmed from internalised misogyny, ignorance, or a belief in gender essentialism. This is an overly simplistic interpretation and is the result of a culture that enshrines the male model of individualism and sees anything else as inferior. My mother left the workforce to stay home with her children for twenty years, whereas my father continued to work. However, my mother did not stay home to support my father’s career because he did not have one. Rather, my father worked long shifts, six days a week, performing manual labour in a vineyard to support the mothering practices they both valued.

In raising me and my siblings the way that they did, my parents gave us a model of matricentric feminism in practice as mothers and fathers. My father worked outside the home, but he also cooked meals, washed our hair, and made our beds. Our mother did numerous courses (eventually culminating in achieving a double degree in her fifties), she valued her own thoughts and opinions, as did my father. My parents made decisions about raising their children together. Although they had limited feminist theory to support this, their lived experience belied their values, which were inherently matricentric feminist, and bestowed these values upon their four children. As they both valued and considered mothering practices such as on-demand breastfeeding important, my parents worked to reshape their lives in order to protect the mother-baby dyad.

My installation, *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum* (Figure 4), is a monument to this mother-baby dyad. It was part of my 2017 installation *Becoming Mother*, a significant body of work created during my bachelor of visual arts Honours year, during which I gave birth to my second child. In this work, a Perspex basin filled with just over four litres of my own breastmilk acted as screen onto which I projected footage of my daughter breastfeeding. Both mother and baby are visible in this video, as are the breast and the actual breastfeeding. There is almost a sacred feeling in this space: a gentle white light emanates from the milk, as it is illuminated by the video, which cuts out abruptly at the break in the film loop, leaving the viewer face to face with a basin of breastmilk.



Figure 5. Allegra Holmes, *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*, 2017. Ceramic, Perspex, wood, breastmilk, and video. 120 x 100 x 140 cm. Photograph by Meg O'Shea.

The title *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum* is a faux Latin phrase taken from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this story, all people are divided into castes based on their biology, specifically fertility, and their willingness to comply with the status quo. Women are stripped of all power, and the patriarchally instigated split between mother and child is made literal through the forced removal of babies from the women who birthed them. The television adaptation of Atwood's novel extends beyond the book and has become one of the rare examples of the strong, affirming mother-daughter narrative Adrienne Rich initially called for (qtd. in O'Reilly 23). *The Handmaid's Tale* not only acknowledges female bodily functions but forms entire plot points around pregnant, maternal, and lactating embodiment. The protagonist's love for her daughters is what emboldens her and gives her the courage to act in the face of unspeakable odds. "*Nolite te bastardes carborundum*" becomes a refrain of resistance meaning "Don't let the bastards grind you down." I chose to reference this in order to align the mothering practices I engage with in my work with the notion of rebellion.

In my research paper *Becoming Mother*, I address this idea of feminist rebellion as follows:

Patriarchy defines mother as inherently limited, imprisoned by her biology and oppressed by the physical realities of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation. Patriarchal control has colonised the female body,

particularly the pregnant and maternal bodies, in order to use them against women. This is evident in the limited awareness of the value of physiological mothering practices and the widespread notion that such practices are “problems” or “bad habits.” Systematic oppression is revealed in the near impossibility of engaging in these practices and functioning in capitalist patriarchal society. This same society claims the solution is to modify one’s mothering practice, again subscribing to the patriarchal worldview. This is the coming to consciousness I have spoken of earlier, recognising this inequity inevitably leads to a call for a restructuring of society. This is the nexus point, where the experience of mothering through physiological practices connects to the serious need to dismantle the patriarchy, and therefore explains how these practices are not simply matters of choice, but an opportunity to enact feminist rebellion.

I argue that this disruption of patriarchal expectation must also play out in the practice of matricentric feminist fathering. Earlier I acknowledged the privileges I enjoy as a white, cisgender woman in a heterosexual marriage. A superficial assessment of my lifestyle—in which my husband works outside the home and I work within it—would assume that patriarchal values govern our familial structure. Over the course of our relationship, my husband and I have continually examined and renegotiated our roles, which has resulted in a dismantling of gendered roles within our family unit while prioritizing the mother-baby dyad. Doing so has required a fundamental shift in the way that my family operates, namely the rejection of the patriarchally mandated gendering of work. In addition to his paid work, my husband performs a significant portion of the household labour and puts in a conscious effort to close the gap between us regarding the mental load. This shift in our relationship did not happen overnight; it took many years of discussion, therapy, fights, research and re-examination on both our parts. As we became unexpectedly pregnant with our first child after only three months of dating, the entirety of our relationship has been shaped around our experience of parenting, which, in turn, has been shaped around the practice of breastfeeding. The re-establishing of subjectivity necessitated by the practice of mothering, specifically breastfeeding, permeated all aspects of our relationship. I assert that in re-establishing my subjectivity as independent from the patriarchal model, it has opened an opportunity for my husband to do the same.

Throughout this article, I have discussed how matricentric feminism has informed both my art practice and mothering practice as well as the wider implications it has had for my life. I assert that mothering is a crucial component in the feminist effort to dismantle patriarchy and that by employing mothering practices that respond to the needs of the mother-baby dyad, one is directly challenging and rejecting the patriarchal status quo. My mother

enacted matricentric feminism far before she ever heard the term. She has showed me what is possible for mothering, for relationships, and for my life. By embracing the mother-baby dyad, my mother unknowingly unbound herself from a powerful facet of patriarchal oppression, and in doing so laid the groundwork for me to do the same. The crucial difference between my mother and me is that I have had matricentric feminist theory to support my lived mothering experiences from the start. Reflecting on my experience, as well as that of my mother's, has shown me that even though matricentric feminism has always been practiced by women and mothers, it is vital that it has a name and place in wider feminist discourse.

My art makes visible empowered mothering, rejects the notion that mothers cannot be artists and researchers, and encourages critical thought about mothering practices; it demands that society evolve its attitude towards mothers and mothering. Matricentric feminist art practice generates artwork that engages with the complex, paradoxical nature of mothering in a way that cannot be otherwise conveyed. A visual art practice that embraces mothering is a radical disavowal of the long-held attitude that to be a mother is limiting.

All too often, artist-mothers are queried as to how we manage to make art and raise children. To approach artmaking from a matricentric feminist perspective means that rather than limiting my art practice, empowered, feminist mothering has expanded it. It is the very thing that makes my art and research possible.

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NICOLE HILL

Understanding Obstetric Violence as Violence against Mothers through the Lens of Matricentric Feminism

Obstetric violence—that is, the mistreatment or abuse of pregnant, birthing, or postpartum individuals by their maternity care providers, institutions, or systems—is a topic of growing concern around the globe among healthcare organizations, healthcare providers, birthing people, and advocates. As research and advocacy work has begun to denormalize and problematize obstetric violence, it has been framed as a distinct type of institutionalized gendered violence that violates the rights of women. This article approaches the topic of obstetric violence through the lens of matricentric feminism and theorizes how it constitutes not only violence against women (typically) but also violence against mothers. Using examples from my personal experience and recent project, I employ matricentric feminism to emphasize the unique discourses of good and bad motherhood that birthing people engage with and suggest that in the context of obstetric violence, motherhood can be weaponized to perpetuate the invisibility of and silence around this issue. I discuss the implications for an understanding of obstetric violence as violence against mothers, including how these implications may impact efforts to recognize and prevent obstetric violence.

Broadly speaking, obstetric violence refers to systemic violence that pregnant, birthing, and postpartum people may be subject to through interactions with their maternity health care providers, institutions, and systems. Obstetric violence has become a prominent concern for maternity health advocates, researchers, and birthing people only in recent years, but the field is rapidly growing to better understand and address it. In this article, through examples from my experience (italicized throughout the article) and recent projects, I explain how applying a frame of matricentric feminism problematizes efforts to address obstetric violence that derive from gendered violence and women's

rights paradigms. I discuss how through this frame, motherhood may be incidentally weaponized through discourses of good and bad motherhood to reinforce the barriers to recognizing and reporting obstetric violence.

I have birthed two children. During my first pregnancy, some of the first people to reference me by my newly acquired motherhood status were maternity care providers who I visited for prenatal care. These providers would make such comments as “how is mama doing today?” By virtue of the nearly microscopic fetus growing in my belly, I was no longer my named self; to my providers, I was “mama.” I was no longer recognized as my own individual person with her own rights and agency but as part of this dyad. It was no longer understood to be just me in my body.

I have since seen this sort of framing happen again and again to peers as well in subsequent research, advocacy, and committee work contexts: maternity care providers—including physicians, midwives, nurses, doulas, and lactation consultants—referring to a pregnant or postpartum person by their motherhood. This is not of course to say that all maternity care providers refer to their patients and clients this way, but in my experience, it is not uncommon. However, when motherhood is invoked in such a way, it engages certain cultural meanings of motherhood that create implications for those who are being labelled this way, particularly in the context of a complex phenomenon, such as obstetric violence.

Understanding and Theorizing Obstetric Violence

Over the course of my first birth, I experienced obstetric violence. The experience was surprising. Throughout my care experience, there were moments in which I was uncomfortable with some of the things that were happening, and increasingly throughout this process, I also felt as though the space for my agency was progressively shrinking. Once I was in labour and in the context of the hospital, the tone of the place and the interactions I had with staff—from the admitting clerk and porter who adamantly refused to allow me to walk to the labour and delivery unit and to the providers who attended me there—made me feel as though my agency was increasingly unwelcome, and my own willingness or ability to exercise it slowly wore down.

Obstetric violence is a topic of growing concern around the globe. Sometimes referred to as “mistreatment” or “disrespect and abuse” in childbirth (Diniz et al.), for the purpose of this article, I refer to these various terms under the umbrella term “obstetric violence.” In 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a statement on preventing and eliminating the mistreatment of women in childbirth, finding that it “not only violates the rights of women to respectful care, but can also threaten their rights to life, health, bodily integrity, and freedom from discrimination” (WHO 1). The statement points

to a growing and disturbing body of research on a worldwide problem that lists a range of reported types of mistreatment: physical and verbal abuse, humiliation, coercive or unconsented medical procedures, lack of confidentiality, failure to get fully informed consent, refusal to provide pain medication, gross violations of privacy, refusal of admission to health facilities, neglect of women during birth, and detention of women and infants in facilities after birth. In 2015, Meghan Bohren and colleagues published a typology of obstetric violence based on a meta-analysis of sixty-five studies from around the world that highlights specific acts that can be understood of as obstetric violence, ranging from micro-level provider interactions to macro-level incidents, such as systemic failures of obstetric healthcare facilities and/or systems. According to this typology, obstetric violence includes several categories of abuse: discrimination, lack of supportive care, neglect, denial of autonomy (such as medical procedures done in the absence of informed consent), and health system conditions and constraints. Together, the WHO statement and the typology by Bohren and her colleagues provide a robust range of incidents that fall under the umbrella of obstetric violence.

Little literature at this time tracks the prevalence of obstetric violence. In a very recent study on birthing people in the United States, Saraswathi Vedam and colleagues found that 17.3 percent of people surveyed reported experiencing one or more types of mistreatment. Based on the qualities of their sample, they suggest that an estimate of approximately 30 percent is likely more realistic for the general population (Vedam et al. 12). Another study focused on prevalence and based in Tanzania reveals that 15 percent of participants reported experiencing violence when they were asked three to six hours after birth while they were still in hospital; however, 70 percent of participants described violence when interviewed in their homes up to six weeks postpartum, and 84 percent of participants experienced at least some form of violence when the violence was measured only by the observations of a researcher present for the birth (that is, not basing the measurement on reports from the birthing person) (Sando et al.). This research points to the significance of both the timing of inquiries to birthing people about their experience (with perceptions of their experience as violent increasing over time), as well as to whether a subjective or objective characterization of violence is used as the measurement. No comparable prevalence data exist for Canada (where the author has given birth); however, recent media stories indicate experiences and awareness of the problem. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has recently reported that hundreds of women contacted the network to share their stories of violence in maternity care (Burns-Pieper; CBC News). Known harms to birthing people stemming from obstetric violence include posttraumatic stress disorder, fear of childbirth, reluctance to seek healthcare, distrust between communities and health facilities, and, as a result, increased

maternal and perinatal mortality (Beck; Beck et al; Creedy et al.; Fawcus; Fernández; Forssén).

Lynn Freedman and Margaret Kruk argue that obstetric violence may be rendered invisible through its normalization by care providers and birthing people. Birth researcher Barbara Kitzinger has explained that birthing people who have had bad experiences in birth may be disinclined to report these events for a variety of reasons: in an effort to avoid thinking about them, if they suffer from feelings of guilt because they believe their reactions will not be validated or they feel they have no right to the emotions they have, or they think they must be “making a fuss about nothing ... silenced because their emotions are perceived as trivial” (Kitzinger 67). These works addressing the tendency of obstetric violence towards invisibility are especially important in light of the influence of discourses of good and bad motherhood discussed below.

Beyond the framework of obstetric violence as a violation of basic human rights, other scholars point to obstetric violence as “a systemic problem of institutionalized gender-based violence” (Diaz-Tello 56-57). Michelle Sadler and her colleagues argue that obstetric violence is not just violence against patients in healthcare contexts; rather, it is a type of gendered violence in which gender ideologies and the gendered nature of maternity care play a role. Through these respective frameworks of basic human rights and gendered violence, scholars demonstrate two (sometimes overlapping) approaches to problematizing obstetric violence.

Although obstetric violence continues to remain invisible in some contexts, certain states have deemed it such a significant issue as to create legislation in an effort to prevent it. Legislation passed by the government of Venezuela in 2007 regarding obstetric violence describes the phenomenon as

the appropriation of the body and reproductive processes of women by health personnel, which is expressed as dehumanized treatment, an abuse of medication, and to convert the natural processes into pathological ones, bringing with it loss of autonomy and the ability to decide freely about their bodies and sexuality, negatively impacting the quality of life of women. (qtd. in D’Gregorio 201)

Again, this law demonstrates the approach to obstetric violence as a violation of women’s rights and provides additional criteria that can be incorporated into a broad understanding of the phenomenon.

There is, of course, a long history of patriarchy’s impact on maternity care, including the medicalization of pregnancy and birth (Woliver; Zadorozny). In obstetric violence, birthing people (typically identified as women¹) are oppressed under the guise of patriarchy and structural gender inequality, which violates the rights of birthing people to autonomy and to respectful healthcare and so on. Here, however, the work falls short of recognizing the

role of motherhood as a construct and its role for understanding (and ultimately addressing) obstetric violence. By engaging the construct of motherhood as it directly speaks to the relationship between the birthing person and the infant, these incidents can be understood not just as acts of gender-based violence but as violence against mothers.

Obstetric Violence, Gender, and Motherhood

After the delivery, while I lay on an operating table in shock (not medical but psychological), my baby in the nursery being cared for by my partner, a physician repaired the birth injury I suffered during the delivery while a student she had called in to observe stared dutifully at my crotch. The physician explained to the student how to best sew “mom’s tissues” back together, and when they finished, they and the other healthcare professionals left, saying “Congratulations, mom.”

Both the WHO statement and Venezuela law cited above put forth a rights-based framework for interpreting obstetric violence, which emphasizes the breach of birthing people’s inherent rights to life, health, bodily integrity, and freedom from discrimination that occurs during obstetric violence. These texts (and the research and theorizing that have subsequently risen from them) drive forwards future research and advocacy work intended to address and prevent obstetric violence; however, this paradigm of obstetric violence as gendered violence neglects a significant theme that shapes discourse around birth: motherhood. This is the area where matricentric feminism reveals a significant gap present in much of the work on obstetric violence to date: how ideas and beliefs about motherhood affect our understandings of what obstetric violence is and who can (or should) complain about it. Andrea O’Reilly explains that matricentric feminism builds on a more general feminism but places its emphasis on the unique category of “mother”; it focuses on the unique issues that mothers face by virtue of their motherhood, which are distinct from the oppression and marginalization that all woman may experience. The concept of motherhood is complex with implications beyond pregnancy and birth, for the purpose of this paper the focus is largely on mother as a construct that understands birthing people in relation to the infant they have carried and given birth to.

Lindal Buchanan discusses the complex meanings that the idea of “mother” brings to any discourse as well as the complex conceptualization that understands “mother” and “woman” with distinct connotations. For example, she explains that in rhetoric, “woman” connotes self-centredness, immorality, hysteria, irrationality, extreme emotion, weakness, and self-indulgence, whereas “mother” connotes children, morality, and self-sacrifice. Individuals are placed on what Lindal calls the “woman/mother continuum,” which results

in different interpretations of them and their behaviour (7-9). Similarly, O'Reilly explains that her students generally describe mothers as “altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful”; they “put needs of [their] children first” (12-13). Mothers do not have “a life before or outside of motherhood.” (13).

