

Editorial

Motherhood and 21st Century Feminism: Reaching out Across the Divide

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There is a compelling need to address 21st century feminism's relationship to motherhood; however, this endeavour is complicated by decades of divisions within feminism in regards to mothers. The purpose of this special issue of *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* is to reach out across these divisions, in order to explore and reimagine the relationship between mothering and 21st century feminism.

The history of feminist encounters with motherhood and mothers is long and complicated, and the narrative about these encounters has often been framed in negative terms (O'Reilly, 2016:Ch.4). The subjects of mothers and motherhood have presented vital yet complex, even problematic issues for feminists and feminist theory alike (Hallstein, 2010: 280). From second-wave feminism through to the fourth wave, feminist debates on mothers and motherhood have shifted in emphasis and evolved over time but continue to cause disagreements and conflicts among feminist critics, as well as also produce new and compelling insights (Palmer, 1989; O'Reilly, 2016; Gibson, 2014). However, as Amber E. Kinser (2010: 161) states: 'the terrain of motherhood [...] is still difficult ground for most women to navigate [...] despite feminist effort and accomplishment, women still are largely thought of first in terms of maternal capacity' (see also Bueskens, 2018; Nelson and Robertson eds., 2019). One of the fundamental reasons for this is the enduring connection between mothering and lesser social status, according to critic Wendy Chavkin who has it that,

motherhood is one of the most intimate and essential of human connections and therefore of concern to all; and female biological reproductive capacity and social assignment for childcaring and the maintenance of domestic life have been centrally connected with women's subordinate status across many cultures and historic eras. (Chavkin, 2010: 4)

For critics and scholars, further analysis of motherhood is crucial because of the connections between the creation of gender codes and intersecting categories of oppression such as race and class (Mack, 2018). The identification of motherhood with female biology has resulted in a degree of matrophobia which has contributed to a reluctance in feminist debates to engage thoroughly with mothering and mothers (Mack, 2018). Defined as the fear of becoming one's mother (Kinser, 2008:33), matrophobia has impeded feminist engagements with mothering and created damaging divisions within feminism itself. Amber E. Kinser explains how feminist daughters' anxieties over retaining the undesirable and oppressed aspects of their mothers and their mothers' lives have led to generational divisions. Thus, "a fear of becoming one's literal mother, or figurative 'mother', is [...] a common theme in feminist living and writing" (Kinser, 2008:33). Lynn O'Brien Hallstein's book, *White Feminists and Contemporary Maternity* (2010) also presents a compelling investigation of the notion of matrophobia, its causes, and the damage this idea has caused to feminism's engagement with mothers and mothering, as well as the divisions matrophobia has generated within feminism itself. These divisions are further compounded by simplistic definitions and perceptions of motherhood as aligned with class- and social privilege, compulsory heterosexuality, and gender role conformity (see examples given in O'Reilly, 2016: Ch.4). Hallstein advocates a series of strategies for 'purging' feminism of matrophobia, thereby generating a fuller understanding of the relationship between feminism and mothering (Hallstein, 2010: 132). Extending these efforts, this special issue aims to shift the narrative of 21st century feminist encounters with motherhood to a more realistic and enabling account. The articles featured here participate in and contribute to these important attempts to move debates around feminism and motherhood on from matrophobia and notions of essentialism to a recognition of constructive diversity and common grounds.

