

One Is Not Born But Rather Becomes a Mother: Claiming the Maternal in Women and Gender Studies

In their dominant, institutionalized iterations within the field of women and gender studies, as well as in much feminist theory, the concepts of female empowerment, self-direction, and gender equality are still largely based on Western neoliberal views of individualism, self, and agency. Notwithstanding important theoretical interventions from the field of motherhood studies and a recent strand of feminist theory and philosophy promoting a relational understanding of identity, self and agency, full equality in mainstream feminism still “requires that women be liberated from the consequences of their bodies, namely the ability to bear children” (Fox-Genovese 21). The aim of this article is to contribute to work seeking to deconstruct forms of essentialism embedded in women and gender studies and feminist theory by bringing together feminist critiques of Western conceptions of self and identity and the theory of the maternal articulated in motherhood studies. My hope is to make apparent the distance between the body in its reproductive function (pregnancy and birth) on the one hand, and the performativity embedded in the maternal role, on the other. By discussing maternal work as separate from pregnancy and birth, I wish to highlight the socially constructed nature of expectations and ideas associated with maternity and reveal that the often neglected agency involved in taking on and performing the role of mother.

Introduction: Disclaiming the Maternal in Mainstream Feminism

Simone De Beauvoir’s famous dictum “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (301) has been essential to the development of twentieth-century feminist thought. In implying the separation between sex and gender, she makes clear the social construction of the category of “woman” as a set of attitudes and behaviours developed gradually within particular social and

historical contexts. In stating that “woman is not a completed reality, it is rather a becoming” (31), De Beauvoir compels us to acknowledge that sex and the body are not enough to define one as a woman. Since then, feminist theory has adopted this antiessentialist perspective, arguing for an epistemology built on deconstructing oppressive patriarchal structures that delimit gender. Feminist epistemology has been striving to replace positivist models of inquiry with what Donna Haraway (1988) calls “feminist objectivity,” or situated forms of knowledge, where knowledge and truth are understood as partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational.

By replacing the word “woman” with “mother” in my title, I wish to draw attention to the fact that although this antiessentialist orientation regarding the category of woman routinely informs feminist inquiry, its implications and relevance for the category of mother continue to be ignored. This exclusion is most striking in academic or mainstream feminism—the kind of feminism that has been institutionalized through women and gender studies departments and programs. The absence through exclusion is not necessarily new, although it has been strongly affirmed over the last two decades.

In tracing the vexed relationship between feminism and motherhood from the early twentieth century until the 1990s, Ann Snitow identifies the persistence of “the taboo on speaking the life of the mother” well into that decade. The extent of this issue and the absence of motherhood and the maternal in feminist theory since the 1990s has been articulated by Samira Kawash. Remarking on the absence and lack of serious feminist engagement with motherhood, she argues that “feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities” (997). The keen relevance of Kawash’s insight notwithstanding, matters have not changed significantly. In her 2016 book on matricentric feminism, Andrea O’Reilly documents the disavowal and virtual disappearance of motherhood in twenty-first century academic feminism by examining the syllabi of introductory women and gender studies courses, articles, and book reviews published in women’s studies journals, introduction to women and gender studies textbooks, and papers presented at the National Women’s Studies Association (185-86). Significantly, textbooks designed to introduce students to the field of women and gender studies published over the last ten years and purporting to ask challenging questions about knowledge production and representation within the field, also show a gap in their material and scope as far as the subject of maternity (Takševa, “Motherhood Studies”).

Even when it is not articulated as an absence, the feminist debate about motherhood ends in a kind of theoretical impasse, which as Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, rests on being able to articulate “indictments of the negative aspects of the role women play as mothers” but without any “consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system” (434-35). Mainstream

feminist discourse is, in fact, still determined by universalist and essentialist accounts of motherhood and versions of the maternal that still “equate the feminine with the maternal” thereby assuming the “naturalisation of maternal identity in terms typical of patriarchal understandings of femininity” (DiQuinzio 10-11).

Although women and gender studies are no longer always synonymous with feminism, one of the dominant discursive lenses for examining women’s experience in the various disciplines that fall under the women and gender studies umbrella remains rooted in feminist principles: the fight for women’s empowerment and right to self-direction in individual as well as professional terms in conjunction with the pursuit of full equality with men. In this article, I argue that in their dominant, institutionalized iterations within the field of women and gender studies, as well as much of feminist theory, the concepts of empowerment, self-direction, and gender equality are still largely based on Western, neoliberal views of individualism, self, and agency. In this context, notwithstanding important theoretical interventions from the field of motherhood studies and a recent strand of feminist theory and philosophy promoting a more relational and complex understanding of identity, self, and agency, full equality in mainstream feminism still implies, and, indeed, “require[s] that women be liberated from the consequences of their bodies, notably the ability to bear children” (Fox-Genovese 21).

