A YORK UNIVERSITY PUBLICATION

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

# 25th Anniversary Issue on Mothering and Motherhood

Spring / Fall 2025
Vol. 15

Oksana Moroz, Laura Bissell, Lauren E. Burrow, Tara Carpenter Estrada, Robin Silbergleid, Tammy Nyden, Ghada Alatrash, Ame Khin May-Kyawt, Zixuan Liao, Ariel Moy, Michela Rosa Di Candia, Sophie Brock and more

ROBIN SILBERGLEID

# Mother Is a Gendered Verb: Embodied Acts of Care in Memoirs of Queer Family

*This article rethinks the particularity of the term "mother" within the converging contexts of the recent push towards trans-inclusive language, such as "birthing person," as well as the crisis of caregiving that came to the fore within the coronavirus pandemic. To do so, this article analyzes Krys Malcolm Belc's recent book* The Natural Mother of the Child *(2021), which was published amid discussion in mainstream media of inclusive terminology for birth and nursing. Belc's book uses his own experience of gestational parenthood to offer a corrective and counternarrative to essentialist notions of motherhood that operate both in cultural discussions of pregnancy and in legal documents, including birth certificates. Juxtaposed with this analysis of Belc, this article considers the equally problematic ungendering of the term "mother," a move that fails to consider the specific embodied and intersectional contexts in which carework occurs. Ultimately, it is within mother memoirs by queer writers that we can understand ways that individual parents understand and narrate their experiences of essential labour; telling stories of queer families, in all their book-length complexity, helps write new family stories, ones that will hopefully lead to real and lasting social change.*

Care
verbs our hours into shards, when our nearest
kin are on our laps yet still farther
than our dreams to write,
to discover, to teach
to parent, to mother, to father
to verb ourselves back together.
—Divya Victor, "Care Is a Verb"

I have been actively (single) mothering for more than twenty years, from the first moments of infancy through the second year of university. I have verbed my kids: breastfed them, cooked for them, bathed them, changed them, rocked them to sleep. I wore each of them strapped to my body for more hours than I can count. I pushed them for miles in the stroller to get them to sleep, took them to the doctors' offices, drove them here there and everywhere, did loads upon loads of laundry, and wiped vomit from the floor, the bed, and the car seat. I talked with them about problems, big and small. I helped them with math homework, drafting emails, and applying to college. I tried (unsuccessfully) to throw them baseballs to hit and played four square during a pandemic. I bought them things they needed and gifts they wanted. We baked bread, cookies, and cakes and played our version of *Chopped*. A mother is so many things. Mother was who I was and what I did, noun and verb simultaneously.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me that a "mother" is "The female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth; (also, in extended use) a woman who undertakes the responsibilities of a parent towards a child, *esp*. a stepmother." It is also a verb: "To be or become the mother of, give birth to; (chiefly *figurative*) to be the source or originator of, give rise to, produce." Or: "To bring up, take care of, or protect as a mother; to look after in a (sometimes excessively) kindly and protective way."

When I say "mother," I think I mean someone who is AFAB (assigned female at birth) who has been pregnant and given birth and/or someone who identifies as a mother and cares for a child whether or not she gave birth to that child.

It's all slippery.

Mostly, I mean a caregiver who is not afforded the privileges of a father under patriarchy.

My rethinking of the particularity of the term "mother" occurs within the converging contexts of the recent push towards trans-inclusive language, such as "birthing person," as well as the crisis of caregiving that came to the fore within the coronavirus pandemic. I find myself struggling for language that is inclusive of the experiences of transmasculine gestational parents without also eliding the specificity of the term "mother" within the broader umbrella of purportedly gender-neutral "parenting." If, as trans activists such as Lara Karaian have made clear, it is critical to "unsex" pregnancy, it is equally vital not to ungender the actual work of mothering. The push to do so, in fact, stems from anti-maternal misogyny.

Written during the early days of the pandemic, Angela Garbes's book *Essential Labor* makes an important argument about the centrality and value

of carework, which, she notes, is un- or underpaid and often undertaken by women of colour. The introductory chapter makes it clear that caregiving (also termed "essential labour") is not essentially women's work but can be undertaken by persons of all genders and sexes, and I do not disagree. Yet there is a telling slipperiness in Garbes's language. She does not say that carework can be done by all but instead: "My perspective has grown to consider the work of raising children as *mothering*, an action that includes people of all genders and nonparents alike" (9). Drawing on the work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams, Garbes continues, "Rather than viewing care work as characteristic of the noun 'motherhood,' I now see it as the action of *mothering*, which includes anyone who is engaged in 'the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life'" (9). On the surface, this is an inclusive, well-intentioned argument. But in this expansive redefinition, both rhetorically and politically, Garbes has taken the mother out of mothering.

