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New Directions in Motherhood Studies

Samira Kawash
 Department of Women's and Gender Studies
 Rutgers University

Abstract

This article surveys scholarship on motherhood and mothering published over the past decade. Academic scholars and writer-activists have written about mothers and mothering in a diversity of genres and with a broad range of disciplinary and theoretical approaches. Work on motherhood is wide-ranging and fragmented, but taken as a whole, this work simultaneously insists on the particularity and specificity of motherhood while at the same time rejecting any notion of a fixed or essential aspect of maternal experience, desire, or subjectivity. The article argues that academic feminism has marginalized and neglected both mothers as mothers and the study of motherhood more generally. This essay endeavors to bring this literature to the attention of academic feminists and to argue for the necessity of including motherhood in a broader feminist movement.

In the 2000s, motherhood was front and center in U.S. popular culture. High-profile celebrity pregnancies ushered in a whole new pregnancy aesthetic, with form-fitting fashions and tasteful nude photos. The spotlight shone equally on high-tech fertility treatments and low-tech midwives, birthing centers, and water births. Celebrity women in their late thirties and forties went public with their rounds of in vitro fertilization and surrogacy, while television talk show personality Ricki Lake produced a documentary film titled *The Business of Being Born* (2008) to advocate for natural and less medicalized childbirth. The sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* ran from 1996 to 2005, with Patricia Heaton playing the wisecracking, long-suffering suburban soccer mom; within three years of its launch, it was consistently ranking among the top-watched shows each season. We had Dr. Sears and baby slings. We had womb monitors and Baby Einstein. We had the mommy wars, the opt-out revolution, lactivism, "mommoirs," and mommy bloggers. *Newsweek* featured as its cover

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story “The Myth of the Perfect Mother” (Warner [2005a](#)), with an adapted excerpt from Judith Warner’s *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* ([2005b](#)) and related commentary; the cover illustration depicted a brunette woman sitting Kali-style with her eight arms holding a soccer ball, a high-heeled pump, a dumbbell, a frying pan, a telephone, a rag doll, and a baby. In 2008, Sarah Palin, at that time governor of Alaska, ran for the position of vice president of the United States on the strength of her experience as an all-American mom. It took Hollywood a little longer to catch on: *Motherhood: The Movie* didn’t come out until 2009, with Uma Thurman standing in for the entire enterprise of contemporary maternity in the role of a Manhattan-writer-turned-mommy-blogger juggling two kids and a diminished sense of self, who concludes by movie’s end that motherhood is tough, but it’s all worth it.

Motherhood was on my mind too during the decade. I was hoping to have a baby, but my feminist reflexes were making me a little uncomfortable about just what that would mean. So it was fortuitous when, in 2001, I came across three books that seemed to focus and explain the problem with motherhood in a way that grabbed my attention. They were Naomi Wolf’s *Misconceptions* ([2001](#)), Rickie Solinger’s *Beggars and Choosers* (2001), and Ann Crittenden’s *The Price of Motherhood* ([2001](#)). These were books from trade presses, and I found them at my local Barnes & Noble, featured on the “new nonfiction” tables. They were informed by feminism, but in a popular sense, through appeals to fairness and freedom. They were books aimed at general readers and policy makers, books that people who weren’t graduate students or professors actually bought and read. For me, as a scholar and sometime theorist, there was something a little embarrassing about admitting that such mainstream works could provide valuable perspectives. However, as a teacher, I had to admit that it was incredibly useful to find works that could speak to undergraduates whose perspectives on motherhood were fiercely personal and usually didn’t go too far beyond “of course I’ll have a career and be a mother.” The message of these books was clear: On the one hand, your “choices” as to whether and how to be a mother were profoundly shaped by your age, race, income, education, and position. On the other hand, no matter your age, race, income, education, or position, becoming a mother meant a decrease in autonomy, economic security, health, and happiness. This seemed like a pretty serious matter, one that feminist studies ought to be placing front and center.

These books emerged out of a rich feminist tradition of thinking about motherhood, beginning with Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* ([1976](#)). Work in the 1990s suggested further feminist interrogation of the ideology and experience of motherhood. Of particular significance was Lauri Umansky’s *Motherhood Reconceived* (1996), which provided a historical account of feminist thought and activism through the 1970s and 1980s, showing how feminists struggled against the most oppressive aspects of biological reductivism while at the same time working to incorporate the perspectives and needs of women as mothers. And Sharon Hays’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* ([1996](#)) enhanced the theoretical framework with her influential analysis of what she called the “ideology of intensive mothering” (5), the body of belief, advice, and practice that shaped contemporary expectations of motherhood.

Umansky and Hays were part of a wave of feminist scholarship on the material and ideological conditions of motherhood that was widely reviewed and recognized as groundbreaking. So I was surprised to observe, as I developed and refined a syllabus for an undergraduate women’s studies course on motherhood in the early years of the 2000s, that the topic had drifted to the margins of feminist studies. The books that Barnes & Noble was interested in selling received scant notice in the feminist journals. The general neglect of motherhood was not limited to a failure to review those popular books. Take this journal, for example. *Signs* published a review of two books on motherhood and reproductive technologies in 2009 (Solinger [2009](#)). Before that, the last time *Signs* had published a review of books on motherhood was 1999 (Forcey [1999](#)). This trickle of attention is in dramatic contrast to the previous decade; in the period from 1995 to 1996, *Signs* published three review essays formulating the terrain of motherhood studies at that time and discussing in detail more than thirty titles published in 1993–94 alone (Adams [1995](#); Ross [1995](#); Brush [1996](#)). The sudden disappearance of motherhood did not just occur at *Signs*; in 1999, *Frontiers* published a

special issue on “Motherhood and Maternalism”; the next time a feminist journal offered a similarly themed special issue was the Fall/Winter 2009 *Women’s Studies Quarterly* “Special Issue on Motherhood” (Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer 2009). And what about the regular issues? A search of the Women’s Studies International index for the decade reveals a surprising paucity of critical essays, studies, or book reviews on the topics of mothering and motherhood. As the director of one of seven PhD programs in women’s and gender studies in the mid-2000s, I do not recall receiving a single graduate student application that proposed a study of mothering or motherhood. Where it did appear during this period, motherhood was most frequently subsumed into discussions of women and work, migration, or reproduction (including abortion on one side and reproductive biotechnologies on the other).

What was going on? In a 1996 review titled “Love, Toil, and Trouble: Motherhood and Feminist Politics,” Lisa Brush described the wave of research around motherhood in the 1990s as evidence of feminists’ growing understanding of and engagement with maternalism as a political strategy. Yet even as such work promised to “move forward the debates over agency and women’s power by showing the risks and gains of rooting women’s claims in maternalist politics” (430), Brush worried that this moving forward was, at the same time, a step back for feminism: “I am not sure, however, whether the shift from patriarchy to maternalism signals a sophisticated analysis of the nuances in women’s activism, or a retreat from feminist politics in a period of backlash. I suspect that maternalism is feminism for hard times” (430). I think Brush was not the only one who harbored such suspicions. No one was denying that mothers, their needs and experiences, their struggles and desires, were central to feminist thought. Giving voice to the experiences of motherhood and recognizing the subjectivity and agency of mothers were clearly crucial feminist aims. And yet, as the decade progressed, such attention to mothers seemed increasingly suspect, aligned with conservative “family values” agendas that conflicted with feminist goals.

