

## Mothering Feminist Daughters in Postfeminist Times

*This essay engages a confessional theoretical politic to examine ways that contemporary feminist motherwork pushes back against postfeminist ideology. Clever deployment of postfeminist arguments results in multiple ambiguities and paradoxes for mothers and daughters, despite encouraging findings about contemporary young women's positive attitudes toward feminist goals. Mass media culture is a profoundly influential socializing force that perpetuates the presumption that women are rather dissatisfied with their equality and so are driven to seek fulfillment elsewhere. This article defines and discusses the rhetorical strength of "postfeminism" and examines how feminist mothering of daughters in a purportedly postfeminist era is characterized by ambivalence, paradox, and matrophobia*

Contemporary feminist motherwork must navigate families through a labyrinthine sociopolitical climate that is technology-driven, media-defined, class-divided, and politically contentious and as such, to say the least, it is a complicated thing. We are poised to raise daughters who can effectively infiltrate knowledge and information strongholds, who can affect critical and pivotal turns in cultural production and power redistribution. But because feminism more broadly seems always pushing back against postfeminism, which suggests among other grand falsehoods that feminism has thankfully met its goals and now is at best outmoded and at worst contraindicated, the enterprises of being empowered mothers and raising empowered daughters are constricted and impeded. In this essay, I examine some of these constrictions and impediments as they have emerged in my own mothering experience. I first explain the term "postfeminist," grounding its rhetorical strength in "strawperson" arguments among other diversionary tactics. I then engage a confessional theoretical politic to offer one view of how postfeminist ideology

injects itself into feminist mothers' and daughters' lives. Specifically, I argue that postfeminism complicates daughters' ability to live in liberatory ways and encourages matrophobic responses to feminism.

Most feminist writing on mothering comes from what Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy (1991) identify as a "daughter-centric" perspective, focusing more on what it is like to have been mothered than on what it is like to mother. While it is possible to write in ways that "move through the daughter's experience to the mother's," few authors have written about mothering in this way (2). Some second wave work, such as Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings*; Judith Arcana's *Our Mothers' Daughters*; Daly and Reddy's *Narrating Mothers*; and, more recently, Amber Kinser's *Mothering in the Third Wave*, among others, have employed a pointed mother-centric focus in their feminist explorations of mothering practices. In what follows, I work to keep a feminist lens focused on mothering daughters from the mother's point of view, even as I consider some of the decidedly complex and potentially problematic consequences of feminist living for daughters.

My daughter and I are members of various social groups of privilege and as such the consequences for her are not as grave as they are for other mothers' daughters. I do not discuss here dangers of physical violence. Nor do I discuss the kind of attempts at erasure or annihilation that might mark her life, and that therefore would inform my mothering practices, if she identified at this point as lesbian, bi, or transgender, or were a young woman of color, or were disabled, or claimed an ethnic identity that was marginalized and subjugated. I write from a white, educated, middle class perspective; so the difficulties in feminist mothering I discuss here may have limited applicability to other families, and the burdens we bear in our feminist family may be comparatively light. Still, it is not a stretch to say that feminist families in general confront a persistent and nagging pull toward synthetic, postfeminist representations of women's power and away from more authentically empowered representations. From my particular social location then, I look at some of the tensions between these two kinds of representation as they rub against each other in feminist mothering.

### **Postfeminism as a counter to feminism**

The term postfeminism has been used in two primary ways. Suzanna Danuta Walters (1991) explains that the first is a theoretical strand, associated with postmodern, post-colonialist, and poststructuralist thought; this is the less common use of the term. The second strand, a descriptive one, is associated with a backlash against feminism, claiming via the "post" prefix to move us beyond feminist concerns and struggles. But as Walters points out, "our political era is hardly *feminist* much less *postfeminist*" (104); her early 1990s comment here is certainly still applicable today, over a decade and a half later. Regardless of which strand a given use of the term postfeminism may be referring to, however, I agree with Whelehan (2000: 90-91) and Walters (1991: 105) that

either version is problematic; they are finally, of little useful significance for feminist movement, for moving women toward ever more liberatory thinking and living. Nevertheless, postfeminism *is* a useful concept for feminist criticism, for understanding contemporary *representations* of feminism and the culture in which it is embedded and to which it responds. In this essay, I address the second strand related to the mainstream backlash.

