

LYNN GARLICK

Contemporary Australian Motherhood Memoir as Personal, Creative, and Political Narrative

*In 2010, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly published *Textual Mothers/ Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, which examines "how mothering and being a mother are political, personal, and creative narratives unfolding within both the pages of a book and the spaces of a life" (3). O'Reilly further calls on memoirs to not only challenge but to change patriarchal motherhood and to move from "rant to revolution" ("The Motherhood Memoir" 209). Drawing impetus from Podnieks and O'Reilly, I examine selected Australian contemporary motherhood memoirs published since 2010 as literary texts to show that this personal writing is flourishing in new political and creative ways. These narrative examples challenge perceived notions of motherhood and redefine maternal roles, often from a position that intersects the personal and professional. Experiments with genre and style also become political acts to rewrite mother bodies and stories.*

In 2010, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly published *Textual Mothers/ Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, which examines "how mothering and being a mother are political, personal, and creative narratives unfolding within both the pages of a book and the spaces of a life" (3). They ask of mother writers to "speak truthfully and authentically about their experiences of mothering" in order to "unmask motherhood" (3). O'Reilly further calls on mothering narratives to not only challenge but to change patriarchal motherhood to move from "rant to revolution" ("The Motherhood Memoir" 209).

Drawing impetus from Podnieks and O'Reilly, I will discuss selected Australian contemporary motherhood memoirs to show that this writing is

flourishing in new political, personal, and creative ways. I use the term “motherhood memoir” loosely in this discussion to refer to a published, book-length autobiographical and literary text written from a subjective–mother perspective, in which there is some exploration of the mothering experience. Therefore, by definition, the books chosen will inevitably grapple with the personal, political and creative elements of writing the subjective–mother experience. In this article, contemporary Australian texts mean ones published since 2010 by authors writing about mothering in Australia. The three texts to be examined in detail—*Things I Didn't Expect When I Was Expecting* (2013) by Monica Dux, *Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism* (2012) by Rachel Robertson and *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body* (2015) by Quinn Eades—were chosen because they are among the few texts that meet all of the above criteria.

This contemporary writing builds from the many discourses that mothers move between in their complex lives in order to offer critiques and celebrations of mothering. They depict maternal agency to challenge dominant archetypes of mothering, such as the “good mother.” I argue also that the creative approaches employed are also political acts used to challenge and change representations of mothering. At the same time, however, it is clear that these voices are not representative of the potential diversity of mothering experiences and voices in Australia.

The Personal Is Political

Transforming a personal mothering experience into a published text can be considered political for many reasons. Motherhood memoir can story “mothering as intelligent practice, deliberately reinventing and rearticulated by women ... where women are agents of discourse and of cultural production” (Stitt and Powell 6). Sheena Wilson adds, “Writing and publishing motherhood memoir signals the writer’s perception that her mothering experience is significant and worthy and a form of resistance to predetermined roles” (3). Given Judith Butler’s position that identity is produced through the performance of cultural norms, “to vary the repetition of maternal practices is to exert maternal agency” (Jeremiah 25) and motherhood memoir has the power to show that. Joanne Frye adds that motherhood memoir can question and “resist simplistic notions of ‘good’ mother as selfless, ‘bad’ mother as selfish, and develop a fuller understanding of human mother as an active and thinking self” (191).

Heather Hewett questions whether “an exclusive focus on the personal precludes the kind of systemic analysis so crucial for feminist activism” (25). Di Quinzio argues that “feminist theory will inevitably include multiple accounts

of mothering that will contradict each other” (247). Wilson believes in the collective power of these individual stories, even when writers are not acting according to or against particular definitions of mothering. She states that “these stories complicate and break open constraining ideals of motherhood” (3). So for Wilson, even books that do not aim to challenge perceived notions of motherhood have the power to do so.