As the coronavirus pandemic made abundantly clear, the work of caregiving is not gender neutral or disembodied, and mothers (whether cis- or transgender) do not have the same experiences or privileges as cisgender fathers. As Andrea O'Reilly unpacks in her groundbreaking book *Matricentric Feminism,* the beneficiaries of second-wave feminism do not include mothers for whom there remains a solid "maternal wall" (2). In general, working mothers earn less money than nonmothers in their chosen fields. As O'Reilly notes, "The pay gap between mothers and nonmothers under thirty-five is larger than the wage gap between young men and women" (2). To put a sharper point on it, in academic contexts specifically, male faculty benefit from being fathers, while women are penalized for being mothers on tenure track (Mason and Goulden). These findings only begin to suggest the ways that mothers—not parents—continue to be treated inequitably.

To explore the specificity of the term "mother" in this essay, I want to concentrate on Krys Malcolm Belc's recent book *The Natural Mother of the Child* (2021), published amid discussion in mainstream media of inclusive terminology for birth and nursing. Belc's book is a stunning memoir in essays that uses his own experience of gestational parenthood to offer a corrective and counternarrative to essentialist notions of motherhood that operate both in cultural discussions of pregnancy and in legal documents, including birth certificates. As such, the memoir provides a vital point of entry into a conversation about the limits of language and normative heteronarratives of family. As the book lays bare, the problem of language that Belc and other transmasculine gestational parents experience is that they identify as men and fathers while they are often biologically and genetically understood to be mothers. One of those experiences is elided/erased on legal documents and in

mainstream culture. There is a lack of adequate language to hold both those experiences simultaneously because of the deeply held binaristic cultural norms of parenting as well as essentialist/pronatalist logic. Mainstream understanding of parenting roles predates reproductive technologies that allow for more complicated understandings of family building and gender. And that inadequacy of language has undeniable practical consequences, including medical care and parental rights. As a corrective and counternarrative, Belc's memoir offers a complex, multifaceted look into gender and parenting from the vantage point of identity, family experience, legal documents, and medical care. As such, the memoir makes clear that the binary terms "mother" and "father" are wholly inadequate and suggests the value of reading contemporary memoirs to understand the complexity of modern families.

Belc's memoir takes the shape of a brief preamble and six longer linked essays. The first long essay, "The Machine," discusses Belc's pregnancy with Samson leading up to his birth. The piece foregrounds Belc's gender identity and the embodied experience of pregnancy, situating gestation as a central experience in Belc's transition. Among other subjects, "The Machine" considers Belc's history of gender dysphoria and eating disorders, as well as discomfort at the surveillance of fertility and pregnancy care, linked to a series of ultrasounds. Following this line of thought, the essay elucidates the difference between Belc's feelings about his pregnancy in three contexts: alone, with Anna (his cisgender partner), and out in public. Similar to earlier butch and nonbinary pregnancy memoirs—including Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings* (1997), Karleen Pendleton Jimenez's *How to Get a Girl Pregnant* (2011), and A.K. Summers's *Pregnant Butch* (2014), as well as Thomas Beatie's *Labor of Love* (2008)—Belc's feelings about his pregnancy were highly fraught. Despite the prevalence of queer families today, Belc confronts the assumption that only cisgender women experience pregnancy. Remarking on the difference between his feelings alone and out in public, Belc remarks: "Queer people had children, but I almost never saw pregnant people like me. Alone at night, I sometimes placed my hands against the baby inside me and felt at peace, like we were in this together, and yet whenever I was outside the house I was aware of the publicness of my body, the unexpectedness" (25).

Not surprisingly, Samson's birth marks a significant turning point in Belc's transition, which reaches a pinnacle during his postpartum experience. Being pregnant with Samson, Belc explains, "forever changed my body and my understanding of who I am" (257). Beyond his own identification and gender dysphoria, Samson's birth marks a critical moment for Belc in terms of navigating legal and social systems. He writes, "I lay in bed at the birth center. Wrote my name next to *Mother* on his birth certificate. The only approximate space" (111). This moment of claiming himself "mother" is fraught: Despite his discomfort with the term, it legally codifies the real embodied connection

that Belc has to his son, both through DNA and gestation. Marking the space "father" on a birth certificate, while socially appropriate, would elide their gestational connection, one that is not only factual but also highly meaningful for Belc. He remarks, "Samson was made inside me, from part of me, and in many ways the person I am now is made from him, too" (258).