Postfeminist ideology, largely perpetuated in mass media and popular culture (Projansky, 2001; Tasker and Negra, 2007), is comprised of frequently articulated assumptions that feminism has succeeded and is now no longer necessary or useful (Aronson, 2003; Negra, 2004); oddly contradictory claims that it has failed and is ineffectual while simultaneously dangerous and problematic (Bean, 2007; Walters, 1991); and an implicit but pernicious focus on and heralding of a monolith of white, middle class, heterosexual girls' and women's desires and opportunities as representative of all girls and women (Projansky, 2001; Springer, 2008). Because postfeminism also conflates "choice" with consumption, highlighting "the figure of woman as empowered consumer," it is white and middle class "by default" (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 2). Further, postfeminism reinscribes women's discontent with the current inequitable state of affairs, such that this discontent appears grounded in the inadequacies and broken promises of feminism (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Walters, 1991), rather than in the refusals and failures of a class-restricted, largely white, patriarchal social order.

Postfeminism is a response to feminism and its persistent undermining of male dominance and a conservative status quo. It is no coincidence that, as Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter (1995) argue, postfeminism emerged, for example, in the UK at the same time that "initiatives in government and industry were announced promoting the 1990s as the decade of gender equality" (3); or that, as Sarah Projansky (2001) explains, postfeminism formerly gained momentum in the US immediately after women won the vote in the 1920s (88). Buttressed by pop culture and championed by a handful of decidedly antifeminist spokespersons and sentiments,<sup>1</sup> postfeminist rhetoric and images are positioned in opposition to any liberatory<sup>2</sup> feminism, claiming that real liberation for women can finally only be found in accepting male dominance while denying its pervasiveness and restrictive power; in accepting white, heterosexual, middle class images as representative of a pluralist society; in safely dabbling in the "celebration of diversity" by consuming race, as Kimberly Springer (2008) argues, through, for example, the purchase of "ethnic" clothing or the "consumption of fair trade goods without ever questioning the conflation of commerce and democracy" (74). Postfeminism is *not*, as Projansky argues, the next, separate and distinct or natural stage in a historical trajectory, linearly connecting pre-feminism to feminism to postfeminism. Rather, it is a direct and pointedly antagonistic response to the fact that feminism has acute relevance for contemporary women, as Pamela Aronson's (2003) and Elaine Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez's (2003) studies, among others,

have shown; to feminism's unrelenting and agitating demands for changes in the status quo; to feminism's continued efforts to expose the heterosexist and racial agenda of media culture. Rather than prove feminism's waning relevance and modern women's disregard of it, the proliferation of postfeminist discourses and images indicates a worried though calculated and sustained effort to maintain postfeminism's tenuous place in the public dialogue, not wholly unlike feminism's efforts to do the same.

Postfeminism and feminism exist then, in relation to and in tension with each other. It follows therefore that feminist maternal scholars ought concern themselves with the ways that feminist mothering is inflected with postfeminist representations. As we do, however, it is important to acknowledge that postfeminism hardly poses the only tension for feminist mothering. Mothering practices are tightly interwoven with feminists' own personal, historical struggles, their own human imperfections, failed attempts, and ambivalent convictions. I turn now to a confessional theoretical exploration of how liberatory mothering of daughters in these times may also function as other than liberatory.