After analysing examples of the genre, Andrea O’Reilly in “The Motherhood Memoir and the ‘New Momism’: Biting the Hand that Feeds You” argues that “Most motherhood memoirs because of their identification with the new momism, cannot discern, let alone critique, the root causes of mothers’ oppression” (212). Two recent Australian motherhood memoirs—Antonella Gambotto-Burke’s, *Mama: Dispatches from the Frontline of Love* (2014) and Jacinta Tynan’s, *Mother Zen* (2015)—could be seen to fit this “new momism” ideology. They promote the joy of being a mother and as such they both profess that their texts are about change or even revolution. Gambotto-Burke promotes attachment parenting as a revolutionary notion against the understanding that motherhood has been seen as a consolation prize for women, and Tynan questions why society sees parenting as a tough and unrewarding job.

In 2010, Tynan was subject to protests from mothers on social media when an article that she wrote, titled “Is Motherhood Really That Hard?” appeared in newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne and began with the following statement: “There is one thing nobody warned me about when I became a mother: what a breeze it would be.” Susan Maushart responded to Tynan by publishing an article in *The Australian*, “Give Us the Bad News,” which reads:

Fifteen years ago, the “dark side” of motherhood (aka, most of it) was quite literally the love that dared not speak its name. Today we are a full ten centimetres dilated on that one. Somehow, somewhere, grizzling, farting and generally sicking-up about motherhood has become the approved discourse—the motherhood issue if you will—while enjoying the experience smacks of some dangerous new radicalism. The taboo has become the totem.

This is significant because Maushart was referring to her 1997 book titled, *The Mask of Motherhood*, in which she wrote: “The Mask of Motherhood is the semblance of serenity and control that enables women’s work to pass unnoticed in the larger drama of human life. Above all, the mask keeps us quiet about what we know, to the point where we forget that we know anything at all, or anything worth telling” (25-26).

Maushart questions if what is “political” has indeed changed over the past fifteen years. Monica Dux’s memoir, *Things I Didn’t Expect When I Was Ex-*

pecting, however, returns to Maushart's original call to "unmask" motherhood and suggests that mothers are not yet "fully dilated" on "grizzling, farting and generally sicking-up about motherhood" because Dux's book does exactly that. She unmasks motherhood, pregnancy, miscarriage and birth by providing a truthful rendition of her experience. At the same time she extracts humour from each situation, even, ironically, self-deprecating humour, in order to empower. Dux reinforces that the "institution of motherhood" remains largely unchanged:

One thing I know for sure: pregnancy is still pregnancy and motherhood is still motherhood. Babies still have to grow inside women's bodies and we still have to get them out at the end of the process. Newborn infants still have to be fed and cleaned and nurtured, and nine times out of ten it's women who end up doing that. So the fundamentals are unchanged. And, if you ask me, those fundamentals are, and always have been, utterly bizarre. (xiii)

Dux's title is a play on the title of Heidi Murkoff's "pregnancy bible" *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, in order to suggest that the well-read pregnancy manual has failed in its task, and that it is her book that will reveal the truth. Her flippant tone belies the impact of her considered research. Dux is not offering a pregnancy instruction manual; she is providing a feminist maternal consciousness-raising treatise that is impactful because she breaks the personal-public divide around pregnancy and women's bodies. She reclaims the colloquial language to explain how pregnant women's bodies and their bodily functions have been considered dirty, controlled, and medicalised, which makes women feel ashamed. She also exposes the falsehood that everything regarding birth is clean and without consequence, such as in this passage from chapter two, titled "Poo":

Imagine you were required to take a poo in front of an audience. You are naked from the waist down and are expected to assume various awkward and immodest positions ... you'll empathise with how I felt when I discovered the horrible truth about labour. As your baby enters the world, so too will your poo. (25)

By choosing a home birth for her second delivery, she regains agency after experiencing a disempowering first birthing experience. Her husband is actively included in the birth and ongoing care of the children; he also writes a small response in the book. So Dux offers examples of "outlaw," or empowered mothering which O'Reilly argues, help move the genre from one of "complaint to change" (212).