The marginalization of motherhood in feminist thought was not only a political rejection of maternalist politics construed as a conservative backlash to feminism. It was also the result of dramatic upheavals in feminist theory. As Umansky (1996) has shown, in the 1970s and 1980s, significant work in feminist thought was dedicated to revaluing the maternal as a basis for social transformation: “Feminist psychoanalytic theory, ecofeminism, feminist peace activism, feminist spirituality, and feminist antipornography theory all explored differences between men and women, and similarities among women, each foregrounding in some way women’s functions as mothers, actual or symbolic, as the key to enhanced human relations and the building of authentic community” (158). By the late 1990s, however, “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 poststructuralist accounts of gender and power left motherhood to the side, an embarrassing theoretical relic of an earlier naive view of the essential woman and her shadow, the essential mother.¹

Despite the disappearance of motherhood from academic journals, conferences, and syllabi during the past decade, individual scholars and writers nevertheless continued to pursue a range of projects that explore, illuminate, and emphasize diverse aspects of motherhood. Much of this work has been published by more popular presses or less prestigious academic presses, further marginalizing it from the center of academic feminism. As a result, little has been done to synthesize this work, and the clusters and conversations I will highlight in this essay are largely of my own devising. Yet once one troubles to examine this broad and disparate field, it is evident that contemporary thinking on mothers and motherhood has far surpassed the pitfalls and limitations of essentialist thinking. What has emerged in the last decade is a body of scholarship that simultaneously insists on the particularity and specificity of motherhood while at the same time rejecting any notion of a fixed or essential aspect of maternal experience, desire, or subjectivity.

Continuing the focus on experience and standpoint developed in the 1990s, scholars’ attention to race, class, sexuality, and social status has demonstrated the vast diversity of ways in which

women experience and engage in mothering. New modes of thinking about body, nature, and desire informed by both psychoanalysis and poststructuralism have opened up thinking about motherhood in new ways. A new generation of feminist scholar-mothers schooled in poststructuralist gender theory have begun to explore the possibilities for expressing their feminist commitments through and in their mothering. At the same time, the rise in popular attention to motherhood and its discontents in the United States has created the conditions for an emergent mothers' movement.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the impact of new feminist scholarship on the broader popular discourse on motherhood has been limited. One feminist scholar, Andrea O'Reilly, has led an effort to bridge the gap between academic feminism and mainstream discussions of motherhood, and to work with activists to create an effective mothers' movement that incorporates a feminist perspective. For the most part, this effort has not been recognized or supported by the scholars, departments, and journals that have the most prestige and influence in academic feminism. Overall, the feminist engagement with motherhood in the last decade has been fragmented, with three primary strands emerging: scholarly work on motherhood; a popular mothers' movement, plus related literary and cultural work; and O'Reilly's efforts to create an autonomous academic field of mothering studies. In an especially disheartening recent development, as of May 2010, York University, which had previously housed O'Reilly's journal, press, and research group, discontinued its support. Motherhood studies today is where feminist studies was in the 1970s, uniquely poised to have a transformative effect in a broader social context but also under siege and at risk of diminishing into divided encampments.²

Popular mothers' movement

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The increase in public and private discussions of the issues and challenges facing mothers, fathers, and caregivers, as well as the rise in mother-based advocacy and political activism, has led some to speculate that we are on the verge of a "mothers' movement: a broad-based social movement based on a platform of mothers' rights, family-friendly policies, and guidelines for truly valuing the work of caregiving" (Hewett 2006a, 36). While some activists advocate a specifically feminist approach to issues of motherhood and care, the various strands that might compose a mothers' movement have not always embraced explicit connections to feminism. The most visible groups, such as Mothers & More, which is primarily focused on workplace policies, and MomsRising, which is an offshoot of the grassroots group MoveOn.org, tend to favor a neutral language of fairness and opportunity rather than a direct appeal to feminist principles of gender equity.³ The most explicit attempt at advocating for a mothers' movement within the broader context of feminism is the Mothers Movement Online, primarily the work of activist Judith Stedman Tucker.⁴

Mothers' movement organizers have made varying efforts at inclusiveness. As Patrice DiQuinzio (2006) has emphasized, the concerns with work and child care that characterize the most visible advocacy groups are the traditional concerns of white middle-class women. Women of color have organized mothers' groups to focus on issues that are quite different: gun violence in urban communities, public schooling, welfare reform, and poverty. Divergent priorities as well as diverse understandings of motherhood raise the question of whether such a mothers' movement is the most effective way to pursue a social change agenda. A further complication is the relation between mothering, parenting, and caregiving. While the valuing of caregiving need not and ought not be restricted to any particular group of caregivers, there is a significant gap between the discourse of mothers' rights, which presumes the identification of maternity with care, and the discourse of fathers' rights, which has sought to preserve or restore the traditional prerogatives of paternity. As of yet, it does not appear that any aspect of the mothers' movement has sought to embrace or include men, fathers, or fatherhood.

The book most frequently cited as the founding text of the new mothers' movements in the United States is Crittenden's *The Price of Motherhood* (2001), a piercing analysis of how existing policies and practices systematically undermine the economic well-being of mothers. Crittenden was

criticized for seeming to lavish too much attention on the plight of lawyers and professors who lost out on high future earnings when they took on motherhood (Flanagan 2004). But her broader economic analysis provides a useful framework as well as hard data to show how, at whatever level of employment or income, women become economically worse off over their life courses as a result of becoming mothers. Crittenden diagnoses the problem as, to be reductive, the unpaid extraction of care work from mothers. The solution, she argues, is “for the entire society to contribute to the provision of a public good that everyone desires: well-raised children who will mature into productive, law-abiding citizens” (258). Crittenden proposes a number of policy reforms aimed not only at easing the burden on mothers who work outside the home but also at reducing the high economic penalties imposed on mothers for whom unpaid caring is their primary occupation.

One of the reasons Crittenden has been so effective as a popular advocate is her ability to demonstrate the false opposition between mothering and work: not only that mothering is work, of course, but that movement between unpaid care and paid work is an important aspect of most mothers’ lives. In contrast, the so-called mommy wars reported (or invented) by the popular media in the first half of the 2000s pitted the interests of these two hypothetical poles of mothering against each other, stay-at-home moms versus working moms. In *The Truth behind the Mommy Wars* (2005), Miriam Peskowitz takes aim at this false and inflammatory pitting of mother against mother. In its place, she provides a detailed and accessible account of the cultural, economic, and structural factors that make it so difficult to integrate paid work with family life, for both men and women. Many of these specific factors are addressed in *The Motherhood Manifesto* by MoveOn.org cofounder Joan Blades and activist Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner (2006). In her review of *The Motherhood Manifesto*, Tracy Thompson (2006) notes that the book “aims to be for the twenty-first century mother’s movement what *The Feminine Mystique* was for the twentieth century women’s movement: a groundbreaking, consciousness-raising, rousing call to grassroots political activism.” The platform includes: health care, paid family leave, early learning and child care, protection from toxins, after-school programs, quality children’s television, paid sick days, fair pay, and flexible work. In contrast to advocacy that focuses only on workplace policies, the *Motherhood Manifesto* is interesting in that it integrates aspects of social conservatism in its concern with the quality of children’s television and entertainment and aspects of social progressivism in its concern with toxins and the environment. As has been observed in other contexts (most notably, the debates over gay marriage), the traditional distinctions between conservative and progressive have become less and less useful in understanding these new political alignments.

Mothers in academe

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Academic mothers face many of the same pressures and demands as women in other professions, but there are also many factors specific to the institutional organization of scholarship and teaching in higher education. How and why the voices of mothers have effectively been silenced in academe (including those domains of academe that profess allegiance to feminist values) have recently emerged as a significant theme in writings on motherhood.