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This special issue forms part of re-energised feminist efforts to engage with motherhood, mothers and mothering in both popular culture and academia.¹ In her article, “Looking Back 2018: Motherhood and Other Stories” for the online magazine *Frieze*, commentator Carmen Winant describes the rising preoccupation with motherhood and mothers’ experiences in popular culture. She says of 2018 that it was, ‘a remarkable year for texts on [motherhood], so long ghettoised by artists and writers alike’ (Winant, 2018). Winant describes the significance of reading these books on mothers as a shock of recognition – ‘like holding up a mirror to a face that didn’t know it had a reflection’ (Winant, 2018). Similarly, “Is Motherhood the Unfinished Work of Feminism?”, Amy Westervelt’s eloquent 2018 article in *The Guardian*, also highlights the currency of motherhood as a feminist issue. Westervelt argues that a dichotomy has arisen, between the proliferation of material on motherhood and mothers’ experience, and the reluctance shown by some feminist critics to include examinations of motherhood in discussions of the fourth wave, leading to the perception that ‘discussion of motherhood in feminist theory is [...] *verboden*’ (Westervelt, 2018). Westervelt’s argument that motherhood is seen as such a problematic issue by some feminist critics that it is best avoided or glossed over in debates can be seen in some recent publications on fourth-wave feminism which minimise discussions of motherhood (see for example Cochrane, 2013; Frances-White, 2018). However, in affirming the validity of feminist engagement with motherhood, Westervelt adds that, “What some theorists forget [...] is that ideas and expectations around mothering impact all women, whether they have children or not” (Westervelt, 2018). This point is central to discussions in this special issue; it marks a significant shift in thinking and takes the debate around motherhood beyond biological essence and heterosexual mothers, to suggest that all women are impacted by social and cultural constructions and expectations of mothers whether they are mothers or not, and whether they are cisgender or not. These important changes in critical emphasis have helped move debates around motherhood, and important shifts in motherhood studies are changing the focus of feminist debates ‘from noun to verb’ (O’Reilly, 2010: 379) (see also Rye et. al., 2017). These and other questions are examined in this special issue of *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, which is dedicated to the critical analysis of contemporary mothering and its glocal representations and manifestations. In this interdisciplinary special issue, critics and scholars from a wide range of academic fields contribute to these important debates through a series of feminist encounters with motherhood, offering original and compelling examinations of how we might rethink, revise and re-present mothers, mothering and feminism in the 21st century.

Several of the articles in this special issue explore topics or case studies related to, broadly speaking, the politics of feminist engagements with mothering, mothers and motherhood in popular culture and representation. In her 2014 book, *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives*, the critic Margaret Gibson argues that in order to engage with motherhood, feminist scholars and commentators have needed inclusive and wide-ranging critical approaches which break down the boundaries between popular culture and the academy. She puts it thus: “[i]n taking motherhood seriously, scholars of motherhood and mothering have already challenged the very divisions between ‘high theory’, ‘low theory’, and real life” (Gibson, 2018: 9). In this special issue, several articles examine the relationship between popular cultural representations of mothers and feminism. Lisa Tsaliki’s article, “The Exoticisation of Motherhood: The Body Politics of Pregnant Femininity through the Lens of Celebrity Motherhood,” reflects feminism’s concern with popular cultural representations of mothers and motherhood. Using public figures such as Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé as case studies for her investigation into the politics of representation, Tsaliki contextualises their ‘celebrity motherhood’ within racial, sexual, and postfeminist critical discussions. Tsaliki argues that the public nature of these women’s embodiment and experience of motherhood adds an educational and pedagogical dimension to their identities as mothers. In her article “Glocalised Motherhood: Sociality and Affect in Migrant Mothers’ Online Communities,” Leah Williams Veazey explores the important role and function of online communities for migrant mothers in Australia. Drawing on analysis of interviews with mothers from a range of ethnic groups and migrant communities, Veazey looks at the extent to which online communities can bridge the gap/rupture experienced by migrant mothers. These articles thus demonstrate how feminist analyses highlight intersecting categories of oppression in representations of mothers and motherhood in contemporary social media and popular culture.

Unsurprisingly, a number of articles in this special issue concern themselves with the politics of representation, and investigate the significance of feminist theory in analysing maternal portrayals in various art forms. This preoccupation with art and representation can also be seen in Adalgisa Giorgio, Gill Rye, Victoria Browne, Emily Jeremiah, and Abigail Lee Six’s (2017) edited book *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe* which examines recent debates and explorations of motherhood and its representation. The literary, filmic and artistic representations of mothers and mothering encountered in this issue’s articles are multi-dimensional and complex, and open to a variety of meanings and interpretations (see also Rye et.al, 8). In their article, “Curating ‘Creative Dystopia’: Exhibiting the Relationship between Artists, Identity and Motherhood in Twenty-first Century Australian Art,” Courtney Pedersen and Rachael Haynes explore the complexities and links between artists,

