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Mothers for and against the Nation: Complexities of a Maternal Politics of Care

The politics of care linked with maternal activism often takes for granted a mutually agreed upon understanding of care. However, care is deployed in varying ways by those engaging in maternal activism. Caring cannot be assumed to be inclusive and may be exclusive, particularly when used by maternal activists linked with rightwing politics. This article explores how a maternal politics of care can reflect both progressive and reactionary politics. It uses Andrea O'Reilly's framework of patriarchal motherhood to explore theoretically divergent international case studies of maternal activism. These cases demonstrate that a maternal politics of care can be used to support a myriad of issues on either side of the political spectrum to reflect individualized and exclusionary visions of care, "paternalistic maternalism," (Wu), or a collective politics of care. Despite the connections often drawn between mothering labour and care labour, the function of care differs across the political spectrum. For some, caring entails collective liberation and common good and disrupts exclusive—often racist—membership in the nation. For others, care for some necessitates the denial of care for others to ensure the purity of the nation. For others still, some mothers are unable to properly care. The latter reflects a white-saviour complex, which is as concerning as the politics of hate that seeks to limit caring to certain groups. What this suggests is that constructions of who can care and who is worthy of care are deeply raced and classed as well as based on gender, sexual preference, and other social identity factors.

Maternal activism, a form of civil society organizing in which women draw upon their roles as mothers to engage politically, inspires women across race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, religious distinctions, and political orientation (Orleck 4). Women's engagement with maternal activism—or a maternal politics of care—can reflect both progressive and reactionary politics. Using Andrea O'Reilly's framework of patriarchal motherhood, I explore

international case studies of maternal activism. These case studies demonstrate that a maternal politics of care can be used to support a myriad of issues on either side of the political spectrum to reflect individualized and exclusionary visions of care, "paternalistic maternalism," (Wu 254), or a collective politics of care. Despite the connections often drawn between mothering labour and care labour, the function of care differs across the political spectrum. Progressive forms of maternal activism rely on a form of caring that is rooted in collective equity, whereas reactionary forms of maternal activism deploy care in a hierarchal manner, in which only some are deemed as worthy of care. In addition, paternalistic forms of maternal activism can deploy care based on perceived incapability of others—they need to be saved by those who know better. In these cases, a racist as well as nationalist politics is at work, which some mother-activists challenge and others embrace. That paternalistic maternal activism reflects a white-saviour complex is as concerning as the politics of hate, which seeks to limit caring to certain groups.

This article mediates on the entrenched colonial, racist, and xenophobic aspects of not only maternal activism rooted in the politics of hate but as well the "paternalistic maternalism" (Wu) of some forms of maternal activism. This approach troubles the politics of care associated with maternal activism by highlighting the white-saviour complex. The focus and methods of reactionary and paternalistic forms of the politics of maternal care produce, on the one hand, a politics of hate that seeks to save deserving white people from immigrants and persons of colour through caring for some and not others and, on the other hand, a politics of paternalism, which is deployed by some maternal activists to guide women of colour and women from the Global South. Despite these differences, both forms of maternal activism refract disturbing constructions that deny the full inclusion of a collective politics of care that seeks equity and social justice, which is seen in progressive forms of maternal activism. In all, a maternal politics of care constitutes a broad spectrum of approaches. Frames that either romanticize or critique maternal activisms as a singular phenomenon ignore the complexities within the enactment of a maternal politics of care—complexities rooted in class, caste, race, gender, location, and other considerations.