Several recent collections compile first-person accounts of the experiences of women struggling to combine academic or research careers with motherhood, even if those experiences are frequently discouraging. Readers can peruse *Mama, PhD*, edited by Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant (2008); *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory*, edited by Emily Monosson (2008); and *Parenting and Professing*, edited by Rachel Hile Bassett (2005). These collections suggest various possibilities for negotiating a career path in an arena that is open to women so long as they subsume their personal lives to the demands of their job, a job that assumes that someone else is taking care of family and domestic concerns. The stories of success also provide valuable role models and encouragement for women, who frequently find themselves isolated in their departments or institutions and desperately in need of mentors or role models. One of the lessons of these accounts is that the obstacles to combining mothering and work are related to, but not reducible to, gender bias. This is common knowledge, the topic of gossip in faculty lounges and the subtext of tenure meetings at colleges and

universities: the female assistant professor reproduces at her peril prior to her tenure decision. In the academy, as in other professions, mothers face a unique and uniquely debilitating set of obstacles and challenges.

In hopes of improving the prospects for women to combine motherhood and academic careers, O'Reilly is currently working on a research project that seeks to better understand the forces leading to academic mothers' success.⁵ Building on research that quantitatively documents the negative impact of motherhood on women's career prospects, O'Reilly is conducting in-depth interviews with some one hundred mothers in academe as the basis for an account of the "lived experiences of parenting and professing." She poses the question: "What enables 'successful' women to achieve the success they have as mothers in academe? Is it mentoring, availability of childcare, a flexible tenure track, maternity leave provisions, presence of extended family, shared parenting and domestic labour responsibilities, timing of children's birth, or a questioning of the ideology of the 'good' mother?" (4). I suspect the answer is, "all of the above, and then some." But while such research will provide stronger data to support institutional change, not everyone agrees with the underlying assumption that the best outcome for every mother would be to stay on an academic career trajectory.

One theme in the first-person narratives of *Mama, PhD* and similar anthologies is how profoundly motherhood changes women's perceptions, goals, and ambitions. Some academic mothers, like mothers in other demanding professional careers, decide to stay. But some decide to leave, to seek alternative positions or nontraditional career paths. We know much less about these women who leave, largely because once they exit the PhD program or faculty position, they no longer appear in the studies and statistics. *Mama, PhD* includes a section titled "Recovering Academic" in which several mothers recount the collision between their responsibilities and desires as mothers and the responsibilities, demands, and constraints of their institutional employers. Decisions to leave the academy are described not simply as the decision to choose children over career but rather as a way of moving forward that allows for the kind of child rearing these women want to practice while sustaining a sense of intellectual engagement and productivity in alternative contexts. These nontraditional academics suggest that there are many ways to define success and that the opposition between work and family is one that can be reimagined and renegotiated in creative ways once one moves outside the narrow framework linking success to institutionally authorized life trajectories. Anyone engaged in mentoring and advising female graduate students should listen carefully to the voices in this collection.

The Association for Research on Mothering and feminist mothering

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No discussion of motherhood studies can progress far without acknowledging the energetic and boundless efforts of O'Reilly, who has committed her career to institutionalizing the study of motherhood. An associate professor in the School of Women's Studies at York University, O'Reilly is the founder and director of the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM; reorganized in 2010 as the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement [MIRCI]), under whose umbrella she founded and edited a journal, launched a publishing house (Demeter Press), and organized numerous conferences in both Canada and the United States. The *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering (JARM)* began publication in 1999 and was, for the entire period of its existence, the only journal dedicated to the field of motherhood studies (the journal ceased publication in 2010). Over its decade-long run, the journal published issues representing an impressively broad array of topics, approaches, and perspectives on maternity. O'Reilly's vision of community building links scholars, activists, and engaged citizens; *JARM* was especially successful in incorporating research with narrative, poetry, and art to appeal to a broad audience.

In addition to the creation and support of these institutions, O'Reilly herself is incredibly prolific. She has published two monographs and edited or coedited another thirteen books, with several more in the pipeline. If you dive into motherhood studies, one of the first things you'll hit is

some emanation of O'Reilly's project (of the thirteen books on motherhood received by *Signs* for review in 2008–9, four were from Demeter Press and a fifth was O'Reilly's own *Feminist Mothering* [2008]). In addition to recent monographs and anthologies, O'Reilly is general editor of the *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (2010); editor of a textbook titled *Maternal Theory* (2007), which covers a broad and inclusive array of approaches and perspectives and would be an excellent resource for anyone beginning to engage with the field; and compiler of motherhood and mothering courses and syllabi.

In her book *Rocking the Cradle* (2006) as well as in the more recent edited collection *Feminist Mothering* (2008), O'Reilly builds on Rich's opposition between experience and institution by positing a deliberately constructed, liberatory feminist practice of mothering as an alternative to the oppressive institution of motherhood. Through the theory and practice of feminist mothering, O'Reilly argues, feminist women can consciously choose ways of mothering that move outside or beyond the narrow confines and demands of patriarchal motherhood.⁶ One is reminded in the course of O'Reilly's accounts of feminist mothering that experience—how we live our lives, our opportunities, and ultimately our happiness—is really what is at stake in the feminist project. But the emphasis on experience and empowerment from the perspective of individual women risks bypassing any serious engagement with politics, policy, or power.

Locating motherhood: Experience, agency, subjectivity, power

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In my view, a feminist intervention into the institution of motherhood needs to begin by questioning the very categories of experience and power that O'Reilly's feminist mothering takes for granted. And to truly comprehend the complexities of such terms, we need to broaden our awareness and understanding of the diverse positions and meanings of motherhood. Feminist scholarship on motherhood in the past decade has focused attention on the various ways in which mothers cannot or will not submit to the (white, middle-class, heterosexual) norms of good mothering. In particular, scholars have worked to understand the dynamics of motherhood within various contexts, with special attention to location, experience, and power. Taken as an (incoherent, vaguely delimited) body, this work has begun to construct a more complex understanding of the ways in which discourses of mothering and motherhood both shape and are shaped by various mothering practices and experiences. What follows is an admittedly partial and necessarily limited summary of some of the most productive areas of inquiry from the past decade.

Middle-class stereotypes dismiss poor, unmarried mothers either as incompetent in their unwillingness or inability to use birth control, or else as malicious schemers using children as a way to gain access to more welfare benefits. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas spent five years interviewing poor women from all races and age groups who live in the depressed and poverty-stricken neighborhoods of Philadelphia and nearby Camden, New Jersey. In *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (2005), Edin and Kafelas argue, on the basis of their research, that poor, single mothers make positive choices to have children because they want them. For poor women with few prospects, motherhood is perceived not as an unwanted burden but as way to experience joy, value, and achievement. Edin and Kafelas note that while marriage offers little to improve poor women's prospects and thus is not highly regarded in the communities they studied, becoming a mother enhances perceptions of women's maturity and gains them respect and esteem in their communities. A similar account of the positive value of motherhood for marginalized women is provided in Elaine Bell Kaplan's *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood* (1997), a study of black teenage mothers in East Oakland, California. The sociological perspective of *Not Our Kind of Girl* might be productively supplemented with the immediacy of the first-person accounts collected in *You Look Too Young to Be a Mom*, edited by Deborah Davis (2004). The authors in this collection, ranging from suburban honor students to inner-city gangbangers, illuminate the inadequacy of policy frameworks that emphasize the pathology of teen pregnancy and that depict teen mothers as doomed to lives of failure and disappointment. Despite the emotional and practical hardships they face, the women who

contributed essays to this anthology demonstrate that teen motherhood does not mean the end of education, ambition, or happiness.