### **Postfeminist dramas and strawperson arguments**

It is easy, and not just for young people, to do what Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983) call, "equate tone with substance, a hot eye with clear vision" (vii). Learning the subtleties of feminist thought, its ambiguities and layers, and distinguishing in its righteous anger what exactly is righteous about it from what is plain old, white-hot anger is difficult enough; passing that ability on to my daughter is something I find exceptionally complicated. Even more difficult is teaching her how to move from anger to a recognition that, as bell hooks has said, "opposition is not enough" (1990b: 15) if our daughters are to live in the world as, and see themselves as, acting subjects rather than acted-upon objects. These are especially difficult lessons in postfeminist times, when the terms of debate are articulated, even invented, by a conservative, postfeminist ideology, disseminated and heralded by the still largely conservative forces of mass media, or, as Kellie Bean argues, by an outright antifeminist "post-backlash" ideology. An important challenge for mothers and daughters then is, in bell hooks' words, "to create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization" (1990b: 15). There are times, many times, when I have been doubtful about my ability to teach this creation and expansion of self on one hand, and an economy of identity in the service of self-protection on the other. There are times when I have limited faith in my ability to model an oppositional worldview while simultaneously making clear that the *point* of it is to challenge and dismantle race, class, sexuality, age, ability, gender, and other privilege systems. To teach my daughter that feminism can be, need be, brassy, discordant, and cacophonous, while still measured, fine-tuned, and clarion, has been one of the most complicated tasks I have faced. Kimberly

Springer's (2008) work suggests that this is acutely complicated for feminist mothers of color, who confront severely restrictive images of black womanhood in mainstream media, given postfeminism's clear, though undertheorized, racial agenda. Somehow what has resonated with my daughter most, I fear, what has risen above the feminist-postfeminist clamor and din is that opposition for its own sake is the goal we are striving for. That contestation detached from a clear politics of change, that resistance which may not be useful or in one's own best interest, and perhaps not even particularly interesting, is worth devoting much energy to. This confusion for daughters is reasonable, given the ways that feminist arguments are perpetually contorted and minimized and muddled by postfeminist zealotry.<sup>3</sup>

Another dimension of the complexity of mothering in postfeminist times is grounded in the fact that as feminist critiques of dominant power structures have evolved and refined, so have oppositional efforts to misrepresent and debilitate those critiques. Hence the emergence, for example, of postfeminist scripts bewailing "male bashing" and white males as the "most oppressed group." Any impediment to unbridled privilege for white men is recast as "oppressive;" if we are not applauding all things male, we must be "bashing" them. And since we have hardly been applauding at our house, the lessons I have been trying to teach are likely to have been read, even by my children, as "bashing." Personally, I am surprised that this language continues to have so much currency in everyday public and interpersonal dialogue. Relatedly, the "feminazi" and "militant feminist" are characters who recur in roles in the postfeminist social drama; these rhetorical figures emerged in the 1990s and though their names might take different forms now, their characterization of feminists as obdurate, brash, and battle-mongering remains. The drama has meticulously scripted public dialogue in ways that typecast feminists as unnecessarily wasting our time and energy on dated and tired arguments or, worse, as in fact undermining the very liberties they claim to defend for women (Faludi, 1991; Kinser, 2004). Feminism is portrayed, in part by characters such as Rene Denfeld, Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Christina Hoff Sommers, and the mainstream media, which continue to fuel their punditry, as not really interested in women's sovereignty because it is more focused on indoctrination and cult recruitment than on liberated thought. In its characterizations of why we are in fact in a "post" feminist era, postfeminism employs with persistence what communication scholars call the "strawperson" argument (Inch, Warnick and Endres, 2006; Rybacki and Rybacki, 2008). To use these arguments, one articulates the claim s/he seeks to critique so that it is inherently weak and therefore easily, immanently, even mockingly defeatable. The claim is articulated as non-substantive, only made of "straw," hardly a force to be reckoned with. As such, it is easy to dismantle or knock down, and leaves only one's own argument still standing. So critiques of masculine dominance are dismissed as male "bashing;" resolute feminist objections are derided as "militant;" confident daughters who stand their feminist ground are repudiated as foolish "feminazis."