Other scholars reiterate that good mothers are selfless, place their children above themselves in all contexts, and also submit themselves to the instruction of experts relating to their motherhood. Susan Chase and Mary Rogers explain that a good mother “follows the advice of doctors and other experts” (30), whereas Jane Ussher specifies that “rigorous body management and adherence to medical discipline are the unquestioned tasks of the pregnant and birthing woman—failure to adhere to these practices positioned as negation of the needs of the unborn child, sign of a ‘bad mother’, [is] a position few women willingly adopt” (151). But if a good mother is selfless and obeys the advice of doctors, can a good mother have rights in obstetric care? If a woman exercises and fights for her rights to health and to her body, does that make her a lesser (or worse yet a ‘bad’) mother?

Approaching obstetric violence through matricentric feminism reveals that arguments problematizing obstetric violence which rely on the gendered violence/violation of birthing people’s rights frameworks may place victims of obstetric violence at odds with constructions of good (selfless) motherhood. Mothers may be framed as bad mothers if their complaints of obstetric violence frame them as insufficiently selfless or as putting their birth experience above the health of their baby. On top of that, if mothers are expected to follow experts’ instructions (in this case maternity care providers) in birth, their refusal to accept this treatment may similarly contradict this expectation of obedience.

The Woman-Mother Continuum in Obstetric Violence Media Coverage as Exemplifying Weaponized Motherhood

Even today what strikes me as one of the most interesting parts of my experience is how grateful I was to my providers immediately after the birth. I felt grateful towards the people who earlier in labour had seemed rushed and even sometimes annoyed at having to help me, despite my efforts to behave as a good patient would—to try and avoid taking too much of their time in light of their obviously heavy workload. I felt an overwhelming duty to thank them before they rushed off to other responsibilities. I wanted to thank the people who had grabbed me and shouted at me, and whose hands I had desperately attempted to push away.

In recent media coverage on obstetric violence, the tension between birthing people’s rights versus motherhood is on full display. In 2016, the CBC

produced a series of investigative news stories exploring women's complaints of obstetric violence (referred to as mistreatment in maternity care in the stories). Some of these stories were televised, and all of the coverage was made available online; viewers could post their comments to the stories posted on CBC's social media page (CBC News, "Untitled Facebook Post"). Whereas some of the posts empathized with the abusive experiences the interviewees were sharing, including many individuals who posted about their own violent and abusive maternity care experiences, other posts drew on the discourses of good and bad motherhood to criticize the interviewees who were telling their stories of mistreatment. One commenter described her own birth and the role of the maternity care provider's expertise to treat and reassure her, "and more importantly to deliver [her] baby safely" (CBC News, "Untitled Facebook Post")—a sentiment that subjugated her own experience and healthcare, and reinforced the selfless mother construct. Other comments placed the victims of obstetric violence in a different location on the women-mother continuum to negatively reflect on their complaints. One such comment began by stating "this article is about spoiled people for the most part" and drew on connotations of women as weak and self-indulgent in response to their complaints that they were mistreated by maternity care providers during childbirth (CBC News, "Untitled Facebook Post").

In another of the CBC reports, one interviewee discusses how her maternity care providers increasingly pressured her to consent to a procedure by telling her that she was harming her baby by refusing the procedure. In this example, the expectation that a mother be selfless is mobilized in order to pressure a patient into consenting to a procedure that they had initially refused (CBC News, "Diana Swain").

During a research project I recently completed, one doula explained to me that when a healthcare provider uses what she calls "the dead baby card" (the threat that whatever the birthing person was refusing to do would kill their baby), they are no longer providing information about risks and benefits of a given procedure; instead, the health of the baby is being used to guilt or scare an individual into compliance. In the case of obstetric violence, then, motherhood can be weaponized to exercise control and gain compliance of birthing individuals. The use of the labels "mom" and "mama" to describe and engage with pregnant, birthing, or postpartum women is one example of how motherhood may be invoked to reinforce the expectation of that these individuals should conform to the normative understandings of good and compliant motherhood.

The examples discussed above demonstrate how motherhood can be leveraged against individuals who disagree with care providers and those who publically decry the obstetric violence they are subjected to. If other birthing people have internalized these discourses of good and bad motherhood, they

may contribute to obstetric violence's tendency towards invisibility, wherein individuals do not recognize their treatment as obstetric violence, nor do not feel that they can express concerns about the treatment they have experienced without potentially subjecting themselves to the label of bad mother.

If motherhood is weaponized to silence and control women regarding maternity care and obstetric violence, and if researchers problematize obstetric violence by adopting paradigms that do not account for the complexity of motherhood, its relation to obstetric violence, and the barriers it may create to recognize and speak out against obstetric violence, what hope is there towards ending the violence?

Concluding Thoughts

Immediately after my obstetric violence experience, I did not characterize it as violent. In the immediate hours and days afterwards, I knew I was uncomfortable with some of the things that had happened, but ultimately I felt grateful that my child and I survived the experience. Over time, I came to reflect on the experience more critically, and I allowed myself to consider that I had suffered violence. I recognized that I had been treated badly and that the sort of treatment I had been subjected to should not have happened. And such feelings did not make me a bad mother or less grateful that my child and I had survived.

Matricentric feminism provides an opportunity to begin breaking down barriers towards recognizing and addressing obstetric violence; it helps to recognize that mothers face unique challenges and forms of oppression that have significant implications related to obstetric violence. In recognizing this, we may be able to deweaponize advocacy strategies and ensure that normative discourses of motherhood are not potentially restricting birthing people from fighting for their rights to prevent obstetric violence.

It is also important to note that the WHO recognizes that teens, unmarried people, people of low socioeconomic status, people from ethnic minorities, migrant people, and people living with HIV are particularly likely to experience disrespectful and abusive treatment, which highlights the intersectional nature of the oppression that birthing individuals may experience. There are numerous sources that highlight the complex intersectional oppression birthing people from specific types of marginalized groups experience (Bridge; Chadwick; Chalmers and Omer-Hashi; Smith-Oka; Vedam et al). Though not the focus of this article, the complexities of these intersectional forms of oppression are also important in shaping advocacy work done to prevent obstetric violence. Another important consideration to discuss is the binary gender construction that serves as the basis for much of the work on women and birth and women and motherhood. Although birth

may be normatively conceived as a woman's task and those individuals who give birth may be understood to be mothers, the reality, of course, is that individuals who do not identify as women give birth and those individuals who give birth may not come to identify as mothers. Such is the complexity of navigating childbirth as a space that all at once may defy and still be shaped by binary gender norms.

This article also does not suggest that obstetric violence begins and ends with the bad behaviour of a few healthcare providers. Sadler and her colleagues argue that understanding obstetric violence is not as simple as a "limited focus on victims (women) and victimisers (health professionals)" (51). They explain that broader factors, including socialization that normalizes types of violence and power inequalities between groups, must be considered as well as healthcare professional curriculum, in which "the acceptance of norms, corporate discipline and punishment plays a central role" (51). Moreover, the poor working conditions that many healthcare workers have to contend with and which influence incidents of violence must be addressed (51). Furthermore, Cheryl Beck and Robert Gable have shown that exposure to obstetric violence not only harms the birthing people who experience it directly but may also traumatize healthcare providers who have secondary exposure to it.

By using a critical framework informed by matricentric feminism, which incorporates the significance of motherhood as a unique intersection of oppression as well as a gendered and constructed experience, advocates and researchers can deweaponize efforts to address obstetric violence. This approach would permit birthing people the space to speak out against bad birth experiences and obstetric violence while circumventing the illusion of the good and selfless mother and the concomitant label of 'bad mother' for those who assert their own interests and agency.

Endnote

1. Although birthing people are typically identified as women, there are individuals who give birth but do not identify as women, for example trans people who become pregnant and give birth as well as nonbinary individuals. This article uses the language "birthing people" to recognize these individuals as well, and it builds on the idea that pregnancy and birth themselves are often understood as womanly, which render birthing people vulnerable to gender-based violence. Furthermore, research demonstrates that various social categories and other factors beyond gender (including race, age, and socioeconomic status) also influence individual risk for obstetric violence (Vedam et al.). These factors present an important avenue to understand how intersectional forms of oppression relate to obstetric violence; however, that level of analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

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Matricentric Policy Research: Making Room for Mothers in an Inclusive Research Partnership

In this article, I argue inclusive policy research using “big data” that is informed by matricentric feminist values can yield analysis and recommendations that will be empowering for mothers. Drawing on my experience as a feminist legal scholar and my developing interest in social policy as a means to achieve justice for mothers and other carers, I contend that legal challenges to advance equality for mothers have not been as successful as early assessments might have predicted. Instead, I explore how an inclusive team approach to the kind of social problems that make life difficult for many mothers in Canada could yield better policy that brings them closer to equality. I describe a policy research partnership that includes public servants and community groups as well as academics, informed by an intersectional approach. The partnership will make use of administrative data in Manitoba to explore social policy challenges, including affected community members and public servants from all relevant departments from the outset, ensuring that the questions that are explored reflect the real needs of the people the policies are intended to serve. With two examples of previous research, I illustrate how mother-focused recommendations can flow from the kind of big data available in Manitoba.

In 2016, Andrea O’Reilly published *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*. With this book, she firmly establishes the proposition that those who are mothering need a feminism of their own (1). She maintains that mothering matters and is central to the lives of women who are mothers (O’Reilly’s intends the word “mothers” to be inclusive of all people engaged in motherwork), without ever conceding ground to the essentialist notion that all women must mother. As she sees it, motherhood “is the unfinished business of feminism” (2). Canadian statistical research about women supports her position, showing that women’s wellbeing continues to be adversely affected by their caregiving responsibilities (Statistics Canada). An inclusive model of

policy research that uses “big data” to inform policy analysis can incorporate a matricentric focus and promote social justice. This article provides a brief summary of O’Reilly’s theory of empowered mothering; a sketch of an inclusive partnership approach to inclusive policy research; and a quick look at some policy questions that put mothers at the centre.

As a legal scholar, I have spent my career trying to figure out how the law, mainly through claims to equality rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, may help to create a space for mothering that was based on a substantive understanding of the needs of mothers. As I have become somewhat disillusioned with the power of constitutional challenges to get us to a place of equality for mothers, I have shifted my focus towards social policy development. Now I ask not “how do we challenge the status quo through the courts?” but rather “how do we create, promote and use research that is focused on mothers’ wellbeing?” Matricentric feminism can shape how we generate knowledge and insights that are relevant and useful for activists, service providers, policymakers, and even lawyers.

I have approached my own thinking about mothering through the theory, activism and practice that O’Reilly envisions in her work. My first approach to theory was grounded in the legal, doctrinal and critical approaches of a Canadian educated lawyer. I had just come of age when the Charter was being born in 1982, and I began my law studies the year after the equality guarantee in section 15 came into force in 1985. I believed that law, through the Charter, could guarantee women’s equality and in particular mothers’ equality. If law could do this, then mothers’ thriving, wellbeing, and equality in Canadian society would be assured. In part, my naïve belief was grounded in a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada that was released just as I finished law school in 1989. In *Brooks v Canada Safeway Ltd*, the Court recognized that a woman who was discriminated against because of pregnancy is discriminated against on the basis of sex and that such discrimination was contrary to both human rights legislation and the equality guarantee of the Charter (Turnbull, “The Promise”). Using broad language that acknowledged the burden of childbearing borne by women, the chief justice stated that it was “unfair to impose all of the costs of pregnancy upon one half of the population.” He also noted “that those who bear children and benefit society as a whole thereby should not be economically or socially disadvantaged” (*Brooks*).

Those were the early days of the equality provision, a time when, as with a new baby, we believed in its infinite potential. As my career matured, so did the Charter. I became less naïve and watched with dismay as the Charter passed through its turbulent teenage years to become a young adult that has yet to fulfil its potential, especially for mothers and other carers in Canada. Since the *Brooks* decision, numerous cases that brought claims by mothers for access to various social benefits have failed, as courts were unable to see

systemic discrimination or unwilling to make a finding of inequality lest it cost the government too much to remedy (Turnbull, “The Promise”).

Activism and practice also brought me to a new way of thinking about equality for mothers. By the time section 15 was entering its teen years, I was the mother of three small children, the birth of each awakening in me a new wonder at the fundamental equality and dignity of every human being. We raised our children in an inner city Toronto neighbourhood, setting up childcare co-ops and food boxes for local families and fighting against the oppressive impacts of Mike Harris’s austerity budgets on local women and their children. As the Charter approached adulthood, we moved to Manitoba, and I began my career as a legal academic. I was actively involved in various national organizations promoting equality through Charter challenges and legislative reform. I also worked with Manitoba organizations to advocate for gender budgeting and for basic income. At the same time, I walked with my children through their turbulent teen years. They too have become young adults, and I still see and believe in their potential, knowing that the young of today are the ones who are building our society of tomorrow. I haven’t given up on law and on the Charter; I still see the potential they have to shape our society of tomorrow, but I want to use my knowledge and advocacy with different approaches. Good matricentric social policy is part of how we can achieve this. With a new inclusive approach to policy we can get closer to the place where all mothers, no matter their social location, can thrive. When mothers thrive, their children and the rest of us will thrive with them. This is a key aspect of O’Reilly’s matricentric feminism: mothers who are thriving, who are empowered, who have adequate income and food security, and who are safe and have access to safe affordable childcare and other supports for their motherwork have children who do better and are themselves able to be the agents of change needed to develop better laws and policies (Crittenden 112; O’Reilly 70; Smith 240).

My point is that matricentric feminism needs to inform and shape everything from the way we mother in our daily lives to the kind of work we do on behalf of others who are mothering. In the privileged position of a legal academic who has always been concerned about the disadvantaged and often powerless position of mothers, the framework offered by matricentric feminism offers a useful tool to inform research. Along with colleagues who have deep experience using big data to advise policymakers in the health domain, we are creating a new partnership of academics, public servants, and community organizations to develop necessary laws and policies that can offer solutions that are inclusive of all Manitobans, no matter their social location.

1. Matricentric Feminism

O'Reilly suggests that mothering, more than gender, is the defining characteristic of women's inequality. She lays out seven principles that provide a partial and provisional definition of matricentric feminism (7): putting mothers first and taking seriously the work of mothering because motherwork is important and valuable to society. She proposes that a matricentric approach is a direct repudiation of patriarchal structures of motherhood as well as the contemporary child-centredness of intensive mothering. She argues strongly for scholars to accept that mothering in itself is worthy of serious scholarly inquiry and to establish motherhood studies as a legitimate scholarly discipline in order to allow the development of both research and activism from the experience and perspective of mothers. Perhaps most important for the research approach I outline here, she asserts that a matricentric approach is committed to social change and social justice, positioning mothering as a site of power, and that matricentric feminism understands mothering to be culturally determined, including diverse experiences related to race, class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, age, and geographical location.

O'Reilly positions matricentric feminist approaches in opposition to patriarchal motherhood and the ideology of the good mother, who is child focused and self-sacrificing, and inevitably white, heterosexual, cisgendered, married, and middle class with two children (Hays). According to Adrienne Rich, mothering is not natural, nor should it be the sole responsibility of biological mothers (33). She argues that mothers need powers equal to the responsibilities they carry on behalf of society, and O'Reilly also sees a connection between the neoliberal ethos of our times and intensive mothering, arguing that like neoliberalism itself, these ideologies and social expectations should be rejected (56). Neoliberalism and the fiction of choice operate as a backlash against women's progress (60). Under neoliberalism, women still face a pay gap when they engage in paid labour, especially if that labour is caring work, and they are still unpaid when they are caring for their own children (which they still do more than male parents). Social supports shrink (community programs and schools face cuts), and men remain relatively privileged (57).

O'Reilly also maintains that non-normative mothers are living and mothering in empowered ways (76). Although Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* suggests three fundamental tasks for mothering—to protect, nurture and train—for many mothers who are marginalized, protecting their children is an all-consuming dimension of their motherwork. As Patricia Hill Collins eloquently proclaims of African American mothers, physical survival is central to their mothering tasks, and the other two elements of mothering that Ruddick identifies are secondary to ensuring their child's survival (49). Mothers living in disadvantage do not have the privilege of devoting time

energy and money to nurturing and training, or to intensive mothering. I emphasize this point because I want to focus on the particularities of the geographic location I am from. Manitoba is in the centre of Canada. It is the Canadian province with the highest proportion of children in care, and nearly 90 percent of those children are Indigenous (Gilbert). Imagine how fiercely those mothers, as well as their families and communities, are trying to protect their children from various colonial intrusions (for example the practice of “birth alerts,” such as the one that went viral in 2019 [Lambert]). Indigenous women are not just marginalized, they may be targeted (sometimes with intention, more often through structures that disproportionately affect them). But as Kim Anderson argues, Indigenous women are also drawing on Indigenous cultural and collectivist norms, and building families as a site of resistance and renewal (762).