The Professional and the Personal Are Political

In the same year that Dux released her book, 2013, Pamela Douglas wrote an article titled “The Medicalised Mother,” in which she argues that despite motherhood literature flourishing in Australia, “there are still relatively few Australian women writers who have dared to foreground the body of the reproductive female and to defy an entrenched cultural prejudice against writing frankly about maternity” (105).¹ Douglas calls for heroic stories of motherhood: “We lack a mythopoeic story for the extraordinary bodily transformation of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. We lack empowered and empowering narratives about this rite of passage” (110).

Douglas is a doctor and an author who shared the 2009 Queensland Premier’s Literary Award for Emerging Author for her unpublished manuscript *Bone Mother: A Memoir in Milk*.² As a doctor, Douglas is trained in and engages in the medicalization of women’s bodies, yet at the same time, she is a mother who is subject to that and can see the limitations of such an approach. She is located at the intersection of the personal and the professional; she can, therefore, offer a gendered critique of medical representations of the pregnant, birthing, and breastfeeding body. Douglas believes in the subversive potential of this gendered insider’s critique. She writes: “this fertile tension between multiple and contradictory selves can be developed, not as a source of crippling anxiety, conflict and guilt, but as a richly textured, empowered, and generative complexity, offering powerful potential for the creation of a new feminine imaginary” (121). This mix of the personal and the professional is representative of the multiple discourses that many contemporary mothers move between in their complex lives; the approach may offer opportunities for the empowered motherhood memoir to move the discussion from “complaint to change” in previously unexplored directions.

Rachel Robertson is another author who combines personal experience with her professional knowledge in her memoir titled *Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism*. This story is about her relationship with her autistic son, Ben (not his real name) during his first eleven years. It is written as a series of lyrical essays, which draw on extensive research into disability and autism. She juxtaposes memoir with cultural, social, and political discourses on disability and motherhood.

As the mother of a disabled son, Robertson is forced into structural relationships that do not empower, and, as such, she finds that she has to renegotiate her identity. She begins with the belief that she could remain autonomous and liberated as a mother, and she continues with her role as main breadwinner once her son is born. When Ben is diagnosed, his status changes from a boy to a “boy with autism.” Her status changes from mother to “carer,” and Ben

officially becomes a “care-recipient,” which “marks them as different to other mothers and boys” (97). Her identity changes again when her marriage ends, from main breadwinner as an independent policy consultant, to single mother and carer. She finds that the institutions that are meant to assist instead make her feel like an outsider:

Just as I have shifted from mother to carer, so too have I moved from consumer to client, taxpayer to recipient, citizen to outsider. Because I get a carer’s allowance of fifty dollars per week and these vexed one-off bonuses, because I get letters from the government telling me that I have to inform them of any changes in my circumstances, because I am on the Centrelink database and have the feeling of being watched by government, my sense of being an autonomous, independent citizen with freedom of speech and action is unravelling. (101)

Joanne Baker explains that the increasingly punitive treatment of mothers by the state in Australia is part of the contemporary neoliberal context, which promotes the idea that choice rather than unseen structural forces govern mother’s lives, and, as such, the government is able to exonerate itself from social service provision. Robertson reflects, “If I were to embrace my identity as ‘carer’ could I be part of a group that challenges the notion that individual families and not taxpayers must be responsible for the majority of the caring work in our society?” (103). Susan Goodwin and Kate Huppatz further outline how the “good mother” archetype developed as the result of deeply held cultural beliefs in Australia and is implemented as a set of unrealistic ideals produced and reproduced through the media, government policy, and institutions. The promotion of this archetype keeps women doing the unpaid care work and regulates family life (6).

In “Misfitting Mothers: Feminism, Disability and Motherhood,” Robertson connects feminist disability theory with the experience of mothering, as both are subject to social, cultural and politically fabricated narratives of the body experienced in and through relationships (8-9). Her academic work theorizes what her memoir shows: independence can occur when interpersonal and social structural relationships empower rather than limit people (8).

Robertson ultimately resists prescribed labels and roles, and maintains her agency by also refusing to label her son or assign him a prescribed role. Her son shows her the “difference in sameness” (10), and she begins to understand her son outside of the notion of a “puzzle” that needs to be solved (63). “It wasn’t until I had Ben that I realised the complexities of the relationship between mothering and autonomy. It took experience, also to teach me that the act of caring for another is a gift to oneself as much as to the other” (113).