Patriarchal Motherhood

O'Reilly calls attention to the core assumptions of patriarchal motherhood, which include presumed gender ideals that situate mothering as women's primal identity and locate women strictly within the confines of the domestic sphere—or the women's domain. In the household sphere, a woman is expected to carry out intensive motherwork within a heteronormative nuclear family to which she devotes herself wholeheartedly. She provides for the

family's nurturing needs while the husband/father supports the family through wage labour. Patriarchal motherhood renders this mothering work natural by suggesting that women rely on instincts rather than skills to mother, even as patriarchal motherhood pressures women to follow the advice of childrearing experts. The patriarchal motherhood construct divorces mothering from its political considerations and emphasizes the importance of blood ties or biologically based motherhood (O'Reilly 14). This latter factor aligns with the rightwing mother of the nation construct, which deems women the biological and cultural reproducers of not only individual nuclear families but the larger nation-state. In this worldview, women as mothers hold together the nuclear family and the nation-state through their motherwork (Yuval-Davis 22-23). This rightwing approach is politically and culturally different from other conceptions of the role of mothers in the nation, such as within Indigenous nations, which promote progressive roles for women and support all members of a community. Any transgressions against patriarchal motherhood by mothers are frequently deemed antipatriotic or even treasonous—as will be demonstrated.

The examples of maternal activisms that follow disrupt the patriarchal notion that motherhood can be confined to the household sphere, and the majority of maternal-activists also embody a sense of collective power. Mother-activists negotiate their activism by disrupting and/or embodying varying aspects of O'Reilly's concept of patriarchal motherhood. In each case, the politics of care functions to advocate for different ends. Groups like Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the mothers' movements in the former Yugoslavia, and the US-based Women Strike for Peace operated in constrained political environments dominated by conservative discourses, which depicted support for progressive political ideologies as dangerous to national security and fundamentally antipatriotic. Such danger was often rendered in terms of women's real or perceived support for socialism/communism or any form of peace advocacy. These forms of activism disrupt the construct of patriarchal motherhood and emphasize the socially constructed nature of mothering as well as contest the borders placed around national belonging. In contrast, individualistic forms of maternal activism can reenact structural, often racist violence. Anti-immigrant United States (US) groups like Mothers Against Illegal Amnesty (MAIA) and the Activist Mommy, a white Anglo American, operate in the climate of the Global War on Terror and the global reign of neoliberalism—a socioeconomic ideology rooted in individualistic self-help that promotes unrestrained capitalism and deep cuts to state welfare policies (Cainkar 1, 110, 229; Bloch and Taylor 199). The Global War on Terror, launched as a reactionary response to the 9/11 attacks on the US, led to military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and prompted intense nativism and othering domestically. The priorities of MAIA and Activist Mommy

overlay with the construction of the mother of the nation, who must protect her country from enemies by serving her nuclear family (Yuval-Davis 22-23). The mother of the nation figure aligns with the values of patriarchal motherhood, as it promotes the politics of a xenophobic and heteronormative nation state.

A more nuanced examination of maternal activism that exists between a collective politics of care, as exemplified by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and the individualized and exclusionary visions of care, as exemplified by the MAIA, requires an exploration of the paternalistic maternalism of the Women Strike Peace group. In the context of the Vietnam War, members of this group deemed themselves—as white, middle-class Americans—as the proper guides to their Vietnamese allies, whom they deemed as less knowledgeable and capable as themselves. Women Strike for Peace members felt they needed to help Vietnamese women to resist the US occupation, as well as better care for and protect their children (Wu 254). This white-saviour complex situates paternalistic maternalism far closer to the exclusionary understanding of care that is associated with the politics of hate than it does a collective politics of care that is inclusive and promotes social justice. Rather, the white-saviour complex upholds the deeply racist and classist views of colonialism and thus supports a colonialist maternal politics of care.

Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo formed in 1977 in reaction to the disappearance of their children by a rightwing fascist military dictatorship, which used state terrorism to target leftist activists. This led to kidnapping, detaining, torturing, and killing an estimated thirty thousand people (Bouvard 1, 23-24, 29, 31). The military regime claimed to be defending the nation against terrorists, or those who supported socialist or communist ideologies and social justice activism in general. The regime identified their brutal rule as the only way to save Argentina from the internal enemy that sought to break apart the traditional values of the family as well as destroy capitalism and Christianity. The leaders of the military dictatorship proclaimed themselves defenders of Western civilization, which construed the heteronormative nuclear family, gender and racial hierarchy, as well as submission to authority as central to national security (Kohut and Vilella xi, xxxix, 34; Taylor 183-185). Cofounded by a group of mothers in a desperate search for their disappeared children, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo eventually included—at their height—hundreds of women who used their maternal suffering to bring international attention to the human rights abuses of the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 (Bouvard 1, 75).