2. An Inclusive Partnership Approach to Policy Research

In 2016, I met a couple of the research scientists at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) which produces research that speaks to a whole range of health and social issues, many of them relevant to mothers and children. Their work draws upon the Manitoba Population Research Data Repository (the Repository) housed at MCHP. The Repository is a comprehensive collection of population-based data developed and maintained by MCHP on behalf of the Province of Manitoba. All data are de-identified and contain a scrambled number, which allows for person-level, anonymous linkage across datasets and over time. It includes data for education, child and family services, income assistance, public housing, and justice, as well as a vast range of health data.

The use of administrative big data in social policy is extremely limited, yet they hold great promise (N. Roos et al., “Policymakers’ Understanding”). Developments in technology have resulted in the proliferation of big data repositories and renewed interest in the use of large administrative datasets for social science research (Martens; McGrail et al; Connelly). Administrative data are derived from the operation of administrative systems (such as the education or the justice system), often associated with service delivery (McGrail; Connelly). They have been described as “found” data (i.e., collected for purposes other than research) as opposed to “made” data (i.e., collected through experimental methods). Although this means researchers generally have no input into the structure or content of these datasets, they offer several advantages, including large sample sizes, longitudinal follow-up, routine collection, and whole-population participation (Martens et al.; McGrail et al.; Raghupathi and Raghupathi; L. Roos et al.). Administrative data are particularly powerful when they can be linked across sectors and services, providing

a breadth of information required for conducting research on complex social problems (Raghupathi and Raghupathi; L. Roos et al.). As such, they hold great potential for policy research and evaluation. Canada has been a leader when it comes to using these data for health policy research and evaluation; however we have lagged behind other countries, notably the U.S. (Jutte et al.; Aizer et al.; Bloom and Unterman; Robertson et al.; Chetty et al.) when it comes to using these linked data for social policy research and evaluation (Chetty et al.). The Repository has the most extensive collection of linkable social services datasets available for research in the country (Martens).

Justice data were just beginning to arrive in the Repository, and we quickly realized the power of using these data to consider the needs and wellbeing of different sectors of Manitoba's population. A group of us determined that we could use the data to look at complex social policy problems using a cross-disciplinary, collaborative approach that would be inclusive from problem definition through data analysis to policy evaluation and/or implementation. It was also our goal to recognize the differing impacts policies may have depending on individual and group identities as well as experiences of inequality. As a lawyer, I could see the power of this kind of research not only to promote data-informed policymaking but also to provide an additional kind of evidence for legal analysis, especially for systemic equality claims that rely heavily on the broader social context to make a finding of differential treatment.

We created a partnership to bring together scholars, public servants, and community organizations to study complex social and policy challenges. Some theorists have labelled these twenty-first-century policy challenges "wicked problems" with the intention of capturing their fluidity, intractability, and political nature (Conklin; Head and Alford; Turnbull, "Wicked Problems"). The federal government of Australia has used the wicked problems construct to address policymaking because it "is capable of grasping the big picture, including interrelationships among the full range of causal factors ... and broader, more collaborative and innovative approaches ... effectively engaging stakeholders and citizens" (Government of Australia). Traditional government structures are hierarchical and highly siloed, making it difficult for governments to effectively address wicked problems (Wellesley Institute; Barber). Collaborative approaches with multidisciplinary teams are what is really needed to tackle these complex issues (Ruhl and Salzman; Coffey). Partnerships are inherently about knowledge co-creation and mobilization and provide a strong foundation for iterative and reflective practice (Cavaghan; MacDonald and Levasseur).

As we think about social change and social justice, we are also guided by Leslie Pal's work on policy analysis, which emphasizes that it must be a multidisciplinary and iterative process. Pal acknowledges that the rationalist

origins of Western policy analysis have limited its ability to include complex social realities and local ways of knowing, and argues for a broader and more inclusive approach to policy development. Mechanisms for including a diversity of knowledge and expertise and taking account of how power is distributed among stakeholders (Brownell et al., “Class Half-empty”; N. Roos et al., “Complete Story”; Doberstein) are essential to improve the policy process for addressing wicked problems. Pal suggests a whole government process that provides “horizontality,” which, as opposed to “hierarchical” approaches, engages across levels of government, departments, and with partners outside of government (Pal; Bakvis and Juillet). Canadian society is diverse, and policies must serve citizens in all their social locations, recognizing that different policy impacts may arise out of the combination of various individual and group identities. Analysis that recognizes such intersectionality will explore how policies affect the inequalities experienced by various social groups (Scala and Paterson).

An intersectionality framework allows the partnership to be intentional about creating an inclusive and collaborative approach. Intersectionality is well established as an analytical tool for theorizing identity and oppression. Its use in policy is just beginning: “The goal of intersectionality policy analysis is to identify and address the way specific acts and policies address the inequalities experienced by various social groups ... taking into account ... multiple systems of power and oppression” (Hankivsky and Cormier 217). An intersectionality framework allows the linking of theory and practice as there is a “dialectical relationship ... where theories of intersectionality are informed by and informing of practice” (Dhamoon and Hankivsky 18). There is significant overlap between the approaches for wicked problems and those for intersectional policy analysis. Both agree that the methods cannot be pinned down, as they evolve based on the stakeholders and the problem (Hankivsky and Cormier). “Policies must reflect [the] uniqueness [of intersectional experiences] or remain largely ineffective in solving the problems of marginalized groups” (Wilkinson 33).

Wicked problems require broader ways of thinking about the variables, options, and linkages (Head and Alford), and meaningful attention to diversity will shape the policy questions that are asked, the kind of data that are collected, how the data are collected, and how the data are disaggregated (Bakvis and Juillet; Hankivsky and Cormier). Pal concludes that traditional policy tools are no longer adequate in a world of global integration, broad internet access to information, and a citizenry that understands that governments are elected to address public problems in the public interest. Inclusive partnerships may offer an ideal way to address some of the challenges in the policy process related to the wicked problems of the twenty-first century (Martens; N. Roos et al., “Complete Story”).

Two examples of research done by team members (prior to the creation of the partnership) demonstrate how powerful policy recommendations can be when attention is focused on mothers. Much research on child welfare systems focuses on outcomes for children, but a study that looked at over three thousand children born in Manitoba between 1998 and 2001 found that the rates of mental illness, addiction, residential mobility, and welfare use were significantly higher for the mothers whose children were taken into care, compared to mothers whose children had not been taken into care. The authors recommend implementing policies that provide supports for maternal health and social outcomes after a child is taken into care (Wall-Weiler et al.). A different study looked at the impact of an unconditional cash transfer to low income pregnant women. A benefit of \$81.41 per month was provided to women in the second and third trimesters of their pregnancy for those earning up to \$22,000 per annum, reducing to zero for incomes over \$32,000 per annum. A total of 14,600 pairs of mothers whose babies were born between 2003 and 2010 were included. Researchers found that the benefit resulted in the prevention of 21 percent of all low birthweight births and 17.5 percent of all preterm births for this vulnerable population (Brownell et al, “Prenatal Income”). An unconditional benefit recognizes the autonomy and agency of the mother, unlike many other similar benefits that the researchers reviewed, and was just as effective, or more so, in improving outcomes. These two examples, though not explicitly informed by a matricentric feminist perspective, show how a focus on the mother can yield results that can lead to policy developments that can improve the wellbeing of mothers, thereby benefiting their children and society as a whole.

3. Matricentric Social Policy Research

If we put mothers at the centre, what kinds of research questions may we ask, what policies should we evaluate? For example, we know that being taken into the care of the state leads to negative outcomes for children, especially for Indigenous children (Government of British Columbia). We now know that mothers have poorer health and social outcomes after their children have been taken into care (Wall-Wieler et al.). We also know that many complex and interacting social factors affect mothers’ ability to provide the care required by law, and the care they do provide is judged by colonial standards that may not be relevant to the circumstances of many families, particularly Indigenous families living in remote areas. At the same time, we know that Indigenous mothers and communities are reclaiming and renewing their own knowledge and pushing back against these forces (First Nations Family Advocate Office).

If we want to begin to look at the policies that are affecting mothers and their children in such circumstances, we must be guided by the OCAP

(ownership, control, access, and possession) principles (First Nations Information Governance Centre). We need to make sure that our partnership includes organizations that are already working in these areas (First Nations Family Advocate Office), and we must also ask ourselves which other mothers might be similarly affected, such as refugee, or farm, or disabled mothers. As we begin our work, and at every stage, we must include mothers in all their diversity and ask “what would “good” mothering look like in your community?” For as Marilyn Waring has said, “what we decide to measure now is what we will prioritise in the future ... Underneath the numbers, a philosophical judgement is always being made based on values, not facts.” (117, 15). Let us draw upon the values of matricentric feminism.

Author’s Note

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author alone, as are any errors. The conceptualization of the policy partnership that is described here is the work of a team of researchers who have recently received a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant to support this work, and intellectual property rights belong to that team, and I thank them for allowing me to draw on the ideas outlined here. The core team includes Marni Brownell, Jennifer Enns, Randy Fransoo, Karine Levasseur, Alyson Mahar, Nathan Nickel, Selena Randall, Rob Santos and Lorna Turnbull. For more information visit www.spectrum-mb.ca.

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Towards Matricentric Feminism in the Caribbean: Inroads and Opportunities

Although feminist and nonfeminist scholars have attempted to debunk the stereotypical representations and framings of matrifocality in the Caribbean, many gaps remain. This article argues that even though much of the scholarship on the Afro-Caribbean family has not centred on the specific realities and struggles of Black mothers, there have been substantive attempts on the part of Caribbean feminists and other non-feminist scholars to trouble the inherent biases within early explorations and theorization of matrifocality in the Caribbean. Where the consensus has been on the persistent disparagement of the Afro-Caribbean family, these scholars have collectively carved out important starting points for the development of a scholarship on and for Black mothers in the Caribbean. However, moving the scholarship on Black mothers forwards requires more critical epistemological and ontological frameworks. The hope is for the advancement of maternal scholarship that captures both the oppressive and neocolonial representations of the Black mother and explores the relative weight and effects of existing structures and relations of power on their lives across time, contexts, and social backgrounds. Such line of questioning opens the door for new perspectives, complexities, and politics around Black motherhood within the context of the Caribbean.

Introduction

Although the notion of the matricentric or mothercentric family has been somewhat explored within broader examinations of the Black family, many theoretical and empirical gaps remain. Of note, is a general lack of research that speaks to the diachronic processes and relational aspects of the matricentric family, but with an inherent emphasis on the synchronic structures within (Staples; Barrow, *Families in the Caribbean*). Related concerns stem from a

general lack of distinction between the institution and the practice of mothering (Rich), and, of critical considerations for the misconceptions and misrepresentations of mothers (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*; Barrow, "Caribbean Masculinity"). In *Matricentric Feminism*, O'Reilly also contends that although mothers continue to be oppressed under patriarchal systems, there is a dearth of scholarship that explores how they have been structurally oppressed, how these social axes of power become embodied or resisted within their everyday experience, and how these social axes affect the specific identities, realities, and practices of mothers.

If we use these key areas as frames of reference to assess what O'Reilly (*Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, 736) referred to as "mother-focused" research or scholarship on matrifocality, then we have to acknowledge the many inroads made within existing Caribbean-based research. Of note is the centrality of matrifocal structures and practices to the research agendas of early European anthropologists and Caribbean feminists. Here, we see that the use of structural functionalism and the ideological references to heteronormative family systems and practices (particularly within early anthropological research on matrifocality in the Caribbean) served as a major impetus or "primary problematic of feminism in the post-colonial project" (Mohammed, "A Symbiotic Visiting Relationship" 122). In fact, such theoretical and ideological critiques largely underscore the weight of patriarchal thinking and practice, the extent to which these have historically structured the identity of women and mothers in the Caribbean, and, to which these have prompted varied adaptations overtime. No doubt, these points of examination counter oppressive patriarchal systems and cultural constructions related to motherhood and set important starting points for developing maternal scholarship in the Caribbean.

However, when we apply the governing principles and aims of matricentric feminism to the collective body of research on matrifocality in the Caribbean, inherent gaps persist. Of note, therefore, is the absence of an extensive scholarship that specifically interrogates motherhood as an institution, as identity, and as practice. What are also missing are noticeable attempts to reimagine mother-child relations, to develop activist agendas and practices related to empowering mothers, or, to address some of the social injustices that they confront. In fact, whether we explore the inherent thrusts of early anthropological research or the critical responses of Caribbean scholars, a tendency remains for the scrutiny of conjugal patterns and relations within the matrifocal family. As such, one can also argue that despite ongoing calls for giving voice to and for increasing the visibility of mothers within the Caribbean, this remains relatively untouched.

This article argues that even though much of the scholarship on the Afro-Caribbean family has not centred on the specific realities, struggles, and

practices of Black mothers, there has been substantive attempts on the part of Caribbean feminists and other nonfeminist scholars to trouble the inherent biases within early explorations and theorization of matrifocality in the Caribbean. As the focus has been on the persistent disparagement of the Afro-Caribbean family, these scholars have collectively carved out important starting points for the development of a scholarship on and for Black mothers in the Caribbean. To some extent, these investigations have produced counter-narratives and representations of Black families that are both culturally and relationally centred. However, given the need to develop a collective body of scholarship that explores the epistemic virtues (values, attitudes, and beliefs) within maternal thought (Ruddick), specific challenges and realities related to the institution of motherhood (Rich; Hays; Maushart; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*), and the diverse responses of mothers, many research possibilities remain.

The aims of this article are, therefore, threefold: to highlight the theoretical narrowness in the early anthropological research on the Black family; to draw on the contributions and inroads made by Caribbean feminists and other researchers in the early theorizations of Black woman and mothers; and to address the areas for further exploration in the advancement of maternal feminist scholarship. In assessing existing research on matrifocality in the Caribbean, the article addresses some of the early representations of the Black family, speaks to some of the scholarly contestations to existing constructions around the roles and structures within this family, identifies some of the areas of research that advance the scholarship on Black mothers, and explores some of the ways in which Caribbean researchers have spoken to issues of resistance and change related to mothers. These areas will be used to assess the scope of existing scholarship on Black mothers in the Caribbean and to underscore some of the prospects for moving this work forward.

Situating Matrifocality in the Caribbean

Matrifocality emerged as a core aspect of early (1950s) theorizations on lower-class Afro-Caribbean families (Barrow, *Families in the Caribbean*; Gonzalez). In such cases, the historical foci of anthropological studies within the Caribbean were on the mother-centred nature of the matrifocal family both as a structure and as a practice. At the heart of discussions and representations of the matrifocal family are those of the loosely configured nature of the mother-child relationship, the physical absence of the father, and the maternal nature of Black families. Such is evident in the diffusionist and cultural line of thinking around Black motherhood (Henriques; Smith, *The Matrifocal Family*; Simey), the general reference to the failure of the marriage movement in the Caribbean, and to the subsequent derailment of matrifocal relations. In the

case of the latter, attention to the affective roles that mothers are expected to take on and how these are embodied within their lived experiences as well as on the level of dominance or authority that the mother exerts within the household all unfold as expressions or manifestations of practice. These ideas are clearly discernable within the work of R. T. Smith (*The Matrifocal Family*), who spoke to the connection between matrifocality and cultural forms in the Caribbean and to others such as Michael G Smith and Hyman Rodman, who extended their analyses to issues of ideology and class.

What emerges within this body of work is the pathologization of matrifocality that imposes functional, heteronormative, and Eurocentric notions of the family. In fact, one can argue that an overriding concern among Caribbean scholars within the study of the family has been for the ideological biases within early explorations of matrifocal families. A more specific criticism has been for the use of Parsonian perspectives, which have rendered the practices and structures of Black lower-class families as inherently dysfunctional, stereotypical, and atypical (Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean*; Leo-Rhynie; Senior; Hall; Barrow, "Living in Sin"). Within such critiques are considerations for how the ideological and patriarchal frameworks have been discursively employed to justify claims of dysfunctionality within lower-class Afro-Caribbean families. Since the institution of marriage emerged as the reference point for analyzing conjugal family forms, criticisms advocated for the use of middle-class Western conceptualizations on what constitutes a family and on the roles and functions of men vis-à-vis that of women within the Caribbean. Such attention to the relative importance of race, class, and gender on understandings of motherhood as an institution, represents one of the many advancements within existing scholarship on Black mothers in the Caribbean (Anderson; Barrow, *Caribbean Masculinity*; *Family in the Caribbean*; Massiah; Mohammed, "The Caribbean Family Revisited"; Momsen, *Women and Change in the Caribbean*).