¹ These renewed efforts have also been noted by Rye et.al., in their insightful essay collection *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe* (2017)

artwork, identities and motherhood. In their article, Pedersen and Haynes examine the relationship between 21st century feminism and motherhood, arguing that contemporary artists are keen to avoid the essentialism associated with some second-wave feminist art, instead opening the subject of mothering up to diverse and innovative investigations, representations and audiences. Examining visual and artistic representations of mothers and mothering, Clare Nicholson explores the impact of medical drawings and models on cultural understandings of mothers, maternal bodies, in light of social class and other life circumstances. Her article, “Speculative Obstetric Models: Remaking Historical Anatomical Models to Visualise Epigenetic Agency,” explores the possibilities engendered through innovative representational strategies for challenging normative institutional constructions of motherhood and corporeality through new ways of visualisation. Feminist engagements with motherhood have also interrogated affective dimensions in relation to representation and cultural norms and expectations of mothers. On Mother’s Day 2019 (31st March), BBC Radio4 offered a feature by historian Professor Emma Griffin, entitled *An Alternative History of Mothering* (Griffin, 2019). The programme explored the widely held notion that maternal love is natural. Relating the clichés regularly circulated on Mother’s Day, Griffin turns to history to debunk what she calls ‘the motherhood myth’, a set of feelings and behaviours defined as essential to mothers and according to which all women are judged. These persistent ideas about and constructions of mothers continue to impact on women and 21stC feminism’s engagement with motherhood, as several articles in this special issue illustrate. In her article, “Enacting Motherhood Online: How Facebook and Mommy Blogs Reinforce White Ideologies of the New Momism”, Charity L. Gibson examines the opportunities provided by social media and blogs for mothers to express themselves, but also cautions against the reaffirmation of patriarchal ideology through such representations. Charity L. Gibson’s article investigates the significance of the ‘momosphere’ in constructing maternal identities and modes of self-representation. Through analysis of the ‘momosphere’ and the mothering styles depicted through these channels, Gibson investigates the extent to which online identities have the potential to interrogate or deconstruct dominant ideological constructions of maternal identities. Amanda Konkle’s article, “Mothering by the Book: Horror and Maternal Ambivalence in *The Babadook* (2014),” explores representations of horror and maternal ambivalence in the 2014 film *The Babadook*. Konkle’s incisive reading of the film focuses on the harmful effects of the neoliberal ideology of ‘intensive mothering’ vis-à-vis the blurring of boundaries between mother and child in attachment parenting. These articles’ discussions of the politics of representing mothers present compelling arguments for the necessity of reimagining motherhood.

Several articles in this special issue engage with important aspects of feminism and motherhood from global perspectives, challenging issues such as inequality between the West and the Global South and East, transnational surrogacy and adoption, race/ethnicity, migration, to name but a few. Black and postcolonial feminist critics have foregrounded the various inequities between the West and the Global South, arguing that, ‘examining motherhood as if there is a universal maternal subject who is oppressed by the institution of motherhood in homogenous ways is problematic’ (Mack, 2018). Amber E. Kinser (2010: 161) adds that: “Expectations for what mothering should look like also are often based on middle-class or upper-middle-class life for white people.” Wendy Chavkin draws attention to the complications and complexities of global motherhood – ‘a world in flux about the most intimate of human connections, a world wide open to a host of possibilities for reconfiguring family and parenthood, and perhaps of liberating women from the constraints of reproductive biology’ (Chavkin, 2010: 3). Research on feminism and motherhood in relation to reproductive rights, gestational surrogacy and adoption problematised by transnational relations and global inequality is one of the subjects featured in this special issue. In their article, “The Role of Culture in Negotiating Reproductive Rights of Diaspora Heterosexual Nigerian Women,” Ezinne Lynda Anizoba and Samantha Davis examine the contexts and relationships which maintain specific cultural practices that shape and influence the reproductive rights of Nigerian women in Britain. The contradictions between Nigerian women’s rights in Nigeria and those of Nigerian diaspora women are analysed, in order to interrogate the enduring gendered social hierarchy that continues to affect Nigerian women in Britain in regards to their reproductive rights. Through the analysis of written memoirs, Eva-Sabine Zehelein’s article, ““India is our Twins’ Motherland:” Transnational Cross-Racial Gestational Surrogacy and the Maternal Body in “IP Memoirs,”” investigates the systemic inequities and other issues associated with affluent women from the global north using gestational hosts (surrogate mothers) from the global south. Zehelein’s study examines the postcolonial and feminist contexts for these representations of mothering identities and their problematic relationship to global inequity.