Edin is also coauthor, with Laura Lein, of an extremely eye-opening study of nearly four hundred mothers receiving welfare payments in the 1990s titled *Making Ends Meet* (1997). Based on meticulous analysis of household budgets and in-depth interviews, Edin and Lein reveal that no mother could support herself or her dependents on welfare payments alone. Mothers on welfare were everything but lazy, constantly working off the books and hustling to increase their incomes. Low-wage work made poor women worse off, as they were additionally burdened with expenses for child care, transportation, and the like. And yet the transition to low-wage work was precisely the intention of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, intended to “end welfare as we know it.” Hays, in *Flat Broke with Children* (2003), examines the consequences of forcing poor single mothers, who comprised some 90 percent of welfare recipients, off the welfare rolls and into jobs with minimal pay, no health benefits, no child care, and no prospect for advancement or improvement. Debunking the stigma surrounding single mothers is the aim of *Unsung Heroines* (2006), by sociologist Ruth Sidel. Based on interviews with fifty single mothers of different ages, races, classes, incomes, and education levels, Sidel seeks to show both that single mothers are not a monolithic entity and that women mothering without partners are courageous, resilient, creative, and strong.

It should be no surprise that money matters enormously to how women mother and how they experience their own mothering. *Unequal Childhoods* (Lareau 2003) suggests that the standards of good motherhood depend as much on context as on culture. In particular, author Annette Lareau argues, class matters, both as it creates or constrains material and social opportunities and as it shapes the values, goals, and identities that mothers bring to raising their children. And yet, as Val Gillies points out in *Marginalised Mothers* (2006), poor and working-class mothering practices are commonly denigrated as bad mothering by associating them with poor outcomes for children. Her study of working-class family life in Britain explores “how working-class mothers make sense of their lives with their children, how they position themselves within a context of inequality and vulnerability, and how they resist, subvert and survive material and social marginalisation” (2).

The push toward the legal recognition of gay marriage on a national level has drawn increasing attention to gay and lesbian families. Both legal developments such as gay marriage and technological innovations in reproductive technologies have created new ways for lesbians to become mothers. The reigning assumption, according to Nancy J. Mezey (2008), has been that “once lesbians have options to become mothers, they will automatically want to become mothers just because they are women” (9). Yet, as Julie M. Thompson reminds readers in *Mommy Queerest* (2002), *lesbian* and *mother* have most often been construed as mutually exclusive propositions. Thompson’s study explores the rhetorical and ideological tensions that exclude lesbians from the realm of legitimate motherhood. This exclusion is not merely theoretical. Lesbian mothers fighting fathers for child custody have battled not only on the facts but on the presumption that lesbians are, by definition, unfit mothers. Non-birth mothers in lesbian couples have also found their motherhood questioned. Ellen Lewin, author of *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture* (1993), began her work in the late 1970s with the aim of validating the existence and competence of lesbian mothers. As social views of lesbians and mothers shifted, though, she has worried that such validation risks contributing to a wider cultural privileging of mothers over nonmothers (6).

The debates surrounding the choice that some lesbian women make to become mothers have been starkly polarized: Are lesbian mothers transforming the patriarchal institution of motherhood? Or are they attempting to assimilate into mainstream culture by way of the mother identity, thereby hoping to gain some version of heterosexual privilege? In *New Choices, New Families* (2008), Mezey seeks to denaturalize the desire for motherhood by examining why some lesbians become mothers and why some lesbians do not. There are no easy answers. As Mezey points out, “Lesbians make mothering decisions on rocky and often contradictory terrain. Beliefs about motherhood, the

promise of reproductive technologies, and progressive laws that allow lesbians to develop and support their families intersect with the simultaneous heterosexist and homophobic backlash against same-sex families, sending a constant flow of mixed messages to lesbians” (8). Other recent studies seek to move beyond the resistance-versus-assimilation debate by making use of advances in poststructuralist and queer theory. Amy L. Hequembourg mobilizes a theoretical framework derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to analyze the choices, experiences, and identities of more than forty lesbian mothers in *Lesbian Motherhood: Stories of Becoming* (2007). In *Lesbian Motherhood: Gender, Families and Sexual Citizenship* (2009), Róisín Ryan-Flood focuses on the ways in which lesbian motherhood challenges heteronormativity, advances queer citizenship, and contributes to the contestation of biology.

The entangling of biological and nonbiological definitions of motherhood becomes a central issue in the research investigating the production of motherhood through adoption. *Like Our Very Own*, by Julie Berebitsky (2000), documents the role that adoption played in defining both motherhood and family in the first half of the twentieth century. This work is a welcome addition to Solinger’s groundbreaking research on the experiences of unmarried white women who were expected to relinquish their babies to so-called deserving families in the same period, while unmarried black women were expected to raise their own babies (Solinger 1992, 2001). Ann Fessler’s *The Girls Who Went Away* (2006) is a study based on interviews with unmarried white women forced to surrender their children between 1945 and 1973, giving voice to the wrenching loss these women experienced as a result of losing their children, as well as the pain of keeping such loss as a shameful and guilty secret.

Scholarship on adoptive motherhood has also begun to address the increasingly visible practice of transracial and transnational adoption. Scholars have used adoption as a lens for interrogating and demystifying the cultural fetishes of blood and kinship. Barbara Katz Rothman’s book *Weaving A Family* (2005) attempts to consider her personal experience as a white adoptive mother of a black child in relation to broader sociological and theoretical perspectives. Sara K. Dorow’s *Transnational Adoption* (2006) considers both institutional and personal dimensions of the adoption of Chinese children by U.S. families. Heather Jacobson takes a slightly different approach in *Culture Keeping* (2008), a study on how white mothers understand themselves and their families as they attempt to create and preserve an ethnic identity (different from that of the family) for their adopted children. The anthology *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, edited by Toby Alice Volkman (2005), provides many surprising accounts of the profound ways in which the transnational circulation of children is transforming the experience of kinship and motherhood.

As Solinger has argued, the logic of adoption is to sort women into good mothers, who deserve children, and bad mothers, who are enjoined, expected, or forced to surrender their children to good mothers. It’s easy to see the unfairness of this logic when the bad mothers are defined in terms of poverty, geography, or race. But what about the *really* bad mothers? You know the ones I’m talking about, the ones who abandon, harm, or perhaps kill their children; or the ones who use drugs and neglect their children; or the ones who end up in prison. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky broke ground with *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (1998), which assembled essays and articles that were more interested in understanding the demonization of those bad mothers than in condemning their shortfalls. “Bad” mothers expose the dark underside of an essentialist view of motherhood: if mother-love and self-sacrifice are the natural expressions of maternity, then anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing of one’s own needs over those of the child are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous. This makes for an especially intriguing premise in the collection *Unbecoming Mothers: The Social Production of Maternal Absence*. As editor Diana L. Gustafson (2005) points out, “In pronatalist societies, in which becoming a mother is naturalized and reified, unbecoming a mother—the process of coming to live apart from biological children—is variously regarded as unnatural, improper, even contemptible” (1). The collection brings together various case studies that attempt to understand how women experience mothering away from their children in a culture that equates mothering with

maternal presence. But absent mothering may mean something entirely different in another context. For example, in *Servants of Globalization* (2001) and *Children of Global Migration* (2005), Rhacel Salazar Parreñas shows how Filipina migrant domestic workers construct a positive maternal identity that focuses on economic support rather than physical presence. Mothering is not essentially determined by presence; we must acknowledge that how and under what circumstances a woman chooses or is forced to leave her child matter tremendously.