A clear extension of this theoretical progression also surfaces within nonfeminist treatment of issues related to maternal practice among Afro-Caribbean women. Of importance is the fundamental critique of the parallel reference to notions of the marginalized Black male with those related to the perceptions of the Black matriarch (Henriques; Smith, *Kinship and Class in the West Indies*). The censuring of the association between matrifocality or matricentrality to male marginality becomes central to that of that process of naming and pigeonholing family systems in the Caribbean (Massiah; Senior; Barrow, "Caribbean Masculinity"; Clarke; Brereton, "General Problems"). As a case in point, Alfrieta Monagan has called attention to understandings of matrifocality that give relevance to or make sense of the functionality of marriage, mating patterns, and/or conjugal patterns within the household. In her work on Caribbean masculinity and family, Christine Barrow ("Anthropology") also argued against the normalization of the nuclear

family and gendered relations of power that affects understandings of their roles and statuses as well as influences how they are mutually constructed and constrained. A major push here is for more expansive frameworks that take into consideration the ideological and moral underpinnings around the constructions of the family and the extent to which these affect the relations of engagement therein.

Constructive examinations of the gendered ways in which mothering and fathering are perceived and practiced also represent another progressive area of research on Black families in the Caribbean. In many cases, researchers move towards an interrogation of the meanings and practices of mothering and from the historical foci on the structure and functions that emerge within. To some extent, Edith Clarke's seminal work *My Mother Who Fathered Me* represents a classical interpretation and representation of single women who raised and supported their children. However, a missed opportunity here is for a discussion around the processes through which the mother compensates for the absence of the father—a conversation that rests on the perceived importance of paternal functions within heteronormative sexual roles. Mindie Lazarus-Black contended however that while the work represents a way of rethinking family systems and practices among Afro-Caribbean peoples, it fails to trouble the value of gender hierarchies and ideologies that preconfigure the roles, functions and diverse engagements of men and women within the family. A call therefore is for deeper explorations of “culture's kinship events” as nonverbal expressions of the “rule governed events [which] give us a different perspective about how families operate, how they are shaped by a society's power relations, and why mothers never father” (Lazarus-Black 66). The central push is also for more critical examinations of the Afro-Caribbean family that connect the meanings and experiences of kinship to socially constituted axes of power that define maternal thinking and practice. Although there has been somewhat of an attempt to draw attention to the practice and thinking around mothering in the Caribbean, this gap still remains.

Capturing the Concerns of Black Mothers

The unique challenges and concerns that confront mothers in this process emerge as another aspect of matricentric feminism. Such concerns also remain core to feminist research on Black women and mothers in the Caribbean. In fact, although few narratives exist on the lived realities and complexities of Black mothers in the Caribbean, many Caribbean scholars have pushed for a movement away from what Monagan referred to as the “etic assumptions within notions of matrifocality” and towards more diachronic interrogations (related to the processes) as well as relational dynamics or realities of matrifocality. This is evident in the work of Michelle Rowley who argued that:

The assumption that matrifocality exists primarily as a result of patriarchal contestations among men denies the fact that matrifocal forms are constructed within the dynamics of gendered inter and intra group relations, within institutional, ideological, and social forces which are challenged and supported by both men and women. The perpetuation of these forms cannot be seen as an unintended consequence of intra-male contestation. This denies the complex-and sometimes contradictory interrelatedness of gender relations and the constructions of our gendered identities. (27-28)

Where such theoretical questioning emerges, the issue becomes that of the broader politics of identity and gender relations that do not take into account various acts of resistance, agency, and autonomy both in the thinking and acting of women. An immediate consequence of this is the lack of visibility to the positionality, subjectivity, and responsiveness of Black women. These create immense opportunities for furthering the scholarship on Black women in the Caribbean.

As a way of addressing such “contradictory subtleties of matrifocality,” Rowley have called for renewed interrogations of gender dynamics as expressed through everyday narratives from the “matrifolk,” described here as the “Afro-Caribbean, low-income, single female heads of households” (Rowley 29). In so doing, some germane issues or points for investigation emerge: sexuality, fertility, respectability, reputation, and the practices of Afro-Caribbean mothers. Even in so doing, there is still a need for new frameworks, new questions, and new ways of understanding these issues. Rowley, for instance, has warned in this case that unless such counter-narratives are engaged, then the likelihood is to ignore the specific realities, contexts, and ideologies that “relegate pregnancy, and by extension, womanhood, to little more than a lot and a burden to be carried throughout life” (Rowley, 37).

In advancing this line of thinking, Patricia Mohammed (“A Symbiotic Visiting Relationship”) called for some sensitization that recognizes the extent to which the “creation of the nation state ... the evolution of patriarchal control, the imposition of the dominant white male patriarchy, rules, regulations, and doctrines imposed by white colonialism, set the boundaries of black masculinity as it did for all femininity (“A Symbiotic Visiting Relationship” 122). The push here is for considerations of the political economy that also centres the cultural, social, and moral references embedded within historicizations and theorizations of matrifocality within the Caribbean. Such lenses have been substantively used in the interrogation of the social, economic, and historical factors that shape the peculiarities surrounding the politics of identity (Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad*, “General Problems”; Reddock; Barnes; Antrobus; Rowley and Antrobus; Rowley). Even here, many possibilities emerge for exploring new concepts and intersectional axes

of power (race, gender, class, ethnicity, just to name a few) that are relevant to the spatial and temporal realities of Black mothers within the Caribbean.

Clear examples of this the complexity within identity politics materialize through feminists' interrogations of issues related to sexuality, conjugality, as well as the respectability of Afro-Caribbean women. To a large extent, these empirical investigations have also provided important points of contentions for advancing the scholarship on Black mothers in the Caribbean. Within such analyses for instance are clear critiques of Eurocentric constructions of the family (Powell; Barrow, *Families in the Caribbean*), which have continued to (albeit in different ways) defeminize and desexualize Black women within the Caribbean (Beckles; Kempadoo; Robinson, "Beyond the Bill of Rights"). As a case in point, Robinson's treatise, "Properties of Citizens," captures the ways and extent to which colonialism—and its resultant structures of race, class, and heteropatriarchy—have shaped regulative regimes that control existing hierarchies within patterns of conjugality within the Caribbean.

Such conjugal hierarchies, where present, inherently lead to the marginalization of the unmarried and single mother, with little interrogation of how she continuously negotiates the need for legitimacy, equity, and equality within her everyday interactions. Some key points of contention, therefore, remain within perceptions of constitutional rights and the extent to which these mirror the lived realities of these women. The important contribution here is for the illumination of the complex connections between the ideological framing and structuring of the Black Caribbean mother and the extent to which regulative systems of power inadvertently shape the representations, identities, cultural expectations, and experiences of Black mothers.

On one level, such analyses provide critical points of reference and pieces of the complex puzzle that characterizes the realities for Black women in the Caribbean. On another level, these insights are relatively underexplored within existing examinations of the Afro-Caribbean family. More contemporary interrogations are needed that explore intersecting structures of power and how these both unfold and affect Black mothers who traverse various contexts and institutions.

Extending the Field: Complexities within Work-Family Domains

Examinations of the work-family challenges for women have also emerged as a specific field of research in the Caribbean, wherein scholars problematize the structured realities of women and mothers. However, there is a lack of attention to women's and mothers' roles within the productive sphere as well as sensitivity to the complexities and paradoxes embedded within. Such tensions are aptly addressed in what Barrow ("Caribbean Masculinity") referred to as the tensions that are created within the coexistence of "Afro-

centered economic autonomy and Euro-centered passivity” (169). In elaborating of this challenge, Janet Momsen (“The Double Paradox”) has also addressed the tensions related to the coexistence of domestic ideology with that of the economic independence and engagement of women. An inherent thrust in this case has been on the weight of domestic responsibilities for women and the struggles that these introduce when women extend their economic activities to small-scale agriculture or other areas in search of new survival strategies in the hope of sustaining their families (*Momsen, Women and Change in the Caribbean*; “Development & Gender Divisions”). Rhoda Reddock has also pushed for greater exploration of global economic restructuring, structural adjustment policies in the region and their relationship to growing sources of tensions for women in the Caribbean. On the surface, the juxtaposition of economic autonomy with what can be perceived as cultural structuralism calls for a deeper interrogation of the structures and discourses that shape the everyday idiosyncrasies of women and mothers in the Caribbean. On a deeper level, these contradictions raise important lines of questioning related to the paradoxical nature of their social realities and the ambivalent nature of their experiences.

This is particularly the case for women within the entrepreneurial sphere. In fact, research within this area shows that Caribbean women (broadly speaking) continue to experience major barriers when they enter the labour market. In many cases, the main restraints have been those of gender discrimination, particularly concerning wage differentials (Barriteau, *Women Entrepreneurs and Economic Marginality*), the centrality of child birth and childrearing for women (Massiah; Reddock; Hart; Mohammed and Perkins; Lynch), and the lack of access to specific resources (training, finance, and networks) (Ferdinand; Reddock and Bobb-Smith; ACS). Victoria Gonzalez’s interrogation of the realm of female familial responsibility also brings into disrepute the expectation that access to resources empowers women to carry out their maternal duties. Other Caribbean scholars have alluded to the important roles of cultural stereotypes and expectations on the choices that they make in relations to work and family (Mohammed and Perkins; Barriteau, *Women Entrepreneurs and Economic Marginality*; Momsen, “The Double Paradox,” *Women and Gender Divisions of Labour*; Bailey and Rickett; Reddock and Bobb-Smith).

A major takeaway from these studies is that of how these stereotypes and expectations negatively shape the ability of women and mothers to meet the demands of work and family (Barriteau, *Women Entrepreneurs and Economic Marginality*; Karides; Verrest). The major contention is that moral expectations of mothering and gender relations remain central to their work-family practices, conflicts, and struggles located therein. It is against such findings that Eudene Barriteau has highlighted the oppressive nature and weight of gender constructions and relations that negatively impact the type and

intensity of work/family conflict that women confront (“Women Entrepreneurs”). It is also for this reason that Momsen (“The Double Paradox”) has contended that while Caribbean women exert a high level of economic autonomy, they remain overburdened. Barriteau has also addressed the gendered construction of Caribbean women and the extent to which these create dual pretensions of inclusion and exclusion (“Women Entrepreneurs” 221). In the case of women entrepreneurs, she asserts, for instance, that the “epistemological frame insists on perceiving and interpreting women’s entrepreneurial activities through androcentric, patriarchal lens, and results in continued unwillingness by research officials to examine the factors, goals, and values that women decide are meaningful to informing their economic activity” (Barriteau, “Women Entrepreneurs” 231).

This research highlights the extent to which women’s access to material and psychological resources are structured, embodied and contested within their lived realities. In my own research, I have attempted to make visible the nexus between the situational, moral, and cultural complexities for Afro-Caribbean mothers involved within the entrepreneurial sphere, the nuanced ways in which these intricacies are structured by varying axes or systems of power (race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality, for instance), and the specific choices that are made in relation to coping with the precarious nature of their work-life interface. I see these as important yet unfinished research agendas related to the work-family realities for Black Afro-Caribbean women and mothers.

Practice of Resistance; Impetus for Change

In *Matricentric Feminism*, O’Reilly outlines the need for political movements that actively seek to confront or challenge the burdens that motherhood as an institution create for mothers. This governing principle presents a significant imperative for research that centres the circumstances and experiences of mothers. In fact, there is a great need to consider how “mothering may be a site of personal agency and social change” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 20). Using the work of Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard, O’Reilly shows the importance of critical consciousness, agentic expressions (whether spoken or enacted), and the politicization of the personal. As an agenda, O’Reilly asserts that “the overarching aim of empowered mothering is to confer to mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy-activism that are denied to them in patriarchal motherhood” (*Matricentric Feminism* 69). Since self-definition and determination emerge as central processes within agentic expressions and survival of Black women, research should underscore the socially constituted categorizations of women (those of race, class, and gender, just to name a few) that reaffirm the power that is

embedded within the Black experience; the patterns of epistemic violence that make invisible alternative ways of knowing or doing; and the ways in which Black women have challenged the status quo within their practices of mothering. Extending this focus to assessments of matrifocal research in the Caribbean requires asking questions related to how mothers challenge normative notions of mothering to develop systems and practices that sustain their children and themselves. These points of examination remain as critical starting points for naming while confronting the systems of oppressions that women continually confront.

An important aspect of demystifying the stereotypical and dysfunctional representations of Black Caribbean mothers is identifying and making sense of the alternative practices of mothering within the Caribbean. One such way in which Caribbean feminists have addressed this is through their attention to the value and significance of child shifting or shared mothering. In “The Double Paradox,” Momsen called for contextualization and theorization that center the patriarchal nature of Caribbean societies and the ways in which these situate and provide meaning to notions of the family. As a way of counter-storying the realities of Black mothers, Momsen underscored the relative function and significance of shared mothering practices, which involve the use of grandparents and other relatives as a way of mitigating the strains of working within or across work and family boundaries. Other scholars also speak to the importance of these networks or mechanisms of support for the sustainability and social mobility of Afro-Caribbean mothers and women (Clarke; Rodman; Powell; Barrow, *Families in the Caribbean; Caribbean Childhoods*).

These maternal strategies were interpreted as an adaptive response to the particular set of circumstances that existed within these territories—an analysis that dismisses ethnocentric presentations of the Black family (Staples; Barrow, *Families in the Caribbean*). From as early as 1972, Robert Staples reminds us of the need to see female-dominated family structures as “very functional units which can maintain the stability of the social system” and to contextualize the many challenges or problems faced by female-headed black families (163). Such renaming serves as an important foundation for addressing the needs and concerns of Black women in the Caribbean. To some extent, this advocacy for the self-representation of Black mothers exists within the wider body of scholarship on families in the Caribbean. For instance, in *Families in the Caribbean*, Barrow also called for a reconceptualization of matrifocality:

The proposal is to wipe the slate completely clean of persistent ethnocentrism and return to the fundamental questions of defining kinship within the Caribbean cultural context. Such an approach is intended to avoid the trap of synchronic economic reductionism and should therefore respond to the above criticisms by introducing

cultural comparisons across race and class and by reinstating kinship ideology and history. (82)

A matricentric concept is needed that takes into consideration the complexities, flexibilities, pluralities, and ambiguities embedded within the realities and experiences of Afro-Caribbean women. On a deeper level, such critiques also problematize the ideological and historical underpinnings of early anthropological research on the family and the idealization of the co-resident and stable family as a cultural reference point to situate and reconfigure the Afro-Caribbean lower-class families. However, some caution is needed in the applicability of a matricentric lens. In thinking through notions of matricentric mothering, the challenge is for theorizations that unmask the colonial constructions of identity related to family and sexuality in order move beyond the ideological strata associated with matrifocality. If successful, this would serve as a crucial way of numbing the rigidity knowledge on and for Black mothers as well as function as an important way of advancing critical scholarship, praxes, and activism, which necessary for the empowerment of Black mothers.

Another contribution is that of Carla Freeman's presentation of issues related to the upward mobility of matrifocality. Specifically, she speaks to the emergence of new ideals of marriage and of matrifocality, which extend beyond lower-class Afro-Caribbean women to include white middle-class women. Using this as a starting point, she invites new examinations and treatment of matrifocality that centre some of the structural and relational changes within the family that continue to unfold under the neoliberal regime. Freeman contends therefore that as part of the neoliberal thrust towards entrepreneurialism, "the reconfiguration of domestic life, relationships, and identities has given matrifocality a different footing, broadening its purview for women in this group" (102). Here, upward mobility is presented as an "expansion of a particular kind of strong, caring femininity that stands at the economic and emotional center of social life" (102). Matrifocality is used in this sense to capture a "resilient gendered cultural model [that] emphasizes a woman centered kinship and social network ... as a template for a robust, flexible, independent femininity not only for the poor ... but for all women, even those imagined to be staunchest gatekeepers of respectability" (103). In this sense, matrifocality also emerges as an alternative yet conscious form of femininity and resistance among middle-class White women. These developments or observations redefine not only white femininity within the Caribbean context but also how matrifocality is both theorized to reflect "gendered sensibilities, feelings, and practices" (129). Such observations and writings, therefore, push for new lines of social inquiry that transcend race, ethnicity, and class boundaries and move toward storying the intra and inter-categorical struggles and strengths of matrifocal families within the Caribbean.