It is thus within the legal system of birth certificates and adoption proceedings that Belc most struggles with existing terminology: "My relationship with Samson could be natural without my having to stand up in court and say I was a mother" (217). We do not have language to express this embodied connection to fatherhood. In transitioning and giving up the term "mother," Belc explains, "There are things one gains by transitioning and the things one loses … the assumption of biological connection" (224). Yet while the "naturalness" of their relationship occurs through Belc's genetic as well as gestational connection to Samson, this intimacy undoubtedly complicates Belc's relation to his nongenetic and non-gestational offspring, who were carried by his partner Anna and whom he needs to adopt. Is he a different father to the child with whom he shares that natural connection? Although Belc's memoir testifies to the importance of gender-neutral language in discussing embodied reproductive experiences, it also makes clear that embodiment matters.

Overall, Belc's memoir beautifully unpacks the complexity of identifying as a man yet also experiencing what would in a cisgender person be described as maternal desire, the desire not only to parent and raise a family but to gestate and chestfeed. In complicating the cultural linkage of the embodied experiences of pregnancy and cisgender femininity, Belc undoes essentialist logic surrounding reproduction. As Belc puts it later in the book, "Nothing about being pregnant made me feel feminine. This body is what it is, not quite man, not quite woman, but with the parts to create and sustain life. To expel and care for that life" (192). Deliberately using the term "gestational parent," Belc writes, "I had never embraced or used the term *mother*.… It made me rage" (217). Yet even after his transition, Belc confesses, "I think about having another baby all the time" (270) and "I like pictures of me pregnant" (271).

At key moments in the memoir, Belc presents his pregnancy as a major turning point in his transition, as his understanding of gender solidified during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Belc observes, looking at family photos, "I don't remember anything about the baby in the pictures, only the self, who I was then, just trying to make it through another day in the absolutely wrong postpartum body" (196). Outwardly, Belc transitions from a gestational parent ("natural mother" on the birth certificate) to a social father, whose marriage to a cisgender woman allows him to pass as straight in certain contexts and thus renders him invisible as trans in the social sphere. Belc

poignantly states, "This baby helped me know the person I had to become. Now no one ever thinks I've carried a baby" (39).

In contrast to the inadequacy of legal documents, such as Samson's birth certificate and second parent adoption forms, Belc writes a memoir that explores the different facets of queer family building, including his role as a nongenetic but social father to Sean and ZZ and his role as a genetic and gestational parent for Samson, whom he actively fathers. Belc also reflects on the elision of the genetic connection all the children have to the sperm donor, who is a family friend. In Belc's discussion, the experience of pregnancy and the experience of parenting are distinct in their relation to gender. Belc is not just a parent to Samson but, significantly in their social relationship, a father. Although his ultrasound photos, reprinted in the book, use his natal name, Krystyn, later documentation from his psychologist serves to represent Belc's legal transition to Krys Malcolm.

Despite Belc's discomfort with the term "natural mother," coming to fatherhood is equally complicated. Situating his fatherhood alongside his family history, Belc suggests that fatherhood is deeply entwined with anger. In eschewing "mother" for "father," Belc's initial understanding of fatherhood ironically hinges on traditional notions of gendered parenting. "The first time I thought of myself as a dad," Belc writes, "I was in the checkout at SuperOne" (112). Thirty years old, he wrangled three children through the grocery store where the cashier described him as "The Awesome Dad." In this social context, Belc's performance of parenting is noted as exemplary. This moment opens into a discussion of men and violence, including shaken baby syndrome, which, Belc says, occurs more frequently with boys. Belc is a father to his three sons, whom he describes as wielding toy weapons in their play, and he worries about his anger: "Once I gripped Sean by his denim shirt and it ripped. He just wouldn't listen. When I unclenched my fists they were full of torn collar. I turned them over; these white-knuckled things could not be a mother's hands" (113). But in this moment of embracing his non-mother status, Belc softens: "Becoming a dad, accepting that's what I was, made me gentler, calmer" (114). He reiterates, "I chose to accept becoming a dad. I am glad they are not babies anymore because now they cannot ever be shaken babies" (116). Through his verb choices in these sentences, Belc clarifies that he identifies with and performs fatherhood; it is not a given but something in him that he "chose" and "accepted." And in embracing this choice, he moves away from, rather than towards, his father's fathering. Belc is adamantly a father, not a mother.