Studies of domestic work and domestic workers have drawn attention to the role of migration both in enabling a particular image of motherhood in the global North and in effecting a transformation of the position of motherhood in the global South. In *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (2003), editors Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild draw attention to what they describe as a gendered “care drain” (29), drawing women caregivers from poor to rich countries and leaving the children those women would otherwise care for in more vulnerable circumstances. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) and Grace Chang (2000) offer more extended analyses of these effects. As these studies suggest, attention to transformations in family, work, and domesticity at a global level provide a view of motherhood that cannot be comprehended in the old good mother–bad mother dichotomy. *The Globalization of Motherhood*, edited by Wendy Chavkin and JaneMaree Maher (2010), draws attention to such global forces as declining fertility, the desire for motherhood in the context of female employment, the development of the global market in reproductive technologies, the rising transnational demand for feminized caregiving labor, and changing family forms. Motherhood in the twenty-first century seems to refigure the relations of body, care, kinship, presence, and desire, all of which provided a more secure basis for ideas about motherhood in the past.

In the United States, the foremost cause of maternal absenteeism is the policies and practices of the criminal justice system. In *War on the Family*, Renny Golden (2005) looks at the consequences of the growing rates of incarceration of women for families and children. More than 80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers, and most are single mothers who prior to imprisonment were the primary caregivers or sole guardians of their children. Golden draws attention not only to the plight of women trying to mother from within prison but to the devastation of entire families when a mother is incarcerated. In *Mothers in Prison*, Lana Marlow (2009) presents incarcerated mothers’ stories told in their own voices in order to show how they contest, negotiate, and accept dominant ideas about women and mothers in society, and about their place in society as criminals. Worth a final mention, especially for those interested in criminology, is *When Mothers Kill: Interviews from Prison* by Michelle Oberman and Cheryl L. Meyer (2008). The authors interviewed forty women convicted of murdering their children and discover common threads in these women’s lives: domestic abuse, limited opportunity, and isolation and lack of social support, a saddening portrait both of human frailty and of the failure of a society to meet these women’s needs as mothers and as human beings.

Mothers’ voices

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Despite several decades of feminist critique, it appears that new mothers continue to be surprised at the gap between idealized depictions of blissful maternity and the more complicated and exhausting reality, akin to running an emotional marathon every day. We know this because mothers are speaking out, telling it like it is, and it isn’t always pretty. Rich blazed the trail with *Of Woman Born* (1976), in which she dares to admit feelings of murderous rage toward a baby who will not stop needing her while her husband, doctors, and friends insist that her every desire will be fulfilled by the joys of motherhood.

Rich, at least in the angry parts, seems pretty mild by today’s standards. In the 2000s, mothers found their voice. And for the most part, they were pissed. In memoirs, blogs, anthologies, and zines, women wrote about their experiences, their joys, and their disappointments as mothers. Much of this is powerful stuff: women, lots of them, are making a lot of noise, talking and writing about mothering in ways that resist guilt for those supposedly nonmaternal feelings, that refuse to

pathologize their own frustration and rage, and that seek broader contexts and communities in which to understand their experiences of motherhood, both the good and the bad.

Web sites like HipMama.com, LiteraryMama.com, and MamaZine.com (suspended in February 2009) cultivated writers who spoke in raw, honest, and funny voices about motherhood in the trenches. The mothering memoir gained recognition and market share as a popular genre during the decade. Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* (1993) was the first in a now well-established tradition. Lamott modeled angry motherhood for the "postfeminist" 1990s: all the passion and honesty of *Of Woman Born* without the uncomfortable bits about patriarchy and feminism. But it was also a vision of motherhood that delved into the joys and passions of nurturing a child, the visceral force of love and protectiveness.

In contrast to Lamott's lyrical narrative, mothering memoirs in the 2000s have shifted the weight from finely tuned sensibilities to fiercely wrought expressions of anger, shock, and resilience, often organized as brief essays that more frequently than not saw first light as blog posts. Andrea Buchanan, one of the founders of Literary Mama, set the tone with *Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It* (2003). *Mother Shock* was followed by countless titles exploring similar terrain, from Faulkner Fox's *Dispatches from a Not-So-Perfect Life; or, How I Learned to Love the House, the Man, the Child* (2003) to the more recent *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace* by Ayelet Waldman (2009). The prevailing tone is humorous and ironic; best sellers in the genre are those that feature increasingly creative ways of describing poop and vomit and that elevate playgroup conflicts to the epic proportions of *War and Peace*. These moms are funny and strong, but they are also angry: angry at the high standards, competitive parenting, and impossible expectations of mothering that make them feel guilty or like failures when they fall short, which is always. The anger does not, however, suggest any particular course of action. Rather, the simplified solution to mommy woes offered in the best sellers amounts to: sure, the standards are impossibly high, so just learn to give yourself a break.

I do not dispute that it is an extraordinary relief to realize that serving pancakes for dinner or leaving the sink full of dirty dishes for a week or letting your daughter go to school with a giant rat's nest of hair do not mean you are an unfit mother (full disclosure: I am mostly only guilty of the last one, but I'm giving myself a break). And it may be true that, by telling it like it really is, these books and writers did something to dislodge the powerful disciplinary force of the norm of "good mothering" for some women.⁷ Nevertheless, there is a clear image of ideal motherhood that emerges from this mainstream literature: mothers can succeed despite the impossible standards for perfect motherhood, so long as they enjoy leisure, the economic capacity to buy and consume, literacy, cultural capital, and social privilege (which usually includes a husband).

The voices of women mothering on the margins have not been so well represented by trade presses. And so we must say, thank goodness for the feminist and alternative presses, which manage to continue publishing even as the economics of books become ever more impossible. These presses are bringing out anthologies that vastly expand the image of mothers and motherhood to embrace generational, economic, racial and ethnic, and national diversities, as well as versions of motherhood that do not reflect the ideological primacy of the nuclear heterosexual family.

Mothering in the Third Wave (Kinser 2008) proposes to explore "what feminist mothers right now are struggling with and wrestling through" (2). In the personal essays collected in this volume, mostly young feminist mothers recount their confusion and ambivalence about motherhood, the emotional conflicts pitting their feminist-inspired critiques of mothers entrapped in female subservience and the perceived tyranny of biology against their realization of their own mothering desires, and their efforts to construct ways of mothering that express their values and preserve their sense of self. The diversity of portrayals of *Mothering in the Third Wave* might be supplemented by several other useful collections that highlight less-heard voices. Poets, novelists, and journalists reflect on the complexities of motherhood as experienced by black women in *Rise Up Singing* (Berry 2005). Younger women's voices from diverse perspectives are also reflected in *Breeder*:

Real-Life Stories from the New Generation of Mothers (Gore and Lavender 2001) and *The Essential Hip Mama* (Gore 2004). These anthologies present themselves as working for social change, and they do important work in giving voice to previously silent and invisible experiences. Yet if the aim is to transform the institution of motherhood, it must be said that sometimes these personal voices are frustrating. The personal is just so ... personal. Perhaps in these days of diminished political expectations, it is the best we can hope for to conclude, as one contributor to *Mothering in the Third Wave* puts it, "I believe that how we live our lives positively affects individual and community attitudes. Our daily practice serves as a powerful form of social activism" (Fine 2008, 79). This seems to be a common thread in many of the accounts of experience: that individual choices and practices, and community attitudes, are the locations to work for change. But as Rich so powerfully demonstrated at the outset, the problem of the institution of motherhood is not attitudes, it's power.