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo first sought only the return of their

disappeared children, but over time, they began to agitate to hold the military dictatorship accountable for its crimes against humanity. The women also demanded an end to the armed conflict in which the state was at war with its own citizens (Bouvard 68, 95). The group was integral to Argentina's transition to democracy in 1983, and today, despite its split in 1986 into two branches, the group remains a mainstay in Argentine politics (Bouvard 94, 162; Politi). While Argentina continues to wrestle with the brutal memories of its dictatorship, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have spent over four decades seeking justice for past wrongs and continue the political work of their collective children. Their efforts have shattered constructions of patriarchal motherhood that assert mothers' responsibilities as limited to the domestic sphere and as an individualized practice. Instead, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo united to address their collective concerns. One branch of the group (Mothers Association) has even disrupted biologically based maternalism, asserting that all the disappeared are their children, not just their own biological children (Bouvard 182-183; Taylor 189).

Mothers' Movements in the Former Yugoslavia

The former socialist Yugoslavia is now made up of the independent countries of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and the autonomous province of Vojvodina. Conservative nationalist discourses, including xenophobia, rose in Yugoslavia starting in the 1980s and intensified with the collapse of the Tito regime and the rootlessness of the population—a direct result of intense urbanization, which had removed citizens from closer-knit networks in more rural areas (Korač 25-26). When national-ism erupted, it emphasized strict gender norms, religion, and shared blood, or ethnonationalism. In this environment, women's role as reproducers of the ethnic community was stressed, as was the need for independent countries for each ethnic group in Yugoslavia. This hostile environment emphasized the naturalness of both the heteronormative nuclear family and the homogenous nation-state (Korač 26-27).

A series of conflicts that would eventually break up Yugoslavia began in the 1990s. In response, informal mothers' movements erupted spontaneously across the region as "a massive grassroots protest" that sought an end to the armed conflict (Korač 29). It began in Serbia in 1991 when the federal army invaded Slovenia after it declared independence. Hundreds of Serbian mothers stormed the country's parliament while in session to demand a peaceful end to the war and the return of their sons from fighting in Slovenia. This protest was followed by similar spontaneous mothers' protests in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The state responded to each mothers' movements in the same way: Women were arrested and interrogated by the police, and the

media—which portrayed women's actions as rooted in support of nationalism rather than being against armed fighting—was used to curtail any further rallying of mothers in the cause of peace (Korač 29).

However, the informality of the mothers' movement allowed for its easy manipulation by the nationalist media throughout the region. The mothers' movement rejected the construction of the "patriotic mother" who gladly sends her sons to war. However, the media downplayed the mothers' movement, often ignoring their actions. Instead, the media propagated the image of the dutiful mother of the nation who sacrifices her sons for the nationalist cause, which ultimately pitted women and mothers from different ethnic communities against one another (Korač 29). Because these movements were spontaneous, there was "no clear strategy or well-articulated message" to guide activists (Korač 29). With the media promoting ethnonationalism, the mothers' movement was spun into support for communitarian violence (Korač 29-30). Although these mothers worked towards a kind of caring that stressed equity through concern for their own children and the children of others, the ethnonationalism that engulfed the region worked to hide these messages in favour of antagonistic othering discourses. Even though it was not successful in preventing war, the mothers' movement did display a collective power that ostensibly moved care beyond their own children and prompted mothers' involvement in the public sphere—all of which disrupt patriarchal motherhood.