Conclusion

Although the mushrooming of Caribbean research on the Afro-Caribbean family has opened some critical conversations and spaces for confronting social inequalities and injustices of Black mothers, many areas of scholarship and activism await further advancement. The potential here is for creating a collective body of scholarship in the Caribbean centring the lived realities and narratives of Black mothers. Given the decades of misrepresentation and disempowerment of Black mothers within existing research, important questions still linger: what are the ideological, discursive, and spatial peculiarities that underpin existing constructions of Caribbean women? (ii); how have Black women attempted to negotiate or resist these constructions? (iii); and how do we deconstruct the historical “othering” of Black motherhood while engaging in new theorizations on and activism for black mothers?

The call is for epistemological and ontological frameworks on and for Black mothers in the Caribbean that move beyond oppressive and neo-colonial representations and that seek to underscore the relative weight and impacts of existing relations of power on the lives of these women across various geo-spatial contexts, socio-economic, or cultural backgrounds. On one level, the promise of matricentric research is for a theoretical and methodological shift that makes visible epistemic forms of violence levied against Black mothers and the multiple ways in which these have both othered and punished the Black body. On another level, the possibilities are also for countering the narratives and cultural caricatures that suppressed both the thinking and practices of Black mothers. Such scholarship opens possibilities for deconstructing while politicizing the activities of Black Caribbean mothers, while centering how they make sense of their subjectivities, sensitivities, and practices as mothers across time and context.

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A Gun Took My Child

The death of a child to gun violence is a particularly devastating loss. The reactions of mothers to this loss, described here, indicate how their experience engenders extreme distress and produces symptoms of psychological trauma. The impact of child loss is intensified for mothers due to the guilt that many feel for having failed to protect their child. Ways of healing from this trauma and the usefulness of mother-centred approaches to recovery are described, and they demonstrate that matricentric feminism is especially valuable in helping mothers move forward in their lives. Although these healing practices do not cite matricentric feminism as their source, it is clear from the descriptions of healing presented by the mothers here that they use matrifocal narratives for healing purposes; they use them as a space to speak about not only the loss of their child but also the loss of identity as competent mothers as well as their despair over never seeing their child move into the future. Matricentric feminism, therefore, can contribute a great deal to understanding and supporting mothers as they struggle to heal.

Introduction

There is no loss more devastating than the death of a child. This article, therefore, will focus on mothers who have lost a child, specifically to gun violence. It will address the enormity of the grief mothers experience at the death of a child and the ways they come together to try to move toward healing. It begins by referencing Sara Ruddick's insight that the preservation of the lives of children is the primary mandate given to mothers and that failure to meet this mandate is a source of profound trauma for all family members, but most significantly for mothers who often hold themselves responsible for this perceived failure to protect. Using both the descriptions of mothers who have lost their children to guns and the work of Judith Herman, particularly her classic text *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), I will attempt to

capture the nature of the psychological pain mothers experience in the wake of the catastrophic loss of a child and some of the ways of healing, often directed by the mother of the gun victims themselves. In analyzing their work to heal, it becomes clear that these mothers have developed ways of living with their grief that mirror the essential qualities of matricentric feminism. In working to recover, each mother “positions their needs and concerns as a starting point” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 3) and “foregrounds maternal power, and confers value to mothering” (O’Reilly, “Feminist Mothering” 802).

In preparing this piece, I was confronted with multiple pathways of entry into this study. I began by re-reading Sara Ruddick’s important treatise, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, as well as Herman’s book mentioned above, and some of my own writing on the experience of loss for mothers. I also revisited the work of Andrea O’Reilly on matricentric feminism to bring into focus how mothers themselves, more than any other group struggling to recover from child loss, and find ways to resonate with the enormity of the pain that the loss of a child engenders. As this article demonstrates, mothers stress the view that the healing they can offer one another comes from their shared understanding of mothering as a profound and transformative experience unlike any other role women perform. Though not using the term matricentric feminism, the mothers described here clearly attribute their healing connection to one another to the shared and unique experience of birthing and raising children. Sybrina Fulton, for example, the mother of-seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, shot to death while simply walking through a neighborhood in Sanford, Florida on 26 February 2012 tells us, “who else knows what a bereft mom needs” but another grieving mother (“About”). In a very general sense, O’Reilly tells us that matricentric feminism asks the question what do mothers need not only to survive but also to thrive, and when could this question be more relevant than with a mother who has faced the death of her child?

Impact of Child Loss

In reading Ruddick, I have always been struck by her insights about the perils that come at the moment a child is conceived. “Birth” Ruddick told us, “is a beginning whose end and shape can neither be predicted nor controlled. Since the safety of bodies, mortal and susceptible to damage, can never be secured and since humans grow vicariously, but always in need of help, to give birth is to commit oneself to protecting the unprotectable and nurturing the unpredictable” (209). To my mind then, mothering is a leap into a vast unknown and into the heart of confusion, joy, exhaustion, and potential loss. For a number of years after immersing myself in Ruddick’s work, I considered elements of child loss but primarily the ordinary losses in life—children

growing and changing in ways hard to understand, the loss of some of our own freedom with the many hours we devoted to our children, and the lack of clarity on how to mother well given the contradictory demands of the role. I always loved this humorous and brilliant comment by Ruddick:

Children are not so fragile as goldfish seemed to me, nor will they flourish if they are perpetually watched and guarded. On the other hand, they are not like roaches and weeds, hardy survivors regardless of what is done to them. A mother can never stop looking, but she must not look too much. Attentiveness to a creature who perseveres in its own being and at the same time is perpetually at risk is particularly demanding. (71)

In writing this piece, however, I became overwhelmed with the fact that it was focused not on ordinary loss but on extraordinary loss, the loss of life. And while it is probably true that all of us live with some degree of fear that our child's life will be lost, this fear is kept in the background of our consciousness, until it is not. And as I contemplated the deep pain associated with the death of a child, a vivid memory of one of my daughters playing the role of a bereaved mother in Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1933) jumped into my mind, and I began to recall the powerful lines of the play as if I were actually seeing it again or even living it myself. In this play, the mother who has lost her child says the following:

My son should have been here. But now my son is an armful of withered flowers. Now my son is a dark voice behind the mountains. (Act III, Scene 2)

The months pass and pain still pricks my eyes, to the very roots of my hair. (Act I, Scene 1)

There's a cry in my heart every moment. (Act II, Scene 2)

Your tears are tears from your eyes, nothing more, but mine will flow when I'm alone, from the soles of my feet, from the root, and they'll flow hot as blood. (Act III, Scene 2)

This mother's words awaken my fear, as her pain is all too common in today's very violent USA. One statistic reveals that nearly forty thousand people died in the USA from gun related incidents in 2017 (Marche), many by their own hand, and another reveals that fatalities from firearms have become one of the leading causes of death among young people, second only to car accidents (Gander). A very disturbing study, soon to be published in *The American Journal of Medicine* but already widely reported in the mainstream media shows that more children were killed by firearms in the USA in 2017 than the number of deaths reported for on-duty police officers and active duty military

(Gander). All of this is deeply troubling and hard to process. There are the high-profile mass shootings that shock us to our very core; there were over three hundred of those in the USA in 2018. One response to the terrible toll taken by mass shootings is a beautiful project named *Since Parkland*, which engaged aspiring teen-aged journalists to write short memorials for the twelve hundred children fatally shot in the year following the rampage at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. But there have also been police-inflicted killings, gang-related gun deaths, murders within domestic violence situations, random deaths from children finding and playing with loaded weapons, and suicides. The impact of all this death is devastating for all of us. But it is more so for the families of those whose lives were lost in such violent ways, especially for mothers whose grief is compounded by the guilt and shame some feel for having failed to protect their child; for having failed at Ruddick's primary mandate of preserving life.

In a deeply moving commentary, Darshell Scott, the mother of B.J. Scott—who as a bystander was killed on 11 April 2013 during an altercation that turned violent outside of Overbrook High School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—conveys this guilt, which compounds her grief. Her son was not even supposed to be at school that day. B.J. had been suspended for the day, but since Darshell's work schedule had changed and she did not want to leave him home alone, she called the school asking for permission to allow him to attend. In granting her request, B.J. died in the line of fire. Darshell says, "I beat myself up over that one" (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe).

There can be no doubt that the psychological trauma experienced by those who have lost a beloved child is profound, and when we listen to mothers describe their pain, we see all of the dimensions of trauma described by trauma experts, most notably Judith Herman, who says the following: "Traumatic events . . . undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (51).

Herman also says that "certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*" (Herman 1). And we hear this sentiment expressed often in the words of those who have endured the devastation of losing a child. Vernetta Burger—whose nineteen-year-old son, Solomon Maurice Montgomery, died from a bullet wound on 10 April 2010 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—movingly says the following:

[His was] a life that had purpose, a life that was inspiring, a life that had so much going for him . . . A life now that the only way that it can be heard or that it can be seen . . . I have to speak of his life.... how could I heal from something so devastating? . . . This pain that is so unspeakable that it can't even begin to be articulated in the English language.... How do I begin to survive life without my child who I had given birth

to, a life that I had nurtured, a life I had spent nineteen years with ... the pain never ceases. (“Monday Moms: Vernetta Burger”)

Clearly, this deep expression of love in the face of extraordinary loss confirms O’Reilly’s contention and a core principle of matricentric feminism: becoming a mother “changes forever and always who we are and who we become (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 12).

Often, the first response to such unspeakable horror is denial. To quote Herman again, “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (1), and this is what many mothers report doing, even without thinking about it. They keep calling their lost child to dinner or knocking on the empty bedroom door to call the child, who is not there, to hurry as the school bus is coming, only to remember their calls will not be answered. Several mothers report that even when they were told their child had been killed, everything in them conspired to refuse believing this information. A *Time Magazine* article, which focuses on the reactions of parents to child death by guns, reports that one mother of a child killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut remembers saying, “No, not my kid. Must be some kind of mistake.” Other mothers report “out of body experiences,” a very profound form of denial, where they see themselves floating above the scene, disconnected from the actual reality, “like a kite snapped at the string” (qtd. in. Edwards and Luscombe). Trauma experts call this form of escape from horror dissociation.

But Herman goes on to tell us that “atrocities ... refuse to be buried” (1), so reports of nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, hypervigilance, and a reliving of the intense emotions felt at hearing of the loss are so common as to be seen as normative.

Trauma also produces additional and very complex psychological reactions. Herman tells us that “traumatic events ... shatter the construction of the self” (51); we also hear this distressing refrain in the words of many mothers who have lost their child. Sandy Phillips, whose twenty-four-year-old daughter Jessica Ghawi was murdered in the movie theatre mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado, on 20 July 2012, shares the following: “Your identity has been stripped from you. You know, whether it’s mother or daddy or father or sister or brother—I no longer have that title. I no longer have that relationship.” And Nicole Hockley, the mother of Dylan Hockley who died in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School on 14 December 2012 at the age of six, echoes the same thoughts of losing not only her son but herself on that horrific day: “Every plan I had went out the window, and I just kind of lost my way in terms of where do you go from here, how do you pick yourself up and move forward, and find a new path?” (qtd. in Lemoult). Pamela Wright Young whose seventeen-year-old son Tyrone Lawson was shot outside of Chicago State University after a basketball game on 16 January 2013 (Rodriguez)

simply says: “Something in you stops when your child dies” (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe).

But not only do people who experience traumatic events lose connection with themselves, they lose connection with others. According to Herman, “traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community ... Traumatic events have primary effects ... on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (51). And this sense of a loss of connection is recounted eloquently in the stories of many of the mothers who have lost their children to gun violence. These mothers feel as though they are different from everyone else, no longer a part of normal motherhood even when they have other children. Annika Dworet, whose seventeen-year-old-son Nicholas was shot down at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on 14 February 2018, says that even family and friends “can never fully, fully understand” (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe), and Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, builds on this by saying “even though people have been shot and killed before, you do feel like you are the only one going through that pain” (qtd. in Welch). Queen Brown, the mother of Eviton Brown, age twenty-four and killed in Miami, Florida, in 2006, elaborates on this loss of community: “My son was killed in October. I tried to do dinner with family and friends in November but I cried through the entire thing ... And then I learned I was not invited to Christmas dinner because I made people uncomfortable.... We are grieving moms. We represent sadness—no one wants to be around us” (qtd. in Welch). Without access to a community of mothers who embrace a mother-centred mentality, which is the centrepiece of matricentric feminism, Queen Brown was unsupported in her profound loss, a factor which compounded her feelings of devastation.

Mothers also speak, as Herman does, of the deaths of their children resulting in a loss of meaning—an existential crisis. Nicole Hockley, Dylan’s mom, tells us that “People don’t think about all the ways people’s lives are forever transformed.... There’s this huge ripple effect of violence and anger and dysfunction.” And Sandy Phillips, Jessica’s mom, says that “once the vigils are over and the media is gone, that’s when things get really bad—the world moves on and you don’t. It’s a pain you can’t outrun” (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe).

Healing

In the face of this devastation, is it possible for meaning and purpose to be restored? Does any mother recover? Is there a pathway back from this kind of senseless and violent death? The answer to these questions is both yes and no. The pain is always there—the anniversaries of the day, birthdays, and holidays

are challenging, of course—but we do see many mothers emerging from the darkness. Trauma experts suggest that healing is possible, but the work to achieve it is hard. To quote Richard Mollica, another trauma expert, what must happen is that “the new story that emerges is no longer a story about powerlessness—about losing the world” but rather “becomes a story ... of survival and recovery” (312).

Herman suggests that three complex processes are paramount to insure success in this journey—namely, restoring a sense of safety, engaging in deep mourning in the presence of supportive others, and reconnecting with the outside world to create a new future. But to feel safe, the first step in the healing process is truly difficult in the USA—where mass shootings continue to occur on nearly a daily basis, where little progress is made to enact common-sense gun laws, and where police shoot first before assessing the actual danger they face. In a recent article in *The Guardian* the point was made that “a mass shooting is no longer a once-in-a-lifetime event in the U.S.,” as at least thirty people attacked in a mass shooting at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, on 8 November 2018 were also survivors of the mass shooting on 1 October 2017 at a concert in Las Vegas, Nevada, where fifty-eight people were killed and 851 injured. (Marche). I would suggest that perhaps the terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019 contributed to the three suicides—two young survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and one the parent of a child murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School—which all occurred only days after the New Zealand massacre. If respite from massive gun violence cannot be found in New Zealand, is anyplace safe? Without a sense that safety is indeed possible, healing and the will to continue on in life can be lost by many survivors or the family members of those lost.

Amazingly, however, many grieving mothers who know that safety will never be assured not even for their other children somehow do find ways to move forwards despite the enormity of their grief. Research suggests that the sharing of their devastation with others who have faced the same pain is one of the ways to find the strength to become present to the depths of their grief and to begin the healing journey. To enter this process of openly sharing grief is an incredible act of courage because as one mother says, “who wants to go someplace when you are going to be on the operating table. You have to realize that it hurts, and then you have to address the hurt” (qtd. in Welch). Elsewhere, I have written extensively about why this process leads to healing through using the relational-cultural theory, which has been articulated in the work of Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues. Briefly, this theory explains that by entering spaces where our vulnerability is supported, it becomes possible to begin the process of reawakening hope and transforming the meaning of our loss. Coming together to mourn and to bear witness to loss and atrocity

accomplishes another important goal: it allows grieving mothers to keep connected with the child they have lost (Edmonds).