Talking back to the experts

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Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English first described the relation between women's loss of power and agency and the rise of expert knowledge in *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women* ([1978] 2005), a book whose theoretical framework of oppositional dichotomies was shaped by its original context in 1970s feminism but that nevertheless provides a powerful lens for considering the pervasiveness and impact of expert knowledge and advice. The power of the expert to shape the expectations, experiences, and judgments of mothers is the subject of *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* by Rima D. Apple (2006). Apple shows how authoritative knowledge of childrearing shifted away from mothers and to psychologists, health experts, and scientists over the course of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries.⁸ Although focused more on experts than on mothers, Ann Hulbert's *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children* (2003) provides a useful context for understanding the intellectual and social origins of the bookshelves full of parenting advice confronting a new mother today.

And with so many books to sift through, it's no wonder that motherhood is frequently depicted as a constant state of self-doubt and anxiety. Even the experts don't agree; how is a mother to know what to do? One solution is to throw the books out the window, which is the approach advocated in *Mother Knows Best: Talking Back to the "Experts"* (Nathanson and Tuley 2008). This collection of essays includes both scholarly analysis and personal reflection, and it takes as its theme the tension between expert knowledge and mothering experience. *Mother Knows Best* is organized into thematic sections covering pregnancy and birth, breast-feeding, child raising, and the guilt-inducing power of the good-mother ideal. Many of these essays reflect the authors' personal experience negotiating expert knowledge. The aim is to reclaim mothering for the mothers: "When it comes to making the right decisions for ourselves and our families, mothers *do* know best: the best mothering practices can only be adopted after careful feminist analysis by and for mothers" (4).

Nature, desire, instinct: Postessentialism

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My favorite essays in *Mother Knows Best* grapple with the appeal to young feminist mothers of "natural" birth and parenting practices that, despite posing viable alternatives to a consumerist and technological mainstream, nonetheless incorporate troubling antifeminist elements. I think there is enormous potential for feminist thought to engage more constructively with ideas and ideals of the natural, which form the only significant counternarrative to the dominant practices of medicalized childbirth and expert-guided child raising, practices that place mothers in the anxious and disabling position of passive objects of attention, care, and expertise. Chris Bobel's *The Paradox of Natural Mothering* (2001) is a first attempt to understand the mothering experiences of women who self-consciously reject careerism, consumerism, and mainstream child-raising practices. Unfortunately, this study is limited by a theoretical framework that reduces mothering practice and experience to the polar ideals of resistance versus accommodation: natural mothering, according to Bobel, resists technology and capitalism but accommodates patriarchy. Despite these mothers' passionate commitment to and satisfaction in the

forms of family life they have created, Bobel concludes that they are effectively colluding in their own gender oppression by choosing for themselves the oppressive roles and tasks patriarchy has assigned them, and that they are justifying these choices through an unquestioned recourse to nature. This nature, therefore, is suspect; for Bobel, nature seems to be another name for patriarchal power.

This idea that the ideology of the natural can only reinforce patriarchy bothers me. It seems to me that the recourse to nature to explain and justify an array of mothering practices might just as easily serve a mother's needs (e.g., the need to be near her child or the need to educate and nurture her child without outside interference). Perhaps the appeal of a recourse to nature for some women is that this discourse provides a positive framework for expressing a form of desire that is otherwise dismissed by some as self-destructive. This is, to be sure, a different sort of feminist perspective, one that begins from women's desires and pleasures, and from their own sense of the value and meaning of what they do. Such is the project of *Maternal Desire* (2004) by Daphne de Marneffe, which focuses on the emotional and relational aspects of mothering from the perspective of the mother.

De Marneffe, a clinical psychologist working in a psychoanalytic framework, points out that wanting to nurture children is a major feature of many women's lives. Rather than dismiss this as a retrograde form of feminine masochism, de Marneffe proposes taking this "maternal desire" seriously as an aspect of personhood. This is not something we are accustomed to doing. Women's progress seems to have been predicated on figuring out ways to free women from the compulsion to reproduce and the demands and constraints of child care. Even O'Reilly's feminist mothering, which shares the concern with considering what women gain from motherhood, draws a sharp distinction between self-sacrifice in giving oneself over to the demands of motherhood and self-realization in an authentic, autonomous relation to one's mothering practice. In contrast, de Marneffe suggests that maternal desire may in fact encompass, and be satisfied through, what appear to be the self-effacing and self-sacrificing demands of motherhood. She calls for "a fresh look at maternal desire, in the context both of the practical conditions of women's current lives and in light of the powerful cultural ideas that contribute to women's perceptions of themselves. We need to develop a more satisfying, more complex understanding of what women *get* from mothering, not only the rewards of being responsive to children but also the ways in which mothering is responsive to self. What contributes to an authentically joyful experience of motherhood? What gets in the way of it?" (54). *Maternal Desire* is written from a base of personal experience, which drives a larger and wider theoretical engagement. So it is not surprising that de Marneffe's own experience and her own passions might cause her to overstate her position that mothers (generally? all mothers?) value and yearn for time and connection with their children, or that being fully "available" is the only or best way to develop a relationship with a child. But de Marneffe's broader point is that mothering—in which de Marneffe includes the worst parts, the messy work of bodily care, the exhausting work of emotional nurturing—is not just for the child but also for the mother. De Marneffe suggests that the failure to acknowledge the potential value of mothering for mothers, as an emotional experience, as an occasion for personal growth, and as a site for meaningful accomplishment, is a major obstacle to imagining possibilities for change in the organization of work, life, family, and gender.²

De Marneffe is extremely careful to avoid collapsing the existence of maternal desire with the essence of female reproduction. We know that not every woman who gives birth yearns to nurture and form a relationship with her child. In this light, biologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (1999) is a valuable corrective for anyone who would confuse the existence of a particular maternal behavior with the natural essence of maternity. In a cross-cultural, historical, and biological consideration of human mothers alongside primates and other animal species, Hrdy shows that animal mothers (including humans) are constantly negotiating conflicts between their own needs and those of their offspring. In Hrdy's evolutionary view, both nurture and neglect can be adaptive maternal responses to environmental pressures and opportunities. In this light, the mother who abandons a child she cannot care for is no less natural than the mother who cherishes her children. Hrdy's evolutionary view also sees natural adaptation in

the mother who apportions food unequally among herself and her offspring in times of scarcity, or in the mother who restricts her reproduction to increase the resources available to her existing offspring.

Hrdy's work is a useful elaboration of the proposition that biological arguments need not be reductive or essentializing. But as far as I can tell, her work has had approximately zero impact on feminist studies of motherhood. It cannot be denied: biology is the third rail of motherhood studies. The persistent essentialism and latent sexism of mainstream scientific approaches to human evolution and reproduction are discouraging, no doubt. Yet insofar as (at least to date) reproduction cannot be dissociated from the female body, it seems excessively dogmatic to insist that biology has nothing to do with mothering. Better to confront biology head on and work for better biological understanding than to run into the bushes and hope it goes away.

“Nature” and “technology” in pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding

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Scholars interested in the most directly biological aspects of motherhood have provided invaluable insight into how culture makes meaning out of the bodily work of inseminating, gestating, birthing, and nursing an infant. Rayna Rapp's *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus* (1999) builds on Rothman's (1986) concept of the “tentative pregnancy” to describe the profound effects of accelerating technological interventions in shaping and giving meaning to a woman's relation to her pregnancy and her baby. Technology has also changed the meaning and experience of infertility: whereas involuntary childlessness was once seen as a personal tragedy, it is now regarded as a treatable disease requiring medical intervention. This change has had profound implications for how women view their bodies and their potential reproductive capacities, and it has shifted the locus of reproduction from the family to medical science, as explored in *Infertility around the Globe*, edited by Marcia C. Inhorn and Frank van Balen (2002). Excellent feminist ethnographies of the workings of reproductive technologies in the formation of subjects and meanings include Sarah Franklin and Celia Roberts's *Born and Made* (2006) and Charis Thompson's *Making Parents* (2005). In their most experimental forms, the new reproductive technologies suggest a radical decoupling of gender, reproduction, and parenthood. Along these lines, Laura Mamo's *Queering Reproduction* (2007) analyzes lesbian reproductive practices in order to suggest ways in which technologies of reproduction destabilize and reform traditional understandings of kinship and heteronormativity.