It is no wonder my daughter struggles in her development of an oppositional worldview. Strawperson arguments are propped up in public and interpersonal dialogue, again and again, stuffed with the same poorly articulated and contorted arguments, in order to play and replay the same scenes, none of which capture what feminist arguments work to say, though they *do* effectively portray feminism as gratuitous or irrelevant. And all of which, more importantly, direct attention away from the accuracy and supreme relevance of well-articulated feminist claims and from the real chance of real change that might do some body some good. A strawperson argument is “a form of deception,” as Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki (2008) explain, because “it introduces a bogus claim, one that was not part of the argument or misrepresents the original claim” (154). Further, strawperson arguments are rehearsed and recited in the public dialogue with such great regularity and consistency that they intrude mightily upon the more private family dialogue in our homes and communities. Here, they may be inadvertently fortified before being recycled back into the larger public domain, if the functions of strawperson arguments as deception and diversion are not clear to feminist families.

The postfeminist social drama is played out in part through scenes of women “opting out” of the workplace<sup>4</sup> in record numbers so that they can raise children, without any financial compensation of their own, which apparently does little to alleviate the concomitant “war” between the “mommy” at work and the one at home.<sup>5</sup> Current social scripts in fact now refer to mothers as “moms,” as the loyal companions of children, rather than as “mothers,” a linguistic turn which ensures that grown women are seen perpetually from the child’s perspective, as Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels point out (2004: 19–20). “Moms” are positioned firmly among the relatively powerless, and are infantilized themselves thereby.

Media dialogue—perhaps “monologue” is a more accurate descriptor—is over-peppered with references to “feminists” “attacking” the “choices” of “moms” to “opt out” of work and “reprioritize” their lives so that her children (“the most important job in the world”) “come first.” And these references might be part of an interesting discussion if they were positioned dialogically with references to workplace opportunities being so “constricted” for women that those with “class privilege,” who are “entitled” enough to “gamble” with “economic self-sufficiency,” are sometimes doing so (prompted in part by the fact that their “second shift” becomes unbearable as they buckle under the weight of “intensive mothering” expectations, despite their career “opportunities”). Even if that means laying aside years of professional training or experience or seniority or all of it—a “privilege” few men are clamoring for—with a plan to step back into a job that hardly sat idle waiting for them while the children were growing, a plan that some might call flawed, and others a travesty. But this interesting discussion is not likely, because neither postfeminist representations nor monologues work that way. Strawperson arguments are powerful because they are deliberately incomplete or inaccurate.

So my daughter learns that I have opted out of opting out of work, rather than that I have opted *in* to my own income and the maternal power that comes with deciding how that income will affect her life, not to mention my own. She learns that the directions she may pursue in terms of work and family, however she defines it, are a simple matter of opting in or out of this or that. A simple matter of individual decision-making, and never ever about social structure or institutional power or how they might be modified to secure a different future for her and other girls and women who have fewer privileges than she does. Fictional postfeminist accounts, as Tasker and Negra (2007) argue “set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as an economic necessity rather than a “choice”” (2).

Strawperson fallacies also work by focusing on one part of feminism’s arguments but extending it “beyond its original bounds by drawing inferences from it that are clearly unwarranted or unintended” (Inch, Warnick and Endres, 2006: 84). We see this working in the co-opted and depoliticized language of choice, effectively deployed by postfeminism. Used in this way, anything any woman is doing, no matter how compromising, can be defended as her *choice*, and feminists are expected to trip over their own rhetoric. And we do. In fact, as Linda Hirshman (2007) has said, just about the only question that ever gets asked is about choice when there are a multitude of other questions we could be asking. More specifically, guided by postfeminist articulations, we ask about *whether or not X or Y was her choice*. This is a strategy which effectively diverts attention from the myriad other questions we ought be asking, including: *What are the social locations and material conditions from which she makes her choices? What are the race, class, sexuality, ability, age, and other privilege systems that might constrict or expand her access to multiple choices? What training has she had in seeking out less apparent but equally valid choices? What forms of support can she count on to sustain her choices? What choices are heralded or denigrated in her immediate and broader social worlds? Which choices will enable or thwart other ones?* Interestingly, postfeminism’s *reduction* of choice to the admonishment “leave her alone, she’s made hers,” has in fact functioned to *extend* the feminist ideal (as straw arguments are wont to) in ways that link choice with consumerism, in ways that “substitute lifestyle questions for political ones” (Dow, 1996: 207).