Robertson parallels her storytelling approach with her lived experience of mothering by not writing in chronological order and mixing essay writing with personal storytelling. This is her creative way to show that mothering a child with a developmental disability means that the “typical or perhaps ideal developmental path” (90) cannot happen. The story has to represent the “continual pauses and reconfigurations” that have represented both Ben’s developmental path and Robertson’s mothering experiences: “In a way you live against the story told by society. There is a kind of silencing that happens when your own story (or your child’s) is fragmented, disordered and out of sequence with the typical story. You can’t share your stories in the same way as other parents” (90). This reinforces the idea that the motherhood memoir can be a political tool when it offers a voice to those not often heard and allows them to write their story in the way that it can best be told.

In 2008, Hewett asked, “Why are white, middle class women still dictating the terms of the discussion, and why does our culture continue to listen to these voices when it ignores so many others?” (25). This question could be aimed at the contemporary motherhood memoirs that I have reviewed because these writers are white, middle class, and educated. These writers are doctors, journalists, or academics, who live in capital cities. These stories explore a variety of family structures and experiences of mothering; however, the voices published in this form are not reflective of the potential diversity of mothers in Australia.

The Creative as Political

In terms of creative approaches, all of these texts offer a mix of genres and styles, but the most radical of these is Quinn Eades’s text, which attempts a new form of writing. In *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body*, Eades makes clear that moving beyond genres can be a political as well as creative agenda. Redefining male writing genres and their conventions can also be a way of redefining patriarchal mothering (Podnieks and O’Reilly 7). Eades is challenging traditional approaches to gender and mothering and achieves this by offering glimpses into everyday parenting experiences with partner Sal and their sons, Zach and Benji. The “autobiography of the body” is presented in short visceral snatches of dramatic events, such as births:

Who surges up in my throat? What is signified when that carnal sound unfurls? Birth. All that it contains. *Birth* is not a word; it is a world. Take word and add *L*. Add language, the lolling lick as a tongue flicks and finds voice behind movement, looping meaning through love, languid days, those long nights, the laugh. When Benji

was born, the first sound was our laugh. Four women in a kitchen, all of us laughing hello. *Take word*, and add *L*: this is the world. (176)

Eades argues that Helene Cixous's call to write bodies in a way that is free from patriarchal language and structures—an *écriture féminine*, a feminist practice of writing—is not enough. Building from Cixous's ideas that writing from the feminine stands in opposition to masculine, Eades shows that this approach does not work in order to write a body as a “genderqueer, tattooed who has lost its womb” (1).³ Instead, Eades has written an *écriture matiere*—a text that matters. This is a call for bodies to write themselves in the moment, and, as such, the traditional binaries will disappear:

Écriture matiere unhides. Writing matter, writing the material, brings dark to light and light to the dark. It is possible that an autobiography of the body will always only be queer. That as soon as we say this is neither: culture nor nature, body nor mind, affect nor effect, here nor there, he nor she, them nor us; as soon as we say: integrated, embodied, we, *oui*, the queering begins (has already begun). (35)

This memoir is written in short form prose and poetry linked with quotes of literary theory, particularly from Helene Cixous. Eades direct voice and genderqueer experience challenges established concepts of mother: “I am taking this queer body that has birthed two babies, drunk ink like it's milk, fucked outrageously in the dawn, drawn scalpels and needles to its arms and wrists, and I am standing it, unapologetically, on this page” (31). Perhaps in offering a new way of writing a genderqueer mothering autobiography of the body, Eades has moved Australian mother writing away from rant and towards revolution.