Dorothy Roberts's book *Killing the Black Body* (1997) was one of the first to draw attention to the impact of race and racism in the emergence of reproductive technologies. In a recent look back at that work, Roberts has suggested that her earlier account of the racial stratification of reproduction needs to be supplemented by an understanding of the racializing and normalizing implications of the imperatives of “choice” for women (of all races, privileged or not) who are expected to submit to the new genetic screening technologies to manage genetic risk. Roberts's article, titled “Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies: A New Reproductive Dystopia?” (2009), is one of several examples of the current research and thinking published in the *Signs* thematic issue “Reproductive and Genetic Technologies” (Bumiller, Shanley, and Smith 2009). Related issues of choice, perfectibility, and the meaning of motherhood for mothers of infants and toddlers with disabilities, whom few parents are assumed to actively “choose,” are taken up in Gail Heidi Landsman's *Reconstructing Motherhood and Disability in the Age of “Perfect” Babies* (2009).

As the work on reproductive technologies has shown, the distinction between the “natural” and the “technological” often obscures more than it reveals. This can be seen with equal clarity in the opposition between natural childbirth and its contrary. Natural childbirth as it is currently practiced is entirely a cultural invention, and technology and conventional medical practice are hardly excluded. The move toward natural childbirth has appealed to some women not only because of the allure of nature but also because advocates of natural childbirth tend to focus on the importance of childbirth as a powerful emotional and physical experience that should be guided as much by the mother and her needs as by the needs of the child. In contrast, traditional childbirth is more

frequently managed in ways that serve the needs of hospitals, doctors, and the larger culture rather than in ways that address the needs, desires, or pleasures of the woman giving birth. Robbie E. Davis-Floyd's *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (1992) is a compelling and startling reexamination of the practices surrounding medical childbirth in the West. Davis-Floyd takes an anthropological approach, showing how medical rituals such as hospital gowns, fetal monitoring, and episiotomies serve the social and discursive aim of constructing both mother and child in the staging and managing of birth.

The evidence for the advantages of breast-feeding for both maternal and infant health is, by now, unequivocal. And yet, as Jacqueline Wolf has noted, "the value of breastfeeding and the factors that contribute to women's inability to successfully breastfeed have languished as virtual nonissues for feminists" (2006, 397; see also Wolf 2001). Instead, anticorporate studies such as *Milk, Money, and Madness* (Baumslag and Michels 1995) and *The Politics of Breastfeeding* (Palmer 2009) have focused on the economics and politics behind the infant formula industry and have emphasized the deleterious effects of the shift from breast to formula both in Western countries and in nonindustrialized contexts where the combination of poverty and inadequate access to clean water has created a catastrophe for infant health. Framed in these terms, the attack on artificial infant feeding risks devolving into yet another demand that women realize the essential truth of the female body by nursing their infants, and yet another cause for judging as bad mothers those women whose don't. Wolf (2006) proposes an alternative approach: to advocate for breast-feeding as a reproductive right, where reproductive rights encompass the optimal health of both mother and baby. Yet the reasons women do or do not breast-feed their babies are complex. As Linda M. Blum demonstrates in *At the Breast* (1999), breast-feeding may be experienced as an imposition or as a desirable choice, depending on race, class, and personal perspectives as well as on conflicts between breast-feeding and other obligations like cultural pressures or work. Blum draws attention to the experience of maternity while at the same time emphasizing the cultural and contextual specificity of those embodied experiences and addressing the diverse ways in which a common biological phenomenon like lactation may be made meaningful. Wolf's point in insisting that feminists should advocate for the unequivocal superiority of breast-feeding is not, however, to deny women the choice not to breast-feed. Rather, Wolf calls on feminists to work to change social norms and attitudes as well as to increase the availability of information about the health benefits of breast-feeding.

Scholarship on women in pregnancy and childbirth has also demonstrated the profound impact of class, race, and ethnicity on women's relationships to the medical management of pregnancy and childbirth. Richard W. Wertz and Dorothy C. Wertz's *Lying In* (1989) is an indispensable study of transformations in the practice of childbirth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors trace the struggle between midwives and doctors over who should govern childbirth, and they show that the displacement of midwives had both positive and negative effects on women's experiences and outcomes. As doctors were able to offer forceps-assisted delivery and, later, anesthetization, upper-class women saw their access to such technologies as a way to assert class differences. "Twilight sleep" in particular enabled upper-class women to remove themselves from what was perceived as the debased and animalistic bodily experience of childbirth. Two generations later, many women saw such technologies as brutal attacks on their bodily integrity (as in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*). Race and ethnicity also have a profound impact on the meaning and experience of medical intervention and expert knowledge, as revealed in Jacquelyn S. Litt's study *Medicalized Motherhood* (2000). Comparing the attitudes of Jewish American and African American women raising children in the 1930s and 1940s, Litt shows that access to perceived high-status medical care and expert attention was a strategy for social advancement for middle-class Jewish women seeking to secure their place as cultural insiders while middle-class African American women sought to strengthen social networks through their choice of doctors and facilities within segregated professional communities. In contrast, poor African American women had limited access to medical institutions or mainstream norms of care, and many were suspicious of the value and intentions of

professional medical care and expert advice. The various essays collected in *The Black Women's Health Book* (White 1994) illustrate the systemic neglect of black women's health and well-being at the hands of the mainstream medical establishment, and document black women's disappointment and anger, as well as the suspicion that medical attention may be motivated by something other than the betterment of black women's well-being. Such suspicions are borne out by Roberts in *Killing the Black Body* (1997), which documents the history of social and governmental control of black women's bodies and reproductive capacities.

Race, class, gender ... and what about religion?

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It is a huge irony of U.S. culture that a woman who hopes to be supported as a mother and also to engage in meaningful adult interaction or work will have much better success in a religious community than in virtually any other environment. Religion has, through most of human history, played a significant and powerful role. Feminism has had much to say about the negative form of that power, and to be sure, religion as an institution has done much to uphold the most damaging forms of patriarchy. But religious faith (which may or may not be experienced in the context of a larger institution) is a significant source of meaning for most humans today. Feminist thinking has tended, more often than not, to dismiss this significance. The violent effects of the resurgence of fundamentalist faiths in the last two decades should not blind us to the other aspects of religious experience, or to the ways in which religious faith and spiritual values answer real needs. In addition to high-profile evangelical efforts like James Dobson's Focus on the Family, there is a substantial literature on motherhood produced for the evangelical Christian and conservative Catholic book markets. An open-minded and sympathetic feminist reading of this literature would be useful for a clearer understanding of how women in faith communities engage in mothering. In African American communities, the black church plays a central role in supporting and defining gender and family roles, yet much of the academic literature on African American women approaches mothering and religion as separate domains. Many "natural mothering" practices have been supported, encouraged, or developed within religious communities, as well as within nonreligious families influenced by countercultural values (as in Bobel 2001). Examples include extended breast-feeding (La Leche League began with a group of Catholic mothers), preferences for naturopathic or holistic medicine, rejection of vaccines, and parenting practices that do not promote early separation. One study that does address this cultural crossing is Pamela E. Klassen's *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America* (2001). But given the diversity of religious practice and faith, and the complex relation of religion to other aspects of social location, much more scholarly attention is needed to elucidate the connections and crossings between secular and religiously framed mothering practices and experiences.