Postfeminism’s clever deployment of choice arguments as a diversionary tactic and, frankly, feminism’s less-than-vigilant use of them too, have made it exceptionally difficult for either mothers or daughters to comprehend how much or how little choice they and other women are in fact exercising in their own lives, much less how to identify and what to do with the choices they do have. We have failed to “see the cynicism, or the logistical maneuverings that [went] into emptying words like ‘choice’ and ‘rights’ of real meaning,” Judith Warner argues (2005: 181). We came to understand that we had choices, she continues, and that “it was our responsibility to make good on them (or not). It was not the government’s responsibility to make sure we were *able* to make good on them” (181). Any conversation about the paths that women are tak-

ing, any critique that might identify the pitfalls of certain paths and so the potential empowerment of different ones gets shut down, Hirshman (2007) contends, when the sacred garments of “choice” are brought out to cloak otherwise useful and important conversations not only between mothers and daughters, but also and perhaps more importantly between daughters and their peers. The intricacies and multi-layered complexities of choice are mystified, and daughters’ ability to think and talk beyond “well it’s my/her choice, and you can’t touch it while I’m/she’s wearing that sacred garment” is impeded. Further, the inequitable distribution of choices is obscured by the cloaking function of choice rhetoric (Tucker, forthcoming), perhaps especially for daughters of privileged groups, who may be more likely to adopt the universalizing explanations of such rhetoric. Individual and personal choices are neither individual nor personal; they are always already “shaped by public laws and policies,” as historian Rickie Solinger notes (17, qtd. in Tucker, forthcoming). Teaching daughters the intricacies of choice within an oppositional worldview is aggravated by postfeminism’s insistence that a monolithic and universalized “freedom” has already been “won” for women (Tasker and Negra, 2007; Springer, 2008), a keen strategem that works well to sustain the status quo because, as Coppock, Haydon and Richter (1995) argue, “it is precisely the *illusion* of ‘freedom,’[and] ‘choice’... which remains fundamental to the political management of conflict and resistance” (183). Feminism’s fierce protection of women’s choice is now being hurled at them at great speed and it has become nearly impossible to avoid getting knocked down by it.

The connection between postfeminism’s illusions and how they work to manage resistance and power is an important one for maternal scholars, in part because it is a link that has not gone unnoticed by daughters of feminists. Though they are not likely to peg postfeminism as illusory, they are likely, entrenched as they are in postfeminist fallacy, to struggle with their own and their mothers’ embodiments of power. It is to this discussion that I now turn.

### **Power, paradox, and matrophobia**

Feminist power and agency are prickly notions, hard to hold onto without getting nicked. Andrea O’Reilly (2004) notes, borrowing from Sarah Rudick, the immense power mothers have to influence their children’s lives. But also she notes many women’s own sense of powerlessness in protecting their children from a dangerous world and in not being positioned politically to ensure their well-being, further aggravated by a broad-based cultural fear of women’s power. This simultaneous sense of power and powerlessness points to “a paradox of motherhood that helps explain women’s ambivalence about motherhood” (250). Women likely embody mothering from equivocal positions, both embracing and railing against the levels of power and agency they possess. Young daughters too, have a complex relationship to power. I have worked diligently in my daughter’s sixteen years to teach her about the great

store of personal power that resides within her. She has come to believe it in enviable ways. She is a courageous woman who can hold her own; but I fear she puts undue faith in this power. I fear that in my efforts to highlight her strength and agency I may have failed to teach her that the power which dominant ideology tries to wield, and often effectively holds over her, is *real*—not just a figment of the patriarchal imagination, not just the whimsy of silly teen boys who giggle over sex talk, and not just the rhetorical orchestrations of “whiney” or “militant” feminists. I fear she puts great faith in sheer will and determination and by god her feminist entitlement; in her ability to spot a troublesome situation before it happens; in her ability to argue her way out of any circumstance; in her belief that to get out of harm’s way she need only “give ’em hell.” I fear that she has adopted postfeminism’s tenet that “a ‘seize the power’ mindset and more vigorous individualism will solve all women’s problems” (Dow, 1996: 207).