Women Strike for Peace

In November 1961, at the height of the Cold War between the USSR and US (c. 1947-1991), Women Strike for Peace (WSP) was founded. As a US women-only peace organization, WSP fought for nuclear disarmament and deployed an activism that revolved around members' identities as mothers and housewives. During this period, a hypernationalist Cold War mentality reigned, as did McCarthyism—a rightwing movement that labelled nearly any questioning of US government policies as treason (Swerdlow 100-103). Since nuclear armament was deemed critical to national security, WSP members defended their controversial antinuclear organizing through their maternal duty to protect their children from nuclear warfare (Swerdlow 1, 48, 235). WSP deftly manoeuvred in the politically hostile environment of continued McCarthyism, which vilified leftist and antinuclear activities as dangerous to the security of the country and inherently unpatriotic. This led to a widespread clampdown on leftist activism. Yet WSP thrived even with FBI surveillance and an inquiry by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (Swerdlow 100-103, 119, 125). After 1965, the group began protesting the Vietnam War, which also created controversy, since it signalled to many on the right that the women in WSP were not supportive of their country (Swerdlow 4).

By deploying a discourse steeped in an ideology of domesticity, largely through their positioning as concerned mothers, the women of WSP deflected much of the rightwing criticism that their antinuclear and antiwar activism entailed (Swerdlow 1, 235). WSP played up the white and middle-class status of most of its members, who donned dainty hats and gloves during their protests, relying on the politics of respectability (Wu, 222). The ease with which they performed respectability was a privilege stemming from the members' racial and class backgrounds. The politics of respectability is often denied to poor mothers and mothers of colour. Patriarchal motherhood insists that mothering be contained within the domestic sphere. Disrupting this expectation, WSP members asserted that their maternal duties included not only their move into the public sphere but also a collective resistance, which understood mothering as a communal practice that extended beyond biological children. WSP members cared deeply about peace. However, there were deeply problematic aspects of WSP's care labour, as the group believed it was the white woman's burden to save Vietnamese women, who could not act for themselves. (Wu 253-54). Feminist historian Judy Wu has aptly characterized the WSP as engaging in a paternalistic maternalism, since the WSP believed that it knew what was best for Vietnamese women and that it was the only group who could help them (Wu 254). WSP believed women from the Global South were incapable of caring for themselves and their communities, which was reminiscent of maternal colonialism, in which middle-to-upper class white women in the US looked upon Indigenous mothers as incapable or inferior at care labour and motherwork (Jacobs 471, 462). Whereas WSP members viewed themselves as agentic figures, they saw their Vietnamese counterparts as anything but equals.

Mothers Against Illegal Amnesty (MAIA)

Founded in 2006 under the slogan "Protect Our Children; Secure Our Borders," MAIA targeted the children of undocumented immigrants, whom they labelled "anchor babies" (Juffer 80).[1] Similar to how some poorer mothers are thought to have children simply for the welfare benefits, immigrant mothers are often stereotypically presumed to have children in order to gain state resources (Bloch and Taylor 202-04). Such discourses show how mothering and mothers are valued differently based on class, immigration status, and race. Patriarchal constructs of motherhood as a function of xenophobic nationalism have, in the case of MAIA, led to a maternal politics of virulent hate, which stipulates an "us versus them" mentality (O'Reilly 14; Juffer 84).

MAIA members portrayed immigrants and their children (particularly those who were undocumented) as parasitic as well as a threat to both US

national security and the ability of US-born citizens to access education and other resources (Juffer 85-87). This worldview embodies a zero-sum approach, in which only a limited number of resources are available. If the children of immigrants have access to these resources, then US-born children have somehow lost something. Such thinking is rooted in neoliberal ideology, which promotes competition (Bloch and Taylor 206). MAIA's carework suggests that resources are scarce, and if immigrant children or the children of immigrants receive care from the state, it will deplete the care available to citizens. This deeply colonial, racist, and xenophobic narrative constructs some children as undeserving of care. Today, this narrative is still wide reaching, as under the former Trump Administration, families seeking asylum were separated from one another and subjected to inhumane conditions, which deprived them of basic necessities, including healthcare, leading to widespread sickness and some deaths among children (Dickerson; Hennessy-Fiske).