Dr. Dorothy Johnson-Speight—the mother of Khaaliq Johnson, shot in a dispute over a parking space on 6 December 2001 at the age of twenty-four in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—learned to express her grief first in psychotherapy and then by creating a space for other mothers to come together to grieve and to tell the stories of their children’s lives, not just their deaths. Through Mothers in Charge, an organization she founded, she created two innovative programs:

“We Remember Them,” a moving tribute to each lost child set to music, accompanied by the reading of a poem, and available on the website www.mothersincharge.org; and “Monday Moms,” accessible on the same website, where each Monday a different mother shares her journey of healing. Johnson-Speight’s own story is presented in an interview on the website:

Where I am today, I have not always been here. You know, it was a process, a long journey and initially I think I was trying to self-destruct—self medicating, finding anything I could to avoid the pain and loss of my son, but at some point I knew I had to do it another way. One, for him, and two, for myself. Khaaliq was a great guy and my only son and at some point I knew I had to live for him. I couldn’t let the person who took Khaaliq’s life take my life too... [But] I couldn’t do it by myself. (“In Focus”)

Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, has created a similar process she calls “the Circle of Mothers,” where grieving mothers can once again come together to share their pain, hold one another in their hearts, and honour the lives of their children. Lucy McBath—the mother of seventeen-year-old Jordan Davis, who was shot to death at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida, on 23 November 2012 because his music was too loud—has attended these circles and describes how moving it is to hold up a photo of her child and then to be invited to

say something to our child, as if he was there in the room ... to be able to verbalize what I had been holding since Jordan’s death—how I miss him, how I love him - in a room full of women who would not judge me was a gift.... So many people say, “I cannot imagine how you feel.” To be around women who know exactly how you feel is healing. (qtd. in Welch)

Sandy Phillips, mother of an Aurora shooting victim, captures the blending of mourning in the midst of attempts at healing when she describes her feelings when she sees mothers holding up photos of their now deceased children. She says seeing those pictures “takes her to her knees” (qtd. in

Marche). But from mother after mother, we hear the same mantra of healing captured by the idea that they must go on in order to pay tribute to their children and the lives they might have lived. The motto for Sybrina Fulton's organization, The Trayvon Martin Foundation, for example, is "We Are Trayvon," whereas Dorothy Johnson-Speight found the courage to complete her doctoral degree in honor of her son Khaaliq who wanted to set up a counselling practice with his mom before his death. She tells us that "speaking of the purpose of my son's life gives me a reason to go on" ("In Focus"). Vernetta Burger honors her son by saying her participation in healing processes have given her "ways of trying to speak about him in ways that keep his memory alive. Not just keeping his memory alive but ways of giving other mothers, other parents, the same hope that I have received ... that's what gives me strength, that's what gives me healing, that's what gives me endurance and perseverance on days when I don't think I want to ... get up out of the bed" ("Monday Moms: Vernetta Burger").

It is as though these mothers, somehow, knew that healing could only occur in the presence of other mothers suffering the same pain. Metaphorically, they knew, as O'Reilly articulates, that they needed "a room of their own" populated by other mothers holding a mother-centred viewpoint. They needed a place where the narratives about their losses could reveal how the pain they feel on the violent death of their children is inextricably related to their identity as mothers. They needed to make clear that the loss of their beloved child is intertwined with their own losses of hope for the future and their sadness in knowing that they would never see the full fruits of their years of extraordinary effort raising strong, beautiful, and good children. They made clear that their recovery involved reclaiming their children, celebrating the years of life they did have with them, and vowing to honour their children by not allowing the murderer to take their lives too. Being a mother intensified their loss but also energized their vow to work to recover. What these mothers affirm is that a space for matrifocal narratives, so central to matricentric feminism, is what empowered their healing (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*).

What is remarkable is that not only have many mothers of gun victims come together to heal through communal rituals of mourning and transformation, but many have also somehow found the courage to go beyond their personal struggles to reconnect with the broader society and to work for change in very public ways. Herman terms this "finding a survivor mission" and suggests that in doing so, survivors "discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action." She goes on to say that "while there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others" (207). Sybrina Fulton echoes this same idea when she describes that a central theme of her work is "to gain fellowship toward personal restoration and ultimately community building."

She advises others to “find what best way to serve your community” and “don’t let your tragedy define you” (qtd. in Welch). Sandy and Lonnie Phillips, through their travels to embrace the families of other gun victims, hope to give survivors something of a toolkit on how to make it through the oncoming days, weeks, and months in the public eye. Their organization, Survivors Empowered has as its mission statement the words “We are your soft spot to land after your life has been forever changed by gun violence.” Dorothy Johnson-Speight also works on projects to reduce violence both in the schools and in the community at large while reaching out to those in prison who have committed violence. Samaria Rice, mother of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice—who was killed on 22 November 2014 by police while holding a toy gun on a playground in Cleveland, Ohio—is working to open The Tamir Rice Afrocentric Cultural Center to honour her son’s life and to provide a safe space for neighborhood children to create art (Wise). Reporting for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Rachel Dissell characterizes Samaria’s dream for the centre in this way: Samaria “envisions a warm and energetic space filled with children. They are painting and drawing with pastels. They are beating African drums and bowing violins. They are performing plays they created in an intimate theatre.” A very high profile and successful organization, Sandy Hook Promise, was founded by Dylan Hockley’s mother Nicole and other Sandy Hook parents only months after the horrific school shooting. Like many mothers described here, Nicole wants to honour her son’s life rather than focusing on his death and currently serves as the managing director of this organization. Sandy Hook Promise is dedicated to preventing gun violence through a variety of innovative “Know the Signs” programs that focus on identifying isolated or struggling children, creating inclusive and antibullying classrooms, and educating children and parents on common sense gun safety and mental health issues.

Other mothers have headed into the political arena. Lucy McBath, mother of Jordan Davis, recently won a seat in the House of Representatives from Georgia (Cobb), and Lesley McSpadden, the mother of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown who was killed on 9 August 2014 by police in Ferguson, Missouri, recently lost her bid for a seat on the City Council of Ferguson (Eligon). Several mothers have also won prestigious honours. Sybrina Fulton was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2018 (Ekpo), and Nicole Hockley was named one of *People Magazine’s* “25 Women Changing the World in 2016” (McNeil); Hockley, also recently received the FBI Director’s Community Leadership Award for her years of dedication to the work of Sandy Hook Promise (NBC Connecticut). In learning of these movements towards empowerment and social reform, my sense is that these mothers embody the dimensions of character O’Reilly describes as unique to those embracing a matricentric feminism—namely, the

qualities of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*). They are clearly practicing mothering from a matricentric feminist position, as their way of being is now “explicitly and profoundly political and social” (O'Reilly, “Feminist Mothering” 802).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I dedicate this article to mothers everywhere who have lost their children to violence. I honour their pain and hope to provide some solace while being inspired by their strength, honest insights, and activism. Once again, it is mothers who teach us the meaning of resilience, courage, the impact of connection, and the depth and power of motherlove. It is my hope that all of us committed to matricentric feminism will do all we can to provide trauma-informed and mother-centred support for mothers who suffer and that each of us will find ways to mitigate the horrors of gun violence.

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Contributor Notes

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Maya Bhavé's PhD (Loyola University, Chicago) focused on Ethiopian immigrant women. After teaching sociology at North Park University for ten years, she now lives in Vermont researching life, work, and family balance, gender identity among female soccer players, and motherhood and child loss. She teaches as an adjunct professor at St. Michael's College and lives with her husband and two sons near Burlington.

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Victoria Brookman is a scholar of English and creative writing. She holds a BA (Hons) in English from the University of Sydney and a Master of Research from Macquarie University. She is a novelist, reviewer, and activist. Her research interests include mothering, feminist discourse, women's literature, Australian literature, democracy, and socialism.

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Regina Edmonds, Ph.D. is a licensed, clinical psychologist and professor emerita of psychology at Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. She directed the Women's Studies Program there for nearly a decade, adding an international focus to its curriculum. Her research focuses on the persistence of mother-blame within psychological theory, the qualities that characterize successful mother-daughter relationships, the treatment of trauma-based disorders in women, and the challenges migrating mothers face.

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Allegra Holmes's practice has played a central role in rejoining the parts of herself that patriarchy aims to keep divided. She actively rejects the notion that the roles of mother and artist are mutually exclusive, and she has developed her art making practice as one that is intrinsically linked with the daily work of raising her children.

Annika Ljung-Baruth is a senior lecturer in English and gender, sexuality and women's studies at the University of Vermont. She specializes in twentieth-century literature and phenomenology, women in literature, and feminist theory and philosophy. Her current research areas include ecofeminism and the development of feminism in Scandinavia.

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Kathy Mantas, associate professor of education at Nipissing University, is the editor of *Mothering Multiples: Complexities and Possibilities* (Demeter Press, 2016) and co-editor of *Middle Grounds: Essays on Midlife Mothering* (Demeter Press, 2018). Kathy's research interests include life-long learning, arts education, artful inquiry, creativity in teaching-learning contexts, holistic and wellness education, and motherhood and mothering studies.

Andrea O'Reilly, PhD, is professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University, founder and director of *MIRCI*, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, and publisher of Demeter Press. She is co-editor/editor of 21 books including *Feminist Perspectives on Young Mothers and Mothering* (2019). O'Reilly is author of *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, (2004), *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering* (2006), and *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (2016). She is editor of the first encyclopedia on Motherhood (2010) and co-editor of the *Routledge Companion on Motherhood* (2019). She is twice the recipient of York University's "Professor of the Year Award" for teaching excellence.

Charlotte Pence's first book of poems, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), received an INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award from Foreword Reviews. The book explores her father's chronic homelessness while simultaneously detailing the physiological changes that enabled humans to form cities, communities, and households. She is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction have recently been published in *Harvard Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Brevity*. In May of 2020, her next poetry collection titled *Code* will be published by Black Lawrence Press. She is the director of the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at University of South Alabama.

Lorinda Peterson is a PhD candidate in cultural Studies at Queen's University, Canada. Her research intersects at mothering practice and theory, trauma memory, and activist comic art. She has written and/or illustrated articles and book chapters, and exhibited her work frequently. She is the co-editor of a volume of essays on mid-life mothering with Demeter Press. She is currently working on a volume of poetry and a graphic memoir as part of the research-creation component of an art-based PhD. Her work is contextualized by forty-four years of mothering four children.

Tessa Pyles is a doctoral candidate at Bowling Green State University, where she anticipates graduating with a PhD in American culture studies in the spring of 2020. Her dissertation project approaches the topic of contemporary motherhood through the revealing lens of culturally defined "bad mothers," specifically as they are represented in popular film and television.

Muna Saleh is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Concordia University of Edmonton. She is a mother to Malak, Ahmad, and Maya. Muna's research interests include mothering and motherhood, social and curriculum studies, familial curriculum making, and research alongside children and youth and their families.

Pria Schwall-Kearney is a mother and respected folk musician who accompanies her singing with fiddle and clawhammer banjo. Specializing in the music of the Appalachians and Quebec, she has performed and taught internationally and at home in Australia, playing and teaching at most major festivals.

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Tracy Smith-Carrier is an associate professor and the graduate program coordinator in the School of Social Work at King's University College at Western University. Tracy's program of research touches upon different fields in the social policy arena, including access to social welfare benefits, social assistance receipt, caring labour, and healthcare administration.

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Lorna A. Turnbull is an activist mother of three and a professor and former dean in the Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba. Her research focuses on the work of care, its importance to carers and those who depend on the care, and how legal frameworks support or fail these important relationships. She is the author of *Double Jeopardy: Motherwork and the Law* (Sumach Press 2001).

Rebecca Vandyk is a community artist and mother of two children, with degrees in art, education, and psychology, and a master's degree in public health. She is currently disrupting primary healthcare in her regional area, seeking to create the administrative structures needed to bring the arts into public health to enrich the lives of women locally as well as further afield.

Folio

Editor's Notes

Over the last decade, thanks to the support of Andrea O'Reilly and *JMI*, I've had the pleasure of compiling Folio features that showcase the work of an individual poet who explores mothering, mother figures, and related themes. In retrospect, it's clear that I am drawn to writers who put motherhood at the very center of their poetic and who offer powerful testimonies about the complex historical forces that shape both parenting and writing. Among the voices featured since I took up my post are, in order of appearance: Rishma Dunlop, Nicole Cooley, Katherine Smith, Katherine Rhett, January O'Neil, Terri Witek, Laurie Kruk, Judith Baumel, Pimone Triplett, Beth Ann Fennelly, Lesley Wheeler, Kirun Kapur, Marilyn Taylor, Jennifer Givhan, Joelle Biele, Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, and Adrienne Kalfopoulou. Whether their poems are narrative or lyrical, formal, free, or somewhere in between, these writers share a kinship: a transformative vision that crosses communities to reveal links between our domestic and civic lives. It's been an honor to introduce the poems of some of today's most compelling writers to their readers of *JMI*.

For this final *Folio*, I'm delighted to feature Charlotte Pence.

Charlotte Pence's first book of poems, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), received an INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award from *Foreword Reviews*. The book explores her father's chronic homelessness while simultaneously detailing the physiological changes that enabled humans to form cities, communities, and households. She is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction have recently been published in *Harvard Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Brevity*. In May of 2020, her next book of poetry, *Code*, will be published by Black Lawrence Press. She is the director of the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at University of South Alabama.

Pence's verse is admired for its seamless fusion of lyric storytelling and scientific knowledge. Poet Traci Brimhall has described her work as "fierce and tender...mysterious and wise." Reflecting on this powerful tension that lies at the heart of *Many Small Fires* for Sundress Publications, Tawnysha Greene praised Pence's "stunning achievement describing the complexities of relationships and its long-term effects," noting her attention to "the beauty of endurance and survival." In this selection, readers will encounter a body of verse that displays the poet's profound gifts of observation.

Pence's poems are deeply grounded in domestic settings that, keenly observed, open onto broader vistas. In "The Weight of the Sun," the poet reflects on her newborn child's early morning feeding sessions. In the pre-dawn light, the poet's awareness of her maternal role expands from the room where she sits, "tilting/the rocking chair back and forth/with my toes," to encompass the mysteries of the natural and human-made worlds. The neighborhood is temporarily at rest, "everyone on this block wishing for sleep,/ for peace, for the coming day to be better," yet the poet's meditations bring contact with larger mysteries, from "the grass/growing a thousandth of an inch every/fifteen minutes" to this reminder:

...we all began in dark and stars,
 that the carbon, nitrogen and oxygen
 in our bodies was created 4.5 billion
 years ago in another generation of stars,

In her meditation, the poet discovers the fortitude threaded throughout our daily lives, everyone waking to some resolution that propels a new day. The "morning feed" genre is a familiar one, and Pence's poem shares an affinity with powerful predecessors such as Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick" or Eavan Boland's "Night Feed." Her exploration of the scientific foundations of the cosmos, however, further underscores the majesty of creation and offers adds a powerful new dimension to this esteemed tradition. "Love Between Parents" offers a witty commentary on the postpartum body and the challenges it places on erotic life. The emotional and physical toll of parenting leaves the speaker feeling that the couples' bodies have transformed awkwardly, to become "a rented text weary with underlines" even as desire remains in "[M]emories of cravings—sleet-shined and treacherous."

Pence is equally persuasive in her exploration of the linkage between the maternal body and the body politic. In "Sometimes, When a Child Smiles," the sight of a child's mouth, "open wide and greedy," leads Pence to reflect on a visit to an orphanage in Ecuador, describing herself as a passing tourist "distancing myself/with one-armed hugs and toy store gifts." As she recalls an encounter with six-year-old girls who hid an abandoned baby in a garden, she

questions the ethics of storytelling. In disclosing the recollected scene, Pence documents actions that transformed her awareness, making a child's smile the permanent reminder that she "could not do what//those girls did: accept a secret without fearing it;/spit into a child's mouth and know this to be love."

In the new poem, "Mourning Chicago," Pence confronts the horrors of police brutality and the legacy of racial segregation in the United States through the lens of a mother's struggle to explain the morning's news to her five year-old child. Pausing over her breakfast, the child wonders, "*Cops shot two kids?/Will they shoot me?*" As the speaker struggles to formulate an answer, she is "relieved and sickened" at the relief she feels: as a white mother, she knows her white child is likely to be safe. Throughout the ages, parents have always struggled to balance honesty with the need to provide child-appropriate replies. Pence's achievement here is to question the need for balance. She pays particular attention to the complicities of privilege and the need to shape the next generation's social conscience. Her attention to the dialogue—and the tension—that unfolds between husband, wife, and child are powerfully evoked. In her hands, familiar domestic tableaux become a provocative space for cultural critique.

In an online interview for *North American Review*, Pence describes her strategy of "not balancing everything and accepting that as one way to negotiate the addition of being a parent" while finding solutions to "honor writing." More recent comments offer a lively glimpse into her artistic process; for their power and urgency, I include them below.

—Jane Satterfield, July 2019

Independence at the Root

"Motherhood. As joyous as it can be, I have found it difficult terrain for myself as a working mother and feminist. Responding to the physical needs of my body and my baby meant so much of my independence had to be reevaluated. Suddenly, I needed people in a way I didn't need them before. It was a place of vulnerability, and that scared me. This idea is at the center of the lyrical essay/poem "How to Measure Distance" in which the speaker is uncomfortable with how much she is suddenly depending on her husband.

Yet independence is at the root of mothering, too; we are raising our children to ultimately be independent of us and useful to the world. I remember after thirty-six hours of labor, the sudden weight of something light and hot placed on my chest. As I looked into my daughter's face for the first time, I expected to feel simply love. But instead, I felt surprise. My first thought was: *You are your own person. And one day you will leave.* In the moment, I found it a confusing realization. But now I understand. Since my daughter had literally come from my body, I had the mistaken impression that she would be a

miniature me. Yet her face was not my face, her body not my body. And her path will not be my path. As mothers, as educators, as writers such is always the goal: to see each person independently of our preconceptions. To learn who that person is, who she might become, and at the same time, who I am and might become, is intertwining the honor and responsibility of motherhood.