On one hand, needless to say, I am tremendously relieved that she believes in and taps into this store of hers, as it has carried her through many a social situation and will continue to; and on this hand my greatest challenge is to not envy her for coming to this knowing place at such an early age when I arrived there so late in my life. But on the other hand I am unsettled by the idea that she does not quite believe that being in the room of “these guys we met last year” while at the beach is a bad idea; that this situation probably is bigger than she is and that boys *are* often taught that girls and women *are* to be used for their own ends; that her power actually resides in refusing to go to the condo where they are staying rather than in navigating potential problems once there. I do know that much of this confidence is grounded in her being sixteen and in not really knowing, thankfully, how dangerous her world is. But it is clear to me that such naiveté is aggravated by her feminist sense of empowered living and her sense of entitlement to a fair and equitable world, untempered by an accurate view of the persistence of pernicious inequity and how it can work in perilous ways—a view that is obstructed by postfeminist denials of unremitting male power and privilege and its parasitical relationship with female subjugation.

There have been places where I have been able to teach my daughter multiple facets of girls’ and women’s empowerment, but learning feminism as prismatic doesn’t necessarily hold the promise of joyful living. Fundamental to mothering my daughter for example, as with many feminist mothers, have been lessons about sex and the body. In fact, most families, whether feminist or not, make such lessons fundamental to how they raise their daughters. Elizabeth Spelman points out, however, that many feminists suffer from “somatophobia,” or “fear and discomfort with the body” (qtd. in O’Reilly, 2004: 249). This could render problematic some of our lessons about sex and the body, interlaced as they are with our own issues too difficult to purge. Such lessons are further complicated by postfeminism’s claim that feminists are “anti-sex” (Projansky, 2001: 79-82). This is another strawperson claim set in perpetual motion, de-

signed not only to divert attention away from authentic feminist arguments about sexuality equity, but also to encourage young women to prove just how (hetero) “sex positive” they are. I did, as a girl learning about myself and about motherhood, have an affirming and constructive, though not feminist, model in my mother, whose lead on these matters I followed: I fostered an accuracy and transparency about the body and how it works; a comfort about bodily functions, sexual and otherwise, as well as questions regarding them; an ability to see considerations about one’s own sexual behavior as much more complex than a simplistic virgin/nonvirgin dichotomy suggests; a genuine valuing of bodily diversity and a flexible position on dress and bodily adornment. But this openness, this transparency about sexuality and the body, needless to say, has consequences for my daughter beyond those I intended.

My daughter lives agitated with her (perhaps especially male) peers for, at best, their rudimentary knowledge and childish giggles over matters sexual and, at worst, their fear and frustration about sex emerging from the cultural silencing of healthy sex talk, which then manifests itself in misogynist discourse, quite often flung at her since she is typically the only person in the room who finds grave fault in it. And she says so. I taught her the necessity of “talking back,” as bell hooks describes it in Anzaldúa’s *Making Face, Making Soul*. I taught her to push back against being “pushed into secrecy or silence” (hooks, 1990a: 208), especially as a feminist agnostic liberal living in the Bible Belt. I taught her to use her speech and every other form of communication at her disposal to profess fiercely and cleverly her right, following hooks, “to voice, to authorship,” and thus refuse to be “tuned out,” or to “become a kind of background music, audible but not acknowledged as significant speech” (208). She is a powerful young person for these teachings; and she is punished for embodying them. The primary problem, again, is that the people in her social world are as fluent in postfeminist and backlash arguments as she is in feminist ones. She has learned to take issue with matters that are passé, from the perspective of postfeminism, which quite prematurely applauds the death of the *need* for feminism. I sense that she feels alone and discouraged and weary; and it is so early yet for her at sixteen. Loneliness, discouragement, and fatigue were not the outcomes I was shooting for. Though they *are* the outcomes postfeminism is shooting for, because they make daughters susceptible to arguments that feminism is the cause of their ills, and moving “beyond” it to “post” feminism the remedy.