Overall, Belc's memoir argues for gender-neutral terms for gestation and birth within the contexts of medical care, cultural conversation, and the legal system. Yet much as the casually used terms "biological mother" or "natural mother" fail to account adequately for the experience of transmasculine

gestational parents, it remains equally essential to maintain the specificity of the term "mother," as it applies to actual caregiving (social mothering) as undertaken by women (cis or trans) who care for children, regardless of whether they share a genetic or gestational connection, for reasons of equity. In disimbricating these three types of "mothers" (genetic, gestational, and social), we open up awareness of the plentitude of familial structures that arise with reproductive technology, for queer families of all kinds, as well as heterosexual couples who use third-party reproduction. Honouring such differences requires that we regender the term "mother" for those not afforded the privileges of fathers under patriarchy. Following Andrea Doucet's work in *Do Men Mother,* I would argue that men (cis or trans) do not actively mother children, although they may in fact act as primary caregivers. Mother is a gendered verb.

Although this statement would seem obvious, the push to degender motherwork has been baked into the study of mothers and motherhood for decades. Sara Ruddick's argument that "maternal thinking" and practices can be performed by men and others who do not identify as mothers is foundational in this regard (107). Although I do not disagree with the fundamental argument about who can do what well, framing those acts of care rhetorically as "maternal" does a disservice to all caregivers, whose work occurs in particular intersectional social contexts. To put a sharper point on it, to say that men "mother" children by caring for children—as Garbes does—is to continue to understand such behaviours as feminine and therefore feminize or exclude nurturing behaviours undertaken by fathers, including transmen such as Belc. As AJ Lowik explains, "Labelling all nurturing behaviour performed by men as 'acts of mothering' may contribute to the invisibility of nurturing fathers—men may 'mother,' but if they identify as fathers are not all of their acts of parenting acts of fathering?" (213). In this regard, it is equally essentialist and problematic to use the term "natural mother" to describe a transmasculine parent (indeed, thinking about his propensity towards violence, Belc says he does not have "mother's hands").

Ultimately, supporting carework and those who perform it requires that we acknowledge that acts of care are both embodied and gendered under patriarchy. Acts of care are intersectional practices demanding specificity rather than universality in our descriptions. The term "parent" might be inclusive, but it is not equitable. As Doucet explains:

> While they [fathers] can develop ways of being and thinking that emulate what we consider stereotypical mothering behavior or what Marilyn Friedman has called the 'symbolically feminine' (Friedman, 1993, 2000), fathers do not mother in practice, partly because mothering itself is a richly varied experience and institution (Rich, 1986). They also do not mother because the everyday social worlds,

> the embodied experiences of women and men, and the larger 'gender regime' (Connell, 1995, 2000) do not permit eliding of the two institutions and distinct identities. Rather than comparing fathers to mothers, we require novel ways of listening to and theorizing about fathers' approaches to parenting. (224)

As this essay contends, one such way of "listening to and theorizing" is by reading the memoirs of parents who operate outside the traditional binary, including queer mothers and transmasculine gestational parents, such as Krys Malcolm Belc and Jennifer Finney Boylan.

To underscore a central point: No parent should have their identity erased by deadnaming or misgendering, as Belc's memoir powerfully illustrates. But eliminating the term "mother," or erasing its embodied specificity, comes at a price. As both verb and noun, the term "mother" should be mobilized strategically to describe caregivers and caregiving undertaken by individuals who do not identify as fathers. I take a cue here from Fiona Joy Green and Gary Lee Pelletier's edited collection *Essential Breakthroughs: Conversations about Men, Mothers, and Mothering,* which strives to "find the right balance between combating gender essentialism and honouring the differences that define our lives," particularly given the "social, political, and intellectual maternal aversion" of the present moment (6).