—Charlotte Pence

Charlotte Pence

Charlotte Pence's first book of poems, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), received an INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award from Foreword Reviews. The book explores her father's chronic homelessness while simultaneously detailing the physiological changes that enabled humans to form cities, communities, and households. She is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction have recently been published in *Harvard Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Brevity*. In May of 2020, her next poetry collection titled *Code* will be published by Black Lawrence Press. She is the director of the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at University of South Alabama.

CHARLOTTE PENCE

The Weight of the Sun

I like the 4 a.m. feedings best, tilting
the rocking chair back and forth
with my toes, observing how the invisible

lines of our dark yard rest against
the lines of other yards—of other lives.
Before the sun rises, this small wedge

of the world momentarily in agreement:
everyone on this block wishing for sleep,
for peace, for the coming day to be better

than the last. I like thinking how the grass
growing a thousandth of an inch every
fifteen minutes is celebrating something

as I celebrate solving small mysteries
like learning a red fox is the one who
flattens the path through the lawn.

Mainly I like pretending I am the only one
awake, the only one seeing the world
at this instant. The navy sky, thick as blood,

is my blood, as the fracture of stars, bright
as raw bone, is my bone. I like being
reminded that we all began in dark and stars,

CHARLOTTE PENCE

that the carbon, nitrogen and oxygen
in our bodies was created 4.5 billion
years ago in another generation of stars,

that somehow if we could weigh the sun,
all rising 418 nonillion pounds of it,
we'd see that strength is never needed

to begin the day. No, it's something else.
Behind every square of light flipped on,
someone is standing or slouching,

stretching or sighing, covering
or uncovering her face. Someone
is thinking, *Today, I will I will I will...*

First Appeared in *Guernica*

CHARLOTTE PENCE

Love Between Parents

Once I gulped sex, unsure of its bounds.
 Now I read how scientists are unsure
 of computers' boundaries.

Outside, winter hardens into March.
 Blood-dot head of the woodpecker
 needles.

 The essay theorizes
 Computers' limits are
 the mind's
 limits.

My theory admits sex after a child
 is weird.

 Our bodies have become
 a rented text weary with underlines.

Love is a square of white
 where once hung a picture.

Memories of cravings—
 sleet-shined and treacherous as winter roads.

We are
 too close. Double pane windows dull
 the brighter the sun shines.

CHARLOTTE PENCE

When I see my love
at a distance,

leaving a drugstore,

sliding glass doors stretching, too bright day,
long strides,

I almost don't recognize him,

then do—that feeling
like a rush and being rushed,
one screen to next.

Always I wonder where is the end?

So, I turn to what is in front of me:
the window, dimpled with ghosts of rain.

First Appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*

CHARLOTTE PENCE

I'm Thinking Again of That Lone Boxer

practicing in Baltimore's Herring Run Park,
floating over the fogged field. City gridlock stood
beside him as he slipped and bobbed, countered
and angled, practicing the art of when to back

down, when to dodge, when to defend.
I'd just been thinking about all I'm losing
in this thing called motherhood
when he delivered a left hook that could've spun

that string of blue stars around anyone's head.
I refuse to say he was a dancer, for he was
what he always was: a man fighting in an empty
field against himself. Yet as long as I remember

that taut curve of back ready to uncoil a punch,
bow of head ready to receive a blow, how
can I not believe in the possibility of peace?

First Appeared in *Rattle*

Sometimes, When a Child Smiles

mouth open wide and greedy, even the molars exposed,
it reminds me of a single afternoon when I'm passing

through an orphanage in Ecuador, distancing myself
with one-armed hugs and toy store gifts. I tour

cafeteria-sized bedrooms guarded by bougainvilleas
scratching at windows, frowning palms standing shoulder

to shoulder. Outside the girls' windows, under the garden's
uncut hair rested a secret everyone knew and no one believed.

And I know the rules: I should not repeat it, should resist
telling a story about orphans, yet how can I ignore it when

the sun angles from the west at five o'clock in May, when
light's neither new nor old, color of freshly-squeezed lemons,

and it slices across a child's face at that silent moment
between a grin and laughter when the open smile reminds me

of the girl who led me through the garden to where she found
the baby. But that's too common for a story. It is this:

for two months, the six-year-olds hid the newborn.
They snuck cartons of milk under their navy cardigans

and let the baby suckle off their fingertips. One girl chewed
her food and spit it inside the baby's mouth like she'd seen

stray dogs feed their pups. They named her Caramela,
a candy they wanted, and made her so content, the nuns

never heard her cry. Sometimes, when a child smiles,
I have to look away, for I know I could not do what

those girls did: accept a secret without fearing it;
spit into a child's mouth and know this to be love.

First Appeared in *Spoon River Review*

How to Measure Distance*

I. *Only Use Light Years When Talking to the General Public*

or to squirrels testing spring between two branches. Or to a new mother saddened by thoughts of earth and its death; sun's death; her death. She watches her husband leave the room for a burp cloth, wonders, could she do it without him? What's the measurement of distance between two people growing too close, too quickly?

II. *The Measures We Use Depend on What We Are Measuring*

Distance between parents? Hills? Rogue comets? Within our solar system, distance is measured in Astronomical Units. Or "A.U.," an abbreviation that sounds similar to the "ow" of a toe stub. Or similar to the sound of a mother teaching the beginning of all sound. "Ah, eh, ee, oo, uu." Watch her mouth widen, purr, and close. This is the measurement for what we call breath.

III. *For Most Everything Else—Stars, Galaxies, Etc...—the Distance Unit Is the Parsec (pc). This Is a Convenient Unit*

for gathering groceries, grains in silos, gasses we cannot package and discount.

*This is convenient, too, when measuring
stars' distances by triangulation.
1 pc = 3.26 light years =
about the distance to the nearest star.*

An equal sign leading to an “about.”

An estimate. A close enough.

Close enough feels safer than being wrong.
Or exact. “Close enough,” we say of that
asteroid skimming past our atmosphere’s skin.
“Close enough,” we say when he returns
with a guest towel.

IV. For Distances Within our Galaxy or Other Galaxies, It Is Kiloparsecs

She is unsure what fatherhood will do
to him. Accurate measurements require
one to know where one stands, where one belongs,
where one is going. Rub the toe
of the blue shoe into the dust. See how
the dust is not a bit bluer. The shoe,
a bit browner. Distance = a thing
between and against.

V. *The Exception to These Units Is When One Is Studying a Smaller Object*

Father to mother to early zygote.
Branch to squirrel to tail-twitch and release.
Knee to toe to spring mud too soft to flake.
No units for these.

VI. *One Might Say, "Its Radius Is 5 Solar Radii", Meaning It Is 5 Times the Size of Our Sun*

Her fear is five times the size of sun, five
times the hours of sleep or lack thereof.
Five times the huddle of father, mother,
child. Five times the energy created
for one nap as opposed to the length
of that nap, that leap.

VII. *She Wants Answers*

but is realizing that won't happen.
She fears the truth that nothing stays the same.
Rashes fade, yet skin will prickle again.
Cries will quiet, yet the quiet will cry.
The man will leave, yet the same man will leave
again. That's why eyes are bloodshot, why she
answers questions as if she doesn't care.
All answers are "almost" or "about"—
everything moving. And this thing called light
years is a distance she can't comprehend.
Yet somewhere she squirms at one forever-
changing end of it.

First Appeared in *Harvard Review*

CHARLOTTE PENCE

Nightly Call to My Daughter While Travelling

Last night the full moon was like anything lost, then found: a gasp, a flash once hidden in the dark. “There’s a full moon tonight,” I tell my daughter over the phone. “Here too!” she shrieks. Oh, that shriek. How wonderful it is not to understand this world. Today, I go on hating the President and he goes on hating just about everyone. What is it James Baldwin said about hate? “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.” Maybe I’m not so different from my daughter. I too am surprised the same moon hangs without a thread over both our houses. A rock has never been so bright. So dense. And ready to fall.

Mourning Chicago

I left the radio on too long,
and so she hears the morning news,
my five-year-old licking peanut butter off toast,
stops, holds it in midair, and asks, *Cops shot two kids?*
Will they shoot me? And I know how to answer but I don't know

how to answer. I know
that because she is white and I am
white and her dad is white, even our Toyota
is white and our dog a beer-shine blonde, the cops
will not shoot her. And I am relieved and sickened by my relief,

and so I say, I left the radio
on too long, but that is wrong, and so
I say that cops are people who make mistakes,
but I know it's not just the cops, but us too who leave
the neighborhoods, the schools, the YMCAs, us too who leave

the cops alone
to tend to what everyone wants
to pretend doesn't exist, be it poverty, paranoia,
the pointlessness of trying to improve when—Her dad
interrupts, says cops help us. I shake my head, say we cannot

lie, although I lie
all the time, and he shakes
his head, suggesting she's young
enough for this lie, and I think how differently parents
across our Untied States hold these conversation in the kitchen

everyone chewing on a different
snap, crackle, and pop as they discuss what
to do when approached by a cop. And it's not just
because we're white, but also that we have enough money
to keep the tags up, the brake lights on, the accent with no "from."

My mom taught me
to say, Sorry Officer, I'm just
running late to Grandma's house, as if life
is a woodsy trek sometimes interrupted by a furry
wolf whose teeth can be appeased by a smile and a please.

I remove the fairytale
for my daughter, say they are
another "dispenser of violence in this world,"
and my husband says, Stop this, and I say, I will when
it stops, and he says it will never stop, and so we fumble for the volume

as the radio mumbles,
our daughter now equally confused
by the two: why they killed kids and why they
will not kill her, so she asks again, *Why won't they shoot me?*
as the radio keeps up its monotone morning prattle to go down
with the coffee and cream, its morning reporting, its *Chicago, Chicago, Chicago.*

*Quote in the penultimate stanza is from Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me*

Book Reviews JMI 2019

Passage

Mila Oshin,
UK: A Maze Records Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY MAYA BHAVE

Mila Oshin's *Passage* is a remarkably unique book of poetry, in that Oshin takes on the birth experience that is so often ignored, invisibilized and obfuscated: stillbirth. Her short ten poem collection is divided into three parts: Part 1 (adagio), Part 2 (andante), and finally Part 3 which is unnamed. It is fitting that her sections are marked by musical terms and nomenclature, as she couples her written words with a CD of music connecting the prose to sound. Ironic – given the global silence of stillbirth. Ironic – given the numbers of stillbirths occurring around the globe, that people still don't know the high incidences of stillbirth, or even speak about it. Rather, stillbirth is often relegated to hushed utterances and empty stares. Oshin, however, moves this hidden world into the open. I feel honored and deeply moved to review this small book of poetry, as I too know the gripping depth of stillbirth hell, as my first son, Andrew Anant Bhave was stillborn 22 years ago on March 17, 1997.

Immediately, before I had even cracked a page or listened to the first musical entry, I was struck by her compilation title. *Passage*—the name evoked a continuum, on the one end a nod to the process of birth, the medium for life to come spilling out. On the other, Oshin seems to use the title for another message, the dark, murky experience of stillbirth that has no definitive length or depth. Rather, it is ruptured open in our lives, pouring into every crevice without any clear manual, or true ending. The title name seems to conjure an image of a long, dark corridor that reveals both life and death simultaneously.

Her poems, like grief, do not follow a standard time continuum, but rather encompass the transformed birth experience, the foggy aftermath, and finally the ethereal, complexity of mothering a child that is no longer physically present within these varied poems. With each entry, each word on the page, Oshin brings us with a clamor into the detritus of her pain and confusion. Each poem beckons the reader to come down the dark hallway, and listen carefully between the words and notes, to what she has suffered. We are asked to join her as she attempts to process this shocking news and utterly confusing aftermath of stillbirth. Take for example her vivid descriptions of the first moment she sees her daughter's eyes in her poem "Endings"—she writes, *"Why did the first sight of my new-born's eyes, black as cleaned slate remind me of endings?... to bring life, you say, will not be a crime. You don't deal in ever after."* Or her analysis of the completely foreign birth experience she calls "Into the Blue." She writes *"No crisps, no chocolate bars, no straws. ... No whispers of encouragement. No, in the end, I have no clue. What spewed you out into the blue. I was there, in the dark of night. Like a witness, just out of sight."*

Other poems, such as "Sanctum" move beyond the initial shock, to how stillbirth transforms the normative birth experience of pregnancy, anticipatory birth, and resulting motherhood. Oshin writes *"There was bliss here, once. Tenderness so tempting... I held hope here, once."* She moves on to speak about a man of steel who changed all that, and now *"What is left there now. Is a gaping wound. A crying shame. Dead Silence. Cold Comfort. No nerve to visit yet. No way out of it. This Sanctum is no longer sacred."*

She continues her deconstruction of this ongoing experience—one that has no end—in her poem "Grow," with a similar line of thinking about how her motherhood will be forever transformed. *"You'll never learn how to fly... Things are not as they seem,"* yet it is her fifth poem "Words" that I resonate with most strongly. She writes *"the English dictionary no longer suffices. I'm out of fresh metaphors. No theory applies here... the words I cannot speak are brand new to me. The truths I can recall not much good at all."*

It is in this one short poem that Oshin speaks for so many women who have experienced stillbirth. There are no proper words, and in fact, most people don't want to even talk about it. Death and grief mingle often in life, but are not supposed to happen with little children, and infants. How do we speak about a child that did not physically breathe in this world? How do we speak of a baby that in some American states still isn't given a birth certificate due to the nature of her birth? Such findings are shocking and yet often not known to most people, even in 2019.

In another poem, "The Chamber" she so astutely writes *"They say to have a child. Fills a hole. You never knew existed. They are right. Yet, no one ever talks. Of the chamber. You never felt was there. Until it was empty."*

Oshin brings incredible depth, meaning and essence to an experience that no one ever expects will actually happen to them. Her work is a must read for any woman, as it will bring clarity and an invitation into an often hidden, silent world.

Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth

Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro, eds.
Bradford: Demeter Press, 2017

REVIEWED BY SIMONE BOHN

This meticulously-produced edited volume fills an important void in the knowledge regarding Indigenous birthing and mothering in Canada (as well as the United States and New Zealand). Although the general public may be somewhat familiar with some of First Nations' scars stemming from (Canadian) white settler colonialism, very little is known about the extent to which governmental interference still shapes Indigenous pregnancy-related and child-rearing practices. The problem is that, as several chapters illustrate, this interference remains having pernicious effects on Indigenous parents, especially mothers and their children.

The contributors to this volume authoritatively demonstrate that Indigenous mothers operate within an institutional framework which almost automatically associates indigeneity with risk (and from the official perspective, *self*-inflicted risk), and assumes a hierarchy of healthcare-related expertise, in which Indigenous knowledge and practices regarding pre-natal nurturing, birth, and post-natal care are not only devalued, but deemed dangerous in most circumstances. Accordingly, the removal of expecting mothers from their communities and their placement in distant maternity wards are justified as a form of governmental "protection" of the First Nation women.

In contrast to this official narrative and making extensive use of Indigenous women's voices and their first-hand experiences, this book shows the inadequacy and absurdity of this so-called "birthing evacuation policy" as it currently stands. Not only does this practice impose enormous financial costs on Indigenous pregnant women and their families and affect negatively their mental health (as they experience severe loneliness amidst an already stressful situation). Ultimately, this governmental-imposed evacuation individualizes

an essentially collective experience, which is the arrival of a new member of an Indigenous community. To illustrate this different perspective, the chapter on the Wasauksing First Nation, for instance, shows that when a wife is expecting, her husband is seen as being pregnant as well, and the community supports the couple in a variety of ways, so that the parents-to-be can lead a stress-free and spiritually positive life as they await the arrival of their new child.

Similarly, the narratives point to abundant virtuous practices and knowledge. For example, Indigenous mothers and grandmothers have developed a set of rather elaborate prescriptions regarding diet (foods to eat and to avoid) and levels and types of physical activity which contribute to maternal health, as well as fetus and infant health. Some communities, such as the Stó:lō First Nation, for time immemorial, have made use of birthing techniques that facilitate safe births and decrease women's hardship during the delivery.