What I meant was, yes, to teach her what Anzaldúa (1983) urges: “Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same. Stop the chatter inside their heads” (172). But that really only finally works if I also have effectively taught her: “Your skin must be sensitive enough for the lightest kiss and thick enough to ward off sneers” (172). I think she and I have been able to prepare her “skin” in this way, but it is hard to be this sensitive and this thick at the same time. I wonder if I have ever learned this lesson well enough myself to be able to teach it effectively; I wonder if it is

possible for mothers to teach this lesson while simultaneously training their daughters to bob and weave amid postfeminist and backlash punches. I worry that she feels castigated, ever-more marginal as a result not only of her feminist positions, but also of her skill in and compulsion toward professing them. She feels both powerful and disempowered at the same time and this conflict is difficult to wrestle through. It is confusing and demoralizing.

In addition to my misgivings about what could prove to be a false sense of actual power in the world, or early discouragement about the limits of her power, I also am uneasy about how my efforts to ground that power may disproportionately weigh her down. There are skills that I am compelled to teach her that are different from those I need to teach her brother, and I struggle with how to do that and still foster equitable living in our home. How do we raise daughters with the sharper and tougher skills that they will need, skills only acquired through relentless training and meticulous attention, and still conduct an equitable household—one which would not in the end favor the sons over the daughters, despite our intentions? How do we drill these skills and teach the necessity of keeping them honed and not threaten their joy for living, especially when we know from Rose Glickman's (1993) work that daughters of feminists "squirm" under the weight of the different and heavier expectations they answer to and sons do not (qtd. in Chase and Rogers, 2001: 210). Are we even fostering a joy for living that our daughters want to emulate? Glickman's research reports a frightening discovery that "feminist families repeatedly favored their sons over their daughters," which is a devastating finding for feminist mothers to read, and even more upsetting in light of Glickman's report that this fact "'irritates the daughters' to this day" (1993: 210).

The research on how daughters of feminist mothers fare indicates that the relationships that bind these women is multi-layered and complex. We do learn that in many ways, as Susan Chase and Mary Rogers (2001) say in sum: "daughters thrive—they learn to stick up for themselves and to speak their truths—when they have strong relationships with adult women," which they often find with their own mothers (215). Christina Looper Baker's research with her daughter, Christina Baker Kline, which resulted in their book *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism*, revealed some important insights into the power and possibility of feminist mothering of daughters. One thing we learned from their work on second wave activist mothers and their adult daughters was that these daughters did in fact adopt the "feminist legacy" their mothers passed on to them (Baker, 2004: 95). However we also learn that feminist mothering has other sides, darker sides that warrant honest exploration.

Daughters of feminists can carry a profound resentment for the ways in which feminism steals away their mothers. Both Baker and Kline's (1996) and Glickman's (1993) research indicate that daughters of feminists can feel resentment, resignation, and a sense of neglect. Mother of five children, Marie Wilson, argues for a rigorous honesty about the impact of feminist work on the

raising of daughters: “That we abandoned our children in some ways while we did the work to save them in others is real,” she admits (qtd. in Baker, 2004: 101). That I am writing about mothering all weekend long and connecting little with my children; that after working all week I am working from this Friday afternoon until Sunday night, spending little if any time engaging with my children, which right now feels particularly troubling to me because I am exhausted from the work I do and need some family connection; that I am putting more hours into trying to make intellectual sense of mothering in a way that other mothers and practitioners might find useful . . . these paradoxes and deprivations for many in our families are real. S. Alease Ferguson and Toni King (2008) note that many current era daughters, the young women of color in their work, have not found their feminist mothers’ lives particularly liberating or enviable, and resent the ways in which the feminist movement has robbed them of their mothers. I first came across this finding when I was editing *Mothering in the Third Wave* and was jarringly disturbed by it; it is a sentiment that haunts me still. In contrast to some of the daughters in Glickman’s and Baker and Kline’s studies, these young women have no intention of using their mothers’ examples as models for living.