Conclusions

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The diverse scholarship on motherhood that I have surveyed in this review is mixed, heterogeneous, and mostly disconnected. It is also unbounded; relevant work in literary studies, art history, psychoanalysis, social history, and more could also gather under the big motherhood tent.¹⁰ A focus on particularity and difference, and on the social, historical, and discursive contexts of motherhood and mothering, is providing a multifaceted and complex understanding of women's experiences of reproduction, family, and care.

Mothering studies as it has been nurtured primarily by O'Reilly and ARM (now MIRCI) is but one aspect of this larger enterprise, albeit the most visible and organized aspect. The effusive acknowledgments in Demeter Press publications, and the cycling between articles in *JARM* and Demeter Press anthologies, reveal a network of supportive scholars who are intentionally and self-consciously engaged in building a field of study and a network of collegial support. The overall quality of articles published in *JARM* improved as the journal grew and developed an audience and a reputation. A *JARM* special double issue on "Mothering and Feminism" (2006) explicitly addressed the question of how to pursue a feminist account of mothering and motherhood, and a deliberate feminist perspective is evident throughout the journal. The broad array of research

projects and publications that were supported in one way or another by ARM indicate that, for those who identify with this work, mothering studies is unequivocally an aspect of feminist studies.

But all is not well. O'Reilly had attempted for several years to secure institutional funding from York University to cover some operating expenses; in the absence of such funding, ARM had been breaking even in recent years, but struggled under a persistent debt burden. Citing "concerns related to financial management and accountability" (in Gordon 2010), York froze ARM's accounts; as a result, all research and publication activities were suspended.¹¹ In May 2010, the Web site, e-mail addresses, and office all previously housed at York University were shut down. *JARM* ceased publication and refunded remaining subscriptions. As of this writing, O'Reilly seems unbowed by this latest catastrophe. She and her allies have regrouped and formed the independent nonprofit MICRI; conferences are being planned, and the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* has been relaunched as the *Journal for the Motherhood Initiative*. But the fact is, even before York pulled the plug, the established academic feminist community completely ignored the work of ARM. Neither O'Reilly's work nor the Demeter Press volumes were reviewed in any significant way by feminist journals, and *JARM* had few institutional subscribers. MIRC now appears to be directing a greater portion of its efforts to community engagement, suggesting that institution building within the academy will be a low priority.¹²

Motherhood studies as an area of scholarship is on precarious ground: ignored by mainstream academic feminism, fragmented and discontinuous in the academic margins. The fact that neither the university system nor the institutions of academic feminism appear willing to support a scholarly community and a research program that explicitly foregrounds motherhood is discouraging. Whatever the limitations or shortcomings of ARM and its offshoots, it was the only academic institution dedicated to the study of mothering and motherhood. Meanwhile, outside the academy and beyond the boundaries of O'Reilly's various projects, the energy and enthusiasm that led many to herald a wider progressive social movement focusing on mothers and care workers seems to have peaked around 2006. The sorts of renewed local and grassroots movements that may emerge out of the shifting political and economic climate remain to be seen.

One positive development is a new Museum of Motherhood, "a real and virtual social change museum focused on amplifying the voices and experiences of mothers while connecting 'the cultural family,'" comprising a Web site and a plan to open as a physical museum in Seneca Falls, New York, at some point in 2011.¹³ The organizers are committed to creating something inclusive and popular that at the same time responds to and incorporates the best of scholarship and theory. The museum is the work of the Motherhood Foundation, which is in turn a project supported primarily by mother-entrepreneur Joy Rose of Mamapalooza and related enterprises. In its organization and vision, the museum seems to embody the kind of fluidity and boundary crossing that energized feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, bridging the popular and academic, the political and the theoretical. There will, no doubt, be missteps, exclusions, and failures along the way. But there is also opportunity, not only in the Museum of Motherhood but in the broader field of popular and academic investment that the museum seeks to make visible.


In describing a hopeful vision for the future of the mothers' movement, Heather Hewett calls for "more movement between the various spheres involved in thinking about, and organizing, political action surrounding motherhood and caregiving. Only with more of this kind of movement can a mothers' movement truly gain momentum" (Hewett 2006a, 49). While motherhood has been an energizing topic in the past decade, there has been little of this boundary-crossing movement between academic and popular discussion, and the movement between feminist studies and motherhood studies has been only in one direction. Feminist theorists, scholars, and writers, as well as feminist mothers and activists, have a lot to say to each other, and a lot to learn from each other, about motherhood. Motherhood studies needs the perspective and commitment 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.

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¹ A range of these theoretical difficulties is suggested in DiQuinzio (1999).

² One practical project is to better incorporate the study of motherhood into women's studies programs; several excellent anthologies are available for classroom use. See *Mother Reader* (Davey 2001), *Mothers and Children* (Chase and Rogers 2001), *Maternal Theory* (O'Reilly 2007), *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994).

³ On Mothers & More and MomsRising, see <http://www.mothersandmore.org> [↗](#) and <http://www.momsrising.org> [↗](#), respectively.

⁴ See Tucker (2008) for a vision of maternal activism that embraces a feminist ethic of care and a commitment to reproductive justice. While not an activist group itself, Mothers Movement Online is the best online resource for bringing together activism, scholarship, and journalism on issues affecting motherhood in a context of social justice. The Web site (<http://www.mothersmovement.org> [↗](#)) includes an extensive archive of book reviews, both academic and popular, as well as the useful Book List: Essential Reading for Mothers Who Think about Social Change (<http://www.mothersmovement.org/books/list/booklist.htm> [↗](#)).

⁵ See the project description for "Being a Mother in Academe: Challenges, Possibilities and Change" at <http://www.yorku.ca/arm/sshrcc2005SIXPAGER.pdf> [↗](#), funded by a multiyear grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

⁶ The practice of feminist motherhood may also include the representation of motherhood from

feminist perspectives; this is the approach in Liss (2009). In this richly illustrated study of contemporary feminist art, Andrea Liss is interested in elucidating “the relationships between the material realities of lived feminist motherhood and the stunning ways in which artist-mothers negotiate and translate their experiences into rich and complex bodies of work” (xix).

⁷ For critical accounts of the boom in mothering memoirs, see Brown (2006) and Hewett (2006b).

⁸ Apple is also the author of *Mothers and Medicine* (1987) and the coeditor of *Mothers and Motherhood* (1997), both excellent resources for readers interested in the historical background to the current conditions of motherhood.

⁹ Of the feminist works on motherhood published in the past decade, de Marneffe’s appears to have engendered the most debate and controversy within feminist academic circles; see, for example, the series of commentaries and reply published in *Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2009).

¹⁰ Among many recent titles of note that suggest additional directions for motherhood studies beyond the terrain covered in this review, see Guenther (2006), Schwartz (2006), Benedetti (2007), Mouton (2007), Bernstein (2008), Rosenman and Klaver (2008), Baraitser (2009), Liss (2009), and Rye (2009).

¹¹ See also O’Reilly’s account at <http://www.rabble.ca/babble/feminism/letter-prof-andrea-oreilly-re-closing-association-research-mothering-york-universit> .

¹² See <http://www.motherhoodinitiative.org> .

¹³ See <http://www.motherhoodmuseum.org> .

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