Investigations of global motherhood and crime furthermore challenge gender stereotypes and representations of criminality in relation to mothers as victims and perpetrators. In her article, “How Could a Mother Do That to Her Children?": Filicide and Maternal Ambivalence in Croatian Media and Online Discourse”, Barbara Pleić Tomić investigates representations of filicide in Croatian popular print and online media such as internet forums. Through analysis of the contradictory representations of mothers in these texts, Tomić highlights the constructions of maternal monstrosity and otherness generated by those texts through her analysis of depictions of filicide, maternal agency and violence. The significance of popular culture in resisting and combatting racialised state violence against

marginalised groups in the USA is the topic of Michelle Hite's article "Beyoncé, Black Motherhood, and the Return of Wrenching Times." Hite explores Beyoncé's role in reclaiming black parenting and overcoming police violence against and killing of black children, thus recuperating and empowering black mothers. Such important interventions from global and culturally marginal feminisms draw attention to the ways in which the patriarchal institution of motherhood is used to underpin race and gender inequities, and the role and function of representation in resisting that dominance (Mack, 2018).

A focus on global motherhood draws attention to inequality in work and employment contexts, issues which are central to feminism. Critic Petra Bueskens argues that motherhood, rather than gender, is the key differentiating factor between men and women causing pay inequality, lack of opportunities, and lack of career progression (Bueskens, 2018). Several of the articles in this special issue explore connections between motherhood, class, race, global locations, inequity and work, through a feminist lens. Drawing on the findings from a 2016-7 research project undertaken by the Women's Studies and Development Centre, University of Delhi, India Ridhima Tewari and Manjeet Bhatia's article, "Mothers at the Malls: A Study of Glocal Aspirations and Mothering from Delhi," explores the class inequities and complexities confronting mothers who work and shop in the mall, and the contradictions between private domains and aspirational globalisation. These issues are vital to feminism, because, as Chavkin points out, 'the association of women with biologic and social reproduction remains the determinative factor underlying job segregation by gender and the gender wage gap in developed economies; and is still associated with female mortality and deprivation in developing ones' (Chavkin 2010:4). Dena Aufseeser's article, "Mothering in the Context of Poverty: Disciplining Peruvian Mothers through Children's Rights," examines Peruvian class contexts and discourses, and their implications for the construction and definition of motherhood and social class. Aufseeser focuses on the construction of the perception of 'bad' mothering caused by the cultural tradition of children working alongside adults. Gina Crivello, Jo Boyden and Alula Pankhurst's article "Motherhood in Childhood: Generational Change in Ethiopia" provides a compelling analysis of the changing role and function of motherhood in the lives of girls and young women in Ethiopia, through a fifteen-year study of a group of young females living in poverty. Marriage and motherhood in childhood was regarded as the norm in previous generations, and the conflict between past expectations and present-day norms for girls continues to complicate the picture. This research gives a detailed insight into the changing priorities and options regarding motherhood for girls and women in the global south, demonstrating how motherhood scholarship can throw new light on important feminist questions regarding gender inequality and privilege.

Feminist debates around gender, sexuality and mothering are a vital point of engagement in several articles and features in this special issue, and have also been examined in the news media. Ashley Noel Mack defines the term motherhood as 'both a complex set of experiences individuals embody and a symbolic social institution that has been used to regulate human behavior through cultural norms and social scripts that are discursively struggled over across history' (2018, n.p.) (see also O'Reilly 2016; Bueskens, 2018). The difficulty of navigating the contradictions between these two points has been central to feminism's engagement with motherhood since the second wave, as is the continued questioning of social and cultural stereotypes in light of the experiences and realities of non-binary and lesbian mothers. This work is all the more important, since popular cultural constructions of mothering and motherwork remain stubbornly normative, as a recent example illustrates. In March 2019, the ITV television programme *Good Morning Britain* featured a discussion of whether men can be mothers with critic Amy Nickell. In the programme, Nickell was mocked by the presenter who insisted that mothering can only be done by women, whereas Nickell made the point that men can and do perform mothering work and assume mothering roles. The ensuing argument, and the reactionary attitudes espoused by the presenter during the argument, reflect Kinser's assertion that:

An image of a heterosexual, two-parent household that is wholly financially independent and has one parent whose time and energy are available for home care and child rearing still shapes what "gets to count" as a family in social and institutional policy. (Kinser, 2010: 161)

The fact that the *Good Morning Britain* debate centred on essentialism versus social conditioning demonstrates why further critical work on decolonising mothers and motherhood is so pertinent for 21st century feminists. Recent feminist debates support these efforts. Scholar Andrea O'Reilly argues that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman, and that the marginalisation and oppression mothers face is caused by their social and psychological work as mothers. In other words, feminist criticism needs to separate the experience and practice of mothering from the identity of the mother (O'Reilly, 2016).