This matrophobia, this “fear of becoming one’s mother” and the consequent splitting off from her and what she represents, diverges in interesting ways from Adrienne Rich’s (1976) early explication (235). Rich argued that daughters who saw their mothers as dupes at worst and victims at best to the patriarchal constrictions choking women’s lives lived in fear that they too, upon becoming mothers, would live constricted, devoid of any individuality or freedom, and full of “compromise and self hatred” as they believed their mothers did (235). Interestingly, though the lives of many mothers, especially feminist mothers, look different from the ones Rich identified as inciting matrophobia in daughters thirty years ago, some feminist daughters seem to be adopting this matrophobic stance in their views of their supposedly unrestricted, liberated feminist mothers nevertheless. There are matrophobic threads running through the writings by third wave metaphoric “daughters” of the second wave, as Astrid Henry (2004) has noted, and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein (2007) argues that “facing the lingering matrophobia within feminism” itself is a complex project requiring feminist attention (293). So a fear of becoming one’s literal mother, or figurative “mother” is certainly a common theme in feminist living and writing.

It is flattening, however, to consider that in our very efforts to free women from confined lives, we may have contributed to differently confined lives that incite a desire for “matrophobic splitting” from our daughters (O’Brien Hallstein, 2007). It is flattening to consider that, in our feminist mothering, we may in some ways represent to our daughters “the unfree woman, the martyr,” to use Rich’s words (1976: 236). And if their “personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap” with ours, Rich continues, then “in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins” daughters will “perform

radical surgery” (236), splitting off from their feminist mothers in ways that these powerful women—we—may be powerless to stop. Of course, the role of patriarchal structures in making it so close to impossible to affect radical change in the conditions of mothering in these times should be emphasized here. It is less feminism or its “failures” that have so restricted mothering and fostered matrophobic sentiment, no matter what postfeminism is saying, and more patriarchy’s success in dictating the status quo. Further, postfeminism’s use of strawperson arguments and dexterous articulation of the terms for public debate, not to mention the all-pervasive and utterly dismissive literal or figurative eye roll in the face of feminist argument, should be noted here too as effective tools of impediment and attrition.

Still, as Baker and Kline (1996), and Chase and Rogers (2001), and countless maternal narratives indicate, feminist mothering builds strong mothers and strong children and strong families. That does not mean though that its practices are marked by clarity of vision or purpose. It already is rife with ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction—as is mothering in general—which then are further aggravated by the power and pervasiveness of postfeminism and its characterizations. The idea that feminist mothering is multi-faceted is going to mean that some of those facets are darker than others, and it is important that we continue to explore them. It certainly is difficult to foster and live with a sense of well-being alongside lessons of discontent with the state of things; it is difficult to teach serenity without complacency. Guiding daughters in the embodiment of an oppositional worldview becomes increasingly characterized by both complexity and perplexity as postfeminist arguments become increasingly sophisticated and given more and more media airtime. The shrewd engineering of strawperson arguments, their manipulative linguistic turns and misrepresentations of feminist concerns pollute the social environment and not only muddy maternal waters but bemire feminist ones more generally. Some matrophobic response to feminism makes sense, given the context in which daughters take in and practice feminist thought. It is, though, but one component of a much broader repertoire of response which feminist mothers and daughters can practice, starting with an outright rejection of postfeminist claims about feminism and a steadfast stance that feminism is not finished, has hardly failed, and is supremely relevant in the lives of contemporary women.

<sup>1</sup>See for example the works of Rene Denfeld (1995), Camille Paglia (1992), Katie Roiphe (1993), Christina Hoff Sommers (1994), and some work by Naomi Wolf (1993), including interviews with several of them featured in such venues as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, *Esquire*, and *Details*, as well as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* (Bean, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>I follow bell hooks (1994) in the use of the term “liberatory” here.

<sup>3</sup>See footnote 1 above.

<sup>4</sup>See Belkin's (2003) phrase-coining article in *New York Times Magazine*.

<sup>5</sup>Discussions have proliferated about public and private battles fought between at-home and at-work mothers. See, for example, Leslie Morgan Steiner's *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families* and Miriam Peskowitz's *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*.

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