Activist Mommy

Elizabeth Johnson, the "Activist Mommy," runs the website activistmommy.com. Johnson is a self-described vlogger who takes on "the lies of abortion, feminism, Islam, and the homosexual agenda" to stand up for "families and patriots" ("About the Activist Mommy"). Like MAIA, Johnson's narrative is based on a "nation under attack" outlook. While Johnson is similar to MAIA on issues of immigration, she is more concerned with what she sees as bullying by progressives, which is apparent in Johnson's fears around the corrupting presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially trans people. In a March 2018 video entitled "They Are Coming for Our Children!" Johnson angrily names the "social Marxists and transgender activists" who oppress Christian conservatives and try to "steal our kids from us and plunge our nation into moral chaos." She calls on her fellow "Mama Bears" to "rise up … and take your kids back from this subversive agenda." Johnson requests that all those who support her to stand up against these bullies and share the hashtag "#HandsOffOurKids" ("Watch: They Are Coming for Our Children").

The other major portion of Johnson's website is a blog, regularly updated with stories that support her argument that Christians and conservatives are persecuted in the US for their beliefs ("My Blog"). The blog frequently misrepresents stories and issues to emphasize progressives' ridiculous ideas. In the blog published on January 23, 2019, Johnson writes, "Google Employees Reportedly Furious Over Use of the Word 'Family.'" Johnson's title presents the negative reaction of Google employees to a Google executive's use of the word "family" as anger against families. In fact, Google employees were pushing for a more inclusive use of the word to refer not simply to heterosexual

couples with children but to any household. Johnson likewise uses her blog to uphold the rightwing mother-of-nation trope in terms of anti-immigrant sentiment: "It is not a right to illegally immigrate to or live in the United States. Each year, thousands of people compete to enter the US legally, while millions live her [sic] undocumented and allowed to fly under the radar by so many Democrat-run cities and states" ("New York Sheriff"). Notably, Johnson supports ending abortion among immigrants and migrants: "Just because a child's mother does not have a legal right to live in a country does in no way mean she and her child don't have a sacred, divine right to life" ("Trump Admin"). Although much of Johnson's content is focused on gender—mainly in terms of disruptions to socially conservative gender performance—she also embodies the patriarchal mother who supports only the heteronormative nuclear family that serves the nation through the reproduction of the right kind of families, which is to be read as nonimmigrant (O'Reilly 14; Yuval-Davis 22-23).

Patriarchal Motherhood in MAIA and Activist Mommy

MAIA and Activist Mommy limit maternal politics of care to only a select, deserving few. Likewise, when caring is stretched to include pity and othering—as in WSP—this is equally as problematic. The wide-ranging differences among MAIA and Activist Mommy to WSP to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the mothers' movements of the former Yugoslavia present a spectrum of maternal movements that encompass a hierarchy of care that excludes, a paternalistic care that rests upon the assumed inability of others, and a collective politics of care that seeks equity and social justice. What this suggests is that constructions of who can care and who is worthy of care are deeply raced and classed as well as based on gender, sexual preference, and other social identity factors. Although the outright politics of hate of MAIA and Activist Mommy are obviously problematic, the paternalistic maternal politics of care of the WSP, which was rooted in the white-saviour complex, is no less problematic. Neither form of maternal activism—despite one being rooted in progressive politics—promotes a collective politics of care that includes all persons as equally agentic and deserving. Only a collective politics of care demonstrates a caring that embodies collective liberation and the common good and disrupts the exclusive—often racist—membership in the nation-state.

Conclusion: How Care Functions in Maternal Activism

Care is fundamental to maternal activism. Yet mother-activists fundamentally differ in their interpretations of how this caring work is carried out. For some, caring entails collective liberation and the common good and disrupts exclusive

membership in the nation-state. For others, care necessitates the denial of care for others to ensure the purity of the nation-state. For others still, some mothers are unable to properly care for their children. The activism of these groups demonstrates an explicitly racial politics; MAIA was primarily concerned with immigrants of colour, whereas WSP wanted to save Vietnamese women. At the same time, some progressive forms of maternal activism may employ essentialist tenets of patriarchal motherhood, such as the relegation of mothering work as natural—be it a strategic decision to underlie political participation in the public sphere or a reflection of their actual perspectives.

Endnotes

1. It appears that the group is now defunct. Their webpage brings up a 404 error (http://www.mothersagainstillegalaliens.org/).

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