Other recent aspects of popular debate highlight feminist problematisations of mothering, gender, and sexualities. In January 2019, American-based commentator and executive producer of the parenting podcast, *The Longest Shortest Time*, Hillary Frank, produced a list of what she considered to be the eight most pertinent and important books on motherhood. In compiling the list, Frank consulted journalist Amy Westervelt who commented on the need for feminist discussions of motherhood to expand parameters and question normative

assumptions. Westervelt argues that, 'like so much of feminism in general, discussions about motherhood in America far too often center straight, cis-gendered, white, middle-class women, a fact that [...] perpetuates the marginalization of other types of mothers' (cited in Frank, 2019). The need to question and resist dominant constructions of motherhood and to explore multiple dimensions of mothering, including representations and experiences of non-binary and lesbian mothers, is examined in detail in this special issue. Mollie Ann Kervick's article, "Embracing Maternal Eroticism: Queer Experiences of Pleasure in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*," explores Maggie Nelson's 2015 novel *The Argonauts*, focusing on the erotics of motherhood, and the significance of sexualities for mothering and mothers. Drawing on Audre Lorde's discussions of the erotic, Kervick argues that, through its representations of maternal sexuality, *The Argonauts* seeks to transgress patriarchal containment of mothers to the private sphere. Margaret F. Gibson's 2014 book *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives* explores the opportunities as well as challenges of opening up motherhood to disruption, thereby destabilising normative mainstream dominant discourses and social/cultural institutions. Gibson points out that a number of works have been published in recent years focusing on queer pregnancy, adoption and family-building – these works often straddle genres, between popular, literary, autoethnographical, academic – in order to explore alternate dimensions of mothering (2014: 7). She demonstrates that queering, rather than being an individual undertaking, also involves relationships, communities, and definitions, and that challenges to normativity can take a number of different forms. Gibson argues that motherhood as a term and a category can be profoundly destabilised and problematised by queering – 'pulled outside of expectation' (Gibson, 2014: 1-2). Thus, Gibson concludes, 'queering motherhood becomes a truly expansive project, an endeavor that might profoundly destabilise existing social relations, institutions, and discourses' (2014:2). I was delighted to have the opportunity to interview Róisín Ryan-Flood about her work on lesbian motherhood and concepts of kinship. Ryan-Flood's 2009 book *Lesbian Motherhood: Gender, Families and Sexual Citizenship* argues for a new way of looking at lesbian motherhood which sees it as part of a continuum of kinship relations, rather than a transgression of heteronormative definitions and relationships. Using specific case studies and comparative analytical methods, Ryan-Flood's critical engagement with motherhood studies contributes new and important dimensions to feminist debates. This interview with Róisín Ryan-Flood explores her academic research into lesbian motherhood and issues around family construction and social/cultural change, taking her book as its starting-point for a discussion of diverse mothers, lesbian and non-binary mothers in the context of ideas about and discussions around kinship and its changing definitions. Gibson has made the important point that both political debates and academic literature frequently marginalise or leave out those whose lives do not conform to mainstream norms and expectations (Gibson, 2010:4). However, as we see in the articles presented in this special issue, popular culture and literature play a vital role in representing non-binary, lesbian and queer mothering.

In this special issue, the terms motherhood, mothering, and mother are used interchangeably, recognising the benefits of avoiding a single, potentially reductive term, and instead opening debates and investigations up to multi-dimensionality (see also Rye, G., Browne, V., Giorgio, A., Jeremiah, E., Six, A.E., 2017, who utilise a similar approach to motherhood terminology). As Andrea Liss (2004: 25) states,

Feminists today no longer need to accommodate themselves to divisionist debates that create an either/or dogmatism between feminist and mother. Indeed, if the mother is no longer placed in opposition to feminism, that is, held in contempt of feminism, a redefined field of possibilities opens up to cultural theory, art history, art practice and the lived material experiences of women for rethinking the representation of motherhood as more than a sign of codified femininity or as a muted allegory.

The special issue thus presents a number of feminist encounters with mothering, motherhood, and mothers which refute the association of gender essentialism with mothering (O'Reilly, 2016) and underline the continued significance of scholarship on motherhood (Gibson, 2014: 7) as a "redefined field of possibilities" (Liss, 2004: 25). To echo Amy Westervelt's question as to whether motherhood is the unfinished work of feminism: the diversity of feminist voices and perspectives in this special issue suggest that, far from being *verboten*, the subjects of mothering and motherhood are compellingly and keenly engaged with. Reaching out across the divide, the investigations in this special issue engender constructive and productive encounters between 21st century feminism and motherhood.

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