That is, while I do not want to exclude the experiences of transmasculine individuals as individual birthing people and parents—and will continue to use the terminology they use to describe their own experiences—I want to suggest that the broader cultural shift towards "inclusive" (rather: ungendered) language is illustrative of a kind of anti-maternal misogyny.[1] I also want to maintain the particular intersectional need for the term "mother" as applied to both cisgender and transwomen who act as caregivers and social mothers for children. In holding space for both cis- and transgender mothers, I am certainly not advocating for unchecked pronatalism or essentialism but rather acknowledging the particularity of mothers' experiences. For instance, in her discussion of parenting, Boylan acknowledges her position as a woman who did not have a girlhood and a mother who has had the experiences of boyhood and the privileges afforded to those who are, or pass as, straight white men. Memoirs by queer parents, cisgender and trans, call attention to the problem of inadequate language and present a more nuanced understanding of individual caregivers and families. As their narratives reveal, the arguments for degendering parenting fall flat, using the language of inclusion to stand in for anti-maternal misogyny and precise intersectionality. Jacqueline Rose opens her book on motherhood this way: "Motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong

with the world, which it becomes the task—unrealisable, of course—of mothers to repair" (1). In the interests of being inclusive, mothers are shamed, even for claiming their status as mothers.

Much as the lens of trans studies usefully helps de-essentialize our understandings of parenthood, feminist motherhood studies remind us of the particular embodied and intersectional contexts in which carework occurs—one in which gender does matter (though perhaps not as much as we once assumed). If, as O'Reilly contends, the work of motherhood studies is to "articulate and theorize the 'voice of the mother'" (5), we might thus understand the queer mother memoir as a fruitful site in which to explore, interrogate, and complicate what it means to become a mother within the broader cultural context of heteropatriarchy if not heterosexual marriage.

The term "mother" cannot be erased from parlance until actual mothers are afforded the privileges of fathers in culture until carework—truly divorced from gendered expectations—is valued. And as the coronavirus pandemic made abundantly clear, we are not there yet. Within North America and other contexts globally, patriarchy continues to thrive, with deeply held misogyny that extends to the work of caregiving, reproductive rights, and medical care. As such, the gender-neutral term "parent," which pretends that equality is the same as equity, is no less patriarchal than the normative "motherhood," critiqued decades ago by Adrienne Rich. We need to acknowledge the particularity of maternal experience under patriarchy. We also need to acknowledge the particularity of nonbinary or transmasculine pregnancy and parenthood under patriarchy. In all things, I argue for specificity and nuance rather than generalization. If we understand "mother" not as an innate identity but as a series of acts/verbs that constitute carework undertaken by non-fathers in specific, intersectional contexts, we approach an understanding of "mother" (and, by extension, "father") that is both inclusive and equitable.

Trans writer Raine Dozier's essay "Guy-Moms Unite! Mothering Outside the Box" helps locate specific caregiving that is neither an uncritical patriarchal motherhood nor a gender-neutral parenthood. As Dozier says of their own (single) parenting: "'Mother' and 'single mother' are specific, gendered social locations evoking particular expected behaviors in families, but also in interactions with social institutions…. The physical and economic constraints of single parenthood and the legal status of a primary parent with fewer assets is a uniquely gendered situation" (135). They continue: "I proudly claim the identities of 'mother' and 'single mother' and all they entail in resources, time use, legal history, oppression, resistance, and life chances while retaining my masculine and male gender identity. Surely this is queering motherhood" (135). In this way, queering motherhood—forging a deliberately anti-heteropatriarchal motherhood—requires more than inclusive language.

If queer families help us begin to see beyond the binary and the nuclear to more capacious family forms, memoirs of queer families offer language and stories that help us to rewrite social scripts. Belc's story of transmasculine gestational parenthood is only one version of queer family building. Much like the argument Doucet makes in *Do Men Mother*, in her memoir *Stuck in the Middle with You,* trans advocate Jennifer Finney Boylan discusses the nature of parental nurture and claims, in explicit contrast to Ruddick:

> At the heart of this theory [that "mothering" can be done by anyone of any gender] seems to be an assumption that caring for children is something women do. If you're a man and you're trying to nurture and protect your kids, it seems to me as if you're being called an honorary woman.
>
> There are lots of men who don't feel that expressing love makes them honorary women. One would think it makes them fathers. (30)

Boylan's book, rather than either reifying a binary of mother vs. father or eliding the term "mother" of its gendered specificity, uses personal narrative and interview to suggest the vast range of carework undertaken in myriad intersectional contexts. Throughout, Boylan explores gender and division of labour in a two-parent household and the evolving nature of parenting: "There was a time once when motherhood and fatherhood were states as simple to define as *woman* and *man*. But as the meanings of *male* and *female* have shifted from something firm and unwavering into something more versatile and inconstant, so too have the terms *mother* and *father* become more permeable and open-ended" (204). In exploring how parental identity informs carework, Boylan's memoir theorizes not gender-neutral parenthood but the vast possibilities that move beyond the binary. As Boylan puts it:

> I wonder sometimes if I am fathering my children without maleness…. There was a time when I thought, No, I need to be more womanly with my sons because otherwise I'm shortchanging my identity as female. But now I believe that parenthood is a mutable experience. There's a lot of room for me to be whoever I want to be with my children without having to lose any of my own identity. (254)

More broadly, Boylan explains, "Surely, if we make room for the mutability of gender, we have to accept that motherhood and fatherhood themselves are no longer unalterable binaries either" (205). Rather, looking at statistics, Boylan claims, "As it turns out, the biggest outlier in our culture is not same-sex couples, or transgender people, or adoptive parents, or single fathers, but the so-called traditional American family itself" (206).

As Boylan suggests, acts of carework occur within particular contexts, depending on gender, class, race, and family configuration, among the

numerous other contextual and intersectional understandings of our lives. My experience of the pandemic as a single parent by choice was radically different from the experience of a married friend with two children under the age of five or a divorced and remarried friend raising three children under shared joint custody arrangements. Or another single mother who lives and parents with chronic pain. These examples are not hypothetical but come from my community. Yes, as Garbes insists, acts of care can be undertaken by any parent of any gender. But care also occurs in a specific body. Care occurs in a specific home. This essay opened with an epigraph from a poem by my friend and colleague Divya Victor, "Care Is a Verb," in which she outlines the various acts of care undertaken by a hybrid, fictionalized caregiver over the course of the day. As the poem forcefully urges, we need to care about caregiving, and in doing so, it is incumbent upon us to consider the context in which acts of care occur. Care is not an abstraction but embodied labour.

Memoirs of queer family, such as Belc's and Boylan's, offers a space in which we might think about the stories we tell about the lives that we lead, and those stories do have social and political significance. If, as Margaret Gibson reminds us, "Queer brings the political and the social into a self-conscious connection with the intimate" (1), queer memoir offers an ideal place to explore such connection, with an inherent focus on both the interiority of the "I" who speaks and also the intimacy of the partnership and family. Memoir is particularly critical as an area in which to understand the work lives of marginalized individuals, and queer mothers, as both queer and mother, are at least doubly so. As O'Reilly and Elizabeth Podnieks note in their introduction to *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts*, "Autobiography (including diary and memoir) is an especially valuable arena in which we can register and understand the ways that women inscribe an 'I' or series of 'I's in the authoring of their own maternal selves, accounting for and expressing awareness of factors such as the body, sexuality, gender, race, class, and nationhood" (7). In short, they offer truths about the experiences of contemporary motherhood. Julie Avril Minich takes a similar approach regarding the work of queer memoir in general, arguing that such works "are an antidote to the hate-filled 'lies' of a homophobic America" (59).

Queer mother memoirs testify to the complicated nature of identity that arises when butch, nonbinary, or transmen gestate, give birth, and care for children. Yet for cisgender women mothering in patriarchy is no less complicated. And, indeed, assuming it is, arises from the same patriarchal, pronatalist, and essentialist logic. If we understand the mother through the lens of trans studies, the sex-gender-reproduction triad is divorced and de-essentialized but not disembodied. We cannot be postmaternal because we have never really been matricentric. Or motherhood remains an ideal to which no mother can ever possibly conform.

It is within mother memoirs by queer writers that we can understand ways that individual parents understand and narrate their experiences—the ways that they understand the acts of care they undertake, acts that shape their subjectivity and perform it in a variety of private and public contexts that are read by audiences in the forms of family, neighbours, and communities, as well as the broader audience of readers of their books. In the end, telling stories of queer families begins to unravel some of these assumptions and to write new stories of family, ones that will—eventually—lead to real social change.

## Endnotes

1. Although the contexts of public health are beyond the realm of my expertise as well as the contours of this analysis, it is worth acknowledging as Karleen D. Gribble et al. contend, that there are material consequences to the unsexing of pregnancy: "It behooves us therefore to be certain of how women's needs and children's developmental prerequisites may be affected by these changes in language and how they might impact advocacy for maternal and child health and human rights" (2).

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Journal of the Motherhood Initiative
25th Anniversary Issue