Conclusion

These selected texts are “political, personal and creative narratives” as defined by Podnieks and O'Reilly. They are personal stories that challenge perceived notions of motherhood and redefine maternal roles, either as a feminist consciousness-raising text about the pregnant and birthing body (Dux), offering examples of empowered mothering gained at the intersection of mother's professional and personal lives, (Robertson and Douglas), or developing new styles of writing varied mothering experiences (Eades). Just as “good mother” archetypes have developed over time and are constantly reinforced, each new depiction of mothering that presents mothers outside of limited roles works to “change patriarchal motherhood” (O'Reilly). It is disappointing, therefore, that there is not a greater diversity of mother experiences explored in this

narrative form. Nevertheless, these authentic portrayals of experiences and reflections on mothering within contemporary Australia build on and extend the work of previous works that “unmasked” motherhood, and they add to an expanding genre and discourse.

Endnotes

¹Douglas notes Susan Johnson’s, *A Better Woman: A Memoir of Motherhood* as an exception to this criticism and, instead, sees this as a rare example of the type of book that she is proposing.

²As this memoir is unpublished, I have not read it.

³Karina Quinn’s name has changed to Quinn Eades.

Works Cited

- Baker, Joanne. “Neoliberalism and the De-Politicising of Motherhood.” *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Ed. Vandenbeld Giles, Melinda. Bradford: Demeter Press, 2014. 169 - 83. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge. 1993. Print.
- Di Quinzio, Pamela. *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering*. New York: Routledge. 1999. Print.
- Douglas, Pamela. “Milkmother Memoir.” *Motherhood Memories: Mothers Creating/Writing Lives*. Ed. Willey, Nicole, L. and Dymond, Justine. Bradford, ON, Canada: Demeter Press, 2013. 105-30. Print.
- Dux, Monica. *Things I Didn’t Expect (When I was Expecting)*. Melbourne: Melbourne University, 2013. Print.
- Eades, Quinn. *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body*. North Melbourne: Tantanoola, 2015. Print.
- Frye, Joanne S. “Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood.” *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures*. Ed. Podnieks, Elizabeth and O’Reilly, Andrea. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010. 187-201. Print.
- Gambotto-Burke, Antonella. *Mama: Dispatches from the Frontline of Love*. Crows Nest: Arbon Publishing, 2014. Print.
- Goodwin, Susan, and Kate Huppatz. *The Good Mother: Contemporary Motherhoods in Australia*. Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press, 2010. Print.
- Hewett, Heather. “Of Motherhood Born.” *Mothering in the Third Wave*. Ed. Kinser, Amber E. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2008. 19-30. Print.
- Jeremiah, Emily “From Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought.” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*

- 8.1-2 (2006): 21-33. Web. 17 Apr 2016.
- Johnson, Susan. *A Better Woman*. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 2000. Print.
- Maushart, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood*. Sydney: Random House, 1997. Print.
- Maushart, Susan. "Give Us the Bad News." *theaustralian.com*. News Digital Media, 18 Sep. 2010. Web. 24 Sep. 2015.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. "The Motherhood Memoir and the "New Momism": Biting the Hand That Feeds You." *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*. Eds. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010. 203-12. Print.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth and Andrea O'Reilly. "Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives." *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*. Eds. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010. 1-47. Print.
- Quinn, Karina. "Ecriture Matiere: A Text That Matters." *TEXT 31* Special Issue (2010). Web. 22 Apr 2016.
- Robertson, Rachel. *Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism*. Collingwood: Black Inc, 2012. Print.
- Robertson, Rachel. "Misfitting" Mothers: Feminism, Disability and Mothering." *Hecate* 40 (2014): 7-19. Web. 21 Sep. 2015.
- Stitt, Jocelyn Fenton and Pegeen Reichert Powell, eds. *Mothers Who Deliver: Feminist Interventions in Public and Interpersonal Discourse*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. Print.
- Tynan, Jacinta. "Is Motherhood Really That Hard?" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Aug. 2010. Web. 24 Sept. 2015.
- Tynan, Jacinta. *Mother Zen*. North Sydney: Harlequin, 2015. Print.
- Wilson, Sheena. "Networks of Relations: Introduction to Writing Motherhood." *Telling Truths: Storying Motherhood*. Eds. Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson. Bradford: Demeter Press, 2014: 1-15 Print.