Most importantly, the book's principle message pertains to the importance, as chapter 7 expounds, of "revitalizing traditional Indigenous birth knowledge." The acceptance of the legitimacy and safety of Indigenous birthing know-how and practices is paramount to advancing a better healthcare network in which professionals from the mainstream medical establishment can work in collaboration with Indigenous midwives and nurses, and in which more Indigenous individuals can be trained to become healthcare providers in their own communities while also maintaining and making use of their traditional knowledge. Furthermore, culture-sensitive practices, such as the delivery of the placenta to the Indigenous woman giving birth so that she can return it to the ground, can be easily adopted by hospitals and wards. As this edited volume shows, culture-sensitive, community-based healthcare is more successful at modifying behaviors. As it is founded upon important cultural signifiers, this type of communal collaborative approach is better received in the community and better absorbed, and contributes to improving trust in the overall healthcare system.

Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives

Margaret F. Gibson, ed.
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014

REVIEWED BY CASSANDRA HALL AND TIRAMISU HALL

Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives, edited by Margaret F. Gibson traces how queer theorizations of kinship inform feminist motherhood/mothering studies. In weaving the frameworks and methodologies of queer theory with those of motherhood studies, contributors to this collection posit queerness as practice rather than a thing possessed or ascribed to bodies. Notably, Gibson does not offer a singular, concrete definition of queerness or queer motherhood. Rather, queering motherhood can “start where any of the central gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of ‘expected’ motherhood are challenged” (6). Gibson neither requires nor expects contributors to agree on a singular idea of “queering motherhood,” instead she embraces the complexities and ambiguities of the concept.

Chapters are grouped into three thematic sections. “Queer Conceptions: Where to Begin?” grapples with how queer embodiment and orientation shapes experiences of conception, pregnancy, birth/becoming parents, and loss. “Queering Practices, Practicing Queers” considers queer parenting/parenting queerly as an everyday meaning-making practice. “Queer Futures? Yearnings, Alliances, and Struggles” expands upon the previous sections as it considers the futures that emerge through queer motherhood/mothering.

Gibson is cognizant of how queer parenting discourses center and assume gay and lesbian parents, often to the detriment of transgender and intersex parents. Following Vivian Namaste, Gibson argues that queer theorists too often celebrate gender transgressions while ignoring transgender experiences of exclusion and violence (11-12). *Queering Motherhood* is attentive to how transmasculine parenting troubles normative gender discourses that undergird theorizations of motherhood and mothering. However, there is a dearth of trans feminine experiences in the collection. In “Transgender Women, Parenting, and Experiences of Ageing,” Damien Riggs and Sujay Kentlyn consider transwomen’s experiences of aging with a focus on lack of familial support and estrangement from their children. While this chapter makes space for lived experiences of hardship, this focus on trans pain, death, and abandonment risks the dangers of the over-telling stories of transwomen’s parenting as inevitably tragic. This highlights the need to expand such work

into the realm of the generative potential of transfeminine mothering, rather than a confined focus on stories of pain and loss.

Barbara Gurr, writing as the heterosexual cisgender mother of a transgirl, explores the need for parents who do not identify as queer to shift their identities as people and parents in order to parent queerly in “Queer Mothering or Mothering Queerly? Motherwork in Transgender Families.” Gurr points out the great need of trans youth to have familial support, and asserts that such support necessitates queer modes of care that do not affirm or assume normativity. As emerges in this chapter, these outcomes might not be classified as good within normative frameworks. In theorizing mothering queerly, Gurr and other contributors trouble the “terms of existing systems that would view ‘normalcy,’ particularly regarding sexuality and gender, as a ‘good outcome’” (3).

For parents whose queerness derives from their queer parenting practices, bringing queer folks into a collective parenting model might also provide needed additional supports. In an interview with Gibson, Gary Kinsmen touches upon this in an exploration of the potential of collective material models of parenting. Kinsmen focuses on the mothering, rather than the motherhood of parenting, in discussing the nurturing and caregiving work of parenting as a queer collective. Kinsmen notes that this carework has the potential to shift ideas of masculinity toward nurturing, as queer men and other types of men join in collective parenting practices that teach care as a strength (254). This intervention hints at the radical possibilities of collective queer parenting in the raising of queer youth, but also in regards to the communal care for aging transwomen mentioned by Riggs and Kentlyn.

When this text came out, a short five years ago, it would have challenged many ideas in undergraduate coursework. With the rapid growth in the fields of queer studies and gender studies, along with the varied methodologies and archives of theory and narrative, this book would work well for activist and academic spaces where considerations of motherhood are taken up. *Queering Motherhood* is of particular use within courses that focus on feminist motherhood studies in that it disrupts a confined imaginary of mother work and its gendered dimensions. Further, the text offers a meaningful contribution to undergraduate queer studies and queer theory courses in that it troubles a queer canon that too often positions parenting as intrinsically normative. Given the ways in which it destabilizes what queerness and mothering are and can be, *Queering Motherhood* is also of use to Reproductive Justice activists and care workers such as doulas and midwives.

As Gibson cautions us, a queer motherhood/mothering cannot emerge from an additive approach wherein bodies coded as queer are included within dominant frameworks that have historically affirmed and assumed cisgender and heterosexual parents. Thus, the prevailing Eurocentrism of the text, named by Gibson in the introduction, marks a significant lapse. Expanding

upon the generative offering of queer motherhood theorized here, how might a deepened attention to race, nation, and (settler) colonial context further disrupt the assumed terms and frameworks of care, kinship, and motherhood? Through an expanded focus on how these formations inform kinship, motherhood, and care, scholars following this anthology's contributors might bring queer mothering into greater relief and reveal care and kinship practices not yet realized in this anthology.

Mothers, Mothering, and Globalization

Dorsía Smith Silva, Laila Malik, and Abigail L. Palko, eds.
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press 2017

REVIEWED BY CARI SLOAN MAES

In the last few years a number of edited volumes have endeavored to trace the effects of globalization on mothers, mothering, and motherhood across multiple contexts. Maher and Chavkin's, *The Globalization of Motherhood: Deconstructions and Reconstructions of Biology and Care* (Routledge 2010) and Andrea O'Reilly, ed.'s *Mothers, Mothering, and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences: A Reader* (Demeter 2014) stand out as two such publications that bring together distinct voices from across the global "matriscap." These volumes are immensely valuable for teaching diverse perspectives and particularly for disrupting normative and Western-centric archetypes and discourses of mothering. It is worthwhile to ask, then, how Dorsía Smith Silva, et al.'s recent release, *Mothers, Mothering, and Globalization* (Demeter Press 2017) distinguishes itself from these comparator volumes and what nuance it adds to this growing field of inquiry.

As the aforementioned works do, *Mothers, Mothering, and Globalization* focuses on some of the "classic" themes at the nexus of globalization and motherhood, such as migration, global care chains, and negotiations of cultural belonging, family, identity, and maternal praxes. Here, the volume mirrors the dominant impulse among scholars in this field to "confront the complexities and intersectionalities of mothers in the contemporary era of globalization" and the comparative work of identifying critical overlaps, or "bridges across globalization" (4). Yet, the authors also signal a move away from conventional frameworks, calling for the formulation of "new models to

understand the transformative and agentic potential of motherhood in a globalized world” (4). The “new models” they suggest broaden existing analytic paradigms by peering into new sites of experience and representation, such as activist organizations, online spaces, fiction works, and film. In this regard, the volume distinguishes itself from others in the field by illuminating as-yet-uninterrogated stories and voices from the *terra incognita* of global mothering and bringing them into dialogue. To accomplish this, the editors cast a wide disciplinary net in assembling authors this volume, drawing experts from the fields of communication, gender studies, literature, political science, and sociology. In aggregate, their research speaks the exigence to keep pace with the perpetually-expanding terrain of maternal experiences and the homogenizing forces of the global patriarchal order that flatten the category ‘mother.’ The majority of the chapters delve into maternal worlds of the Global South and its diasporas and the profiles of the authors themselves evinces the work’s alignment with the wider transnational feminist activist-academic project. The editors acknowledge, rightly, that academics whose privilege buffers them from the poverty and precarity should “listen carefully” to maternal voices to learn how to respond to the urgent concerns of neoliberal austerity and climate change (xii). The volume would have certainly benefitted from a more robust discussion—perhaps in the introduction or with the addition of a concluding chapter—of the shifting politics of globalization, the implications for mothers, and the methodological and theoretical challenges scholars continue to confront. Here, the work seems to work more as a collection of discrete essays that, while still insightful and quite useful for teaching, lacks an overarching argument. The authors briefly gesture towards the reemergence of nationalism, yet they argue that the longitudinal effects of globalization on mothers and mothering “will not disappear” (11). But readers are left wondering what’s next, why will this type of inquiry remain important, and what is the authors’ vision for this field of scholarship in light of such instability and change? A concluding chapter could have forayed into these concerns and could have underscored some of the key “bridges” forged between the volume’s fourteen chapters. It bears mentioning, as well, that all the chapters, save for a few glimpses of pregnancy and reproduction, focus on *mothering-as-childrearing* and dominant biological and cultural typologies of ‘mother.’ That is, the mothers analyzed here overwhelmingly identify as female, are able-bodied, draw biological connections to their children, and, where sexuality is discussed, are heterosexual. The focus on these particular mothers does not detract from the work’s valuable, cross-cultural exploration of globalization and mothering, but more explicit attention to the pervasiveness of normative experiences and identities across the globe would strengthen the analysis and hint towards new avenues of research.

The first of two sections, “Mothering, Globalization, and Identity,” delves

into the inner sanctum of maternal experience and subjectivity. Here we see the range of disciplinary perspectives on display as the chapters move from cinematic depictions of transnational mothers, to personal narratives of migrant nannies, mom-blogs in diasporic communities, to the place of mothers and mothering in the current global development agenda. Among the most salient themes emerging in this section are the interrogations of virtual “bridges” built by mothers through online interaction. Suchita Sarkar (Chapter 4) and Gavala Maluleke (Chapter 5) reveal how online communities act as mediums through which mothers navigating the pressures and dislocations of globalization forge alliances, preserve culture and language, and resist prescriptive ideas that constrain their mothering. These chapters also show how the tentacles of global capitalism invade these intimate online spaces and attempt to co-opt, monetize, and market maternal thinking and experience. Michelle Hughes Miller (Chapter 7) likewise takes up this theme in her reading of global “women’s empowerment” development discourses. She argues that it is specifically *women as mothers* and *girls as prospective mothers* that development investors hope to enlist and instrumentalize. While other chapters in the volume explore the neoliberal exploitation of ‘motherwork’ and care labor in specific contexts, this chapter offers readers a look at how hegemonic development imperatives synergize these oppressive forces under the guise of gender “empowerment.” Readers will come away from Section One with a sense of how 21st-century mothers have adapted to a world rife with demands and austere with social supports. Most significantly, this section reveals the push and pull mothers feel as they navigate the complex liminal spaces created by globalization and shows the challenges and triumphs of “the doing of mothering” (Maluleke) between cultures and between homelands and diaspora, as well as across borders and across generations.

One of the book’s novel features is an interlude between sections entitled, “At Sea,” in which mother/scholar Jessica Adams ponders mothering adrift as a “small act of globalization” (154). Albeit from a position of acknowledged privilege, Adams narrative exposes how globalization and its modes of displacement create a paradox for mothers who are simultaneously anchored to tradition and compelled to invent something new (154). Section Two, “Mothering, Globalization, and Nation,” tackles a number of complex questions regarding citizenship, migration, resistance, and transnational mothering. The section’s cultural and geographic scope allows readers to envisage some of the “bridges” connecting mothers across the world. For example, we see that mother-activists in Liberia (Chapter 13) and Puerto Rico (Chapter 11) take up strikingly similar forms of (discursive and physical) protest that center and weaponize their bodies, maternal identity, and reproductive labor. Crystal Whetstone’s analysis (Chapter 13), in particular, offers a key counterpoint to the detrimental effects of globalization by

examining how mothers wield its very features—mobility, interconnectivity, and rapid communication—to build transnational movements for change. Two qualitative investigations of mothering across national boundaries add to the metanarrative of Section Two. These chapters ask “what it takes to mother (in) a nation” (193) by analyzing interview data among Filipino migrant mothers in Japan (Celero, Chapter 10) and Zimbabwean mothers living in South Africa (Batisai, Chapter 12). The contexts and perspectives the authors examine offer new angles that complicate the traditional narrative of ‘*South to North*’ and ‘*East to West*’ migration and, as Batisai states, of those “who occupy both the high and low ends of the migration hierarchy” (242). Here, the authors expose occluded aspects of transnational mothering, including, as Batisai observes, the negative repercussions of upward class mobility and the challenges mothers face in understanding their children as reflections of diasporic culture and society (241). The methodological and analytic approaches the authors employ open a promising path for other scholars to explore new pockets of transnational mothering across the Global South. The remaining chapters of the section analyze works of fiction, from Ireland (Chapter 9) and Haiti/New York (Chapter 14) as lenses into the embodied and emotional traumas of reproduction and mothering amidst the oppression and violence wrought by the biopolitical, economic, and imperialist forces of globalization. In analyzing Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and O’Brien’s *Down By the River* (1996), Smith Silva and Palko respectively argue that traumas endured by fictionalized maternal protagonists and their families, in particular sexual assault, mirror the corporal and affective damage of globalization on real mothers and children. Both chapters also give voice to the experiences of children in these contexts, offering yet another angle from which to view the complex interior worlds of global mothers. The pairing of literary and qualitative analyses speaks to the accessibility of this work and its appeal to those teaching undergraduate and graduate courses on mothering.

In returning to the editors’ signal towards the “new models” at the outset of the book, we conclude that our interrogations of mothering within the context of globalization must be dynamic, responsive, and engage multiple categories of analysis and disciplinary perspectives. Without a concluding chapter, however, we, as scholars and teachers, are left to our own devices with this daunting proposal. Ultimately, the book works well as an impressively interdisciplinary set of essays that reveal not only the plurality of mothering experiences in the contemporary moment, but also the ever-evolving spectrum of methodological and theoretical tools scholars have devised to understand them.

Borderlands and Crossroads: Writing the Motherland

Jane Satterfield and Laurie Kruk, eds.
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2016

REVIEWED BY KATHY MANTAS

Borderlands and Crossroads: Writing the Motherland is an edited collection comprised of two sections. The first section includes thirty-five poems and the second part contains twenty-three works of fiction and/or creative non-fiction. This creative and compelling anthology is bookended by an introduction written by Jane Satterfield, a conclusion authored by Laurie Kruk, and opens with the following quote from Adrienne Rich, “*The words are maps.*”

In the introduction, Jane Satterfield, a poet and professor, explores the maternal body as “a primal landscape” and motherhood as a “strange new country” with “shifting borders.” Using various images and metaphors of travel, the co-editor acknowledges the “transformative and empowering” aspects, but also interrogates the disruptive qualities of motherhood. In an effort to “revise assumptions, presumptions, and inherited scripts” we, along with the poets and authors of this collection, are encouraged to re-engage with the concept of motherhood “as literal landscape, as inheritance, or home.”

Given the range of forms and topics included in this compilation, it is integrated beautifully and flows thoughtfully from one text to the next. Themes addressed in this provocative collection include, but are not limited to: breastfeeding; losses and developments; grief and suffering; birth and death; mothering daughters and sons; matrilineage; memory, memoir, memorialization, and commemoration; family, home, heirlooms, and heritage; adoption; geography, border crossings, emigration, and exile; war, peace, love, and hope; health and wellness; abortion; miscarriage; religion; race and class; moving between realities, countries, languages, and ways of knowing and being.

This volume, which offers a multiplicity of voices and cultural viewpoints, adds depth to the discussion on maternal landscapes of all sorts. As well, it challenges our understanding of what it means to write the motherland in the twenty-first century from a more global, but also personal and political perspective. Since “the motherland is...often unrecognized or unarticulated” states the co-editor Laurie Kruk, who is also a poet and professor, she closes this collection by bidding us to ponder further, “How...we write the motherland?” and invites us to “become the travelling companions of writers who chart journeys of the heart,” as the contributors of this collection do with such grace and courage. I fully relished voyaging, from beginning to end, through the rich and complex writings of motherlands embodied in this literary collection.



The defining mission of the Journal of the Motherhood Initiative is to promote and disseminate the best current scholarship on motherhood, and to ensure that this scholarship considers motherhood both in an international context and from a multitude of perspectives, including differences of class, race, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and nationality, and from across a diversity of disciplines.

This special issue on “Matricentric Feminism” features 19 articles, 5 book reviews and a poetry folio featuring the work of Charlotte Pence.

Articles include:

- One Is Not Born But Rather Becomes a Mother
- Practicing Matricentric Feminist Mothering
- Relational Resistance
- The Lost Songs of Motherhood
- Placenta, the Sculpture, and the Invisible Blood of Women
- Centring Complex Maternal Emotion in The Babadook