Within the mainstream feminist paradigm, the absence of the maternal bespeaks the perspective that the feminist empowerment project is essentially incompatible with the social and personal entanglements arising out of the maternal role. Embedded in this assumption is that maternal identity is understood in essentialist terms, as a category of existence rather than a performative role. My goal here is, therefore, to contribute to work that seeks to deconstruct this form of essentialism by bringing together feminist critiques of Western conceptions of self and identity, and the theory of the maternal articulated in motherhood studies. My hope is to make apparent the distance between the body in its reproductive function (pregnancy and birth) on the one hand, and the performativity embedded in the maternal role, on the other. Discussing the maternal in terms of performativity shows that the maternal role is primarily defined through the agency required to commit to the long-term care of children.

At the same time, in foregrounding the distance between the body and the maternal role, my intention is not to widen the space that allows the maternal body to become occluded and recede to the point of obliteration in favour of an objectified uterus interpreted as a temporary fetal container. The most advanced reproductive technologies that open our eyes to the world of the fetus within the womb are already performing this task by encouraging an understanding of the womb as a self-contained ecological system, only

peripherally attached to the rest of the maternal body and the subjectivity that animates it. By discussing maternal work as independent from pregnancy and birth, I wish to highlight the socially constructed nature of expectations and ideas associated with maternity and reveal the often neglected agency involved in taking on and performing the role of mother.

On the Politics of Exclusion and the Limits of Selfhood in Feminist Theory

De Beauvoir could clearly see the social and historical forces conspiring against women over time to create expectations for the performance of good or appropriate womanhood that have come to be accepted as inherent female qualities whose validity was justified through women's reproductive capacity. However, she herself failed to theorize motherhood and the maternal in similar terms. Even though throughout *The Second Sex* she outlines the host of cultural and social conditions that make motherhood oppressive and a source of misery to women, she continues to blame the female reproductive function itself rather than the patriarchal conditions that delimit it by claiming that in maternity "we continue to be ... enslaved" (157). Much of the impassioned antimotherhood rhetoric of the radical second wave and its more recent manifestations find their roots in this line of thought (see, for example, the work of T-Grace Atkinson; Firestone). Advances in reproductive technologies and the increasing number of gay and lesbian parents have made the choice to mother more readily apparent and accepted in a theoretical sense, but they have not resulted in a mainstream shift in the ways the maternal role is constructed.

Despite the apparent feminist commitment to collapsing the universal and essentialist category of woman, however, there have been signs that even this project is far from being finished or unproblematic. Transnational feminist theory and the work of feminists of colour in particular have revealed that the spectre of the unified female subject has played a defining role for the hegemonic feminist academy. As Chandra Mohanty points out in her book on Third World women and the politics of feminism, the academy's response to the challenge of its singular identity presented by racialized communities of resistance and intersectionality has been to "insist that these racialized categories were neither politically contingent nor valid; rather they were essentialist ways of imagining the female body" (5). The politics of exclusion Mohanty articulates is based on the hegemonic feminist projection of its own essentialism onto racialized others as a way to justify their marginal status within dominant feminist discourse.

The politics of exclusion of the maternal within hegemonic feminism functions along similar faultlines, and it consistently reveals that the category of mother within feminism is understood as neither politically contingent nor

particularly relevant to the larger feminist project. It seems that accepting motherhood studies within the fold of mainstream feminist agendas and curricula poses a challenge to the way in which that feminism articulates and sustains itself as an ideology and a politics. So despite the feminist epistemological investment in situated knowledge, and despite brilliant feminist critiques of the rational and masculine-coded bases of objective and universal knowledge in traditional Western philosophy, when it comes to dominant streams of feminist empiricism, the “knower” who is rooted in experience as a valid source of knowledge is still primarily an independent subject whose privileged *modus operandi* unfolds according to individualist principles. The particular kinds of situated and embodied ways of knowing that typify the maternal—rooted in emotional and relational interdependence and within a field of ongoing active consideration of the demands of another—are not consistent with the autonomous self’s primary desire to maintain self-direction in a patriarchal world populated by entangling commitments.

The claim that I am making, therefore, is that hegemonic, academic, or mainstream feminism rejects not only the misogynist heritage of positivism but also the maternal. The rejection is due to this feminism’s lingering orientation towards a preferred neoliberal selfhood understood in terms of individualism, and autonomy as an unencumbered capacity for self-direction. The politics of exclusion of the maternal from academic feminism is thus symptomatic of a larger feminist ideological investment in a concept of identity that alarmingly mirrors the disembodied, male and unencumbered Western model of the self. This model is to a large extent derived from the Kantian philosophy of the ethical subject, where the individual is the standard for understanding identity and whose objectivity and commitment to duty—or in the case of its feminist versions, commitment to equality and empowerment—is imperilled by social bonds and daily acts of care within patriarchal contexts (Willett et al.).

The ethical and moral subject of this philosophy depends on an understanding of the self that “isolate[s] the individual from personal and social relationships, and thus also from all biological and social forces” that make it dependent on others in myriad ways (Willett et al.). The neoliberal self, which combines the idealised subject of neoclassical liberal philosophy and economics, is defined as a “rational, self-interested actor” (Stedman Jones 2) for whom activity, self-reliance, and agency mark so-called success within the neoliberal economy (Verdouw 525). As a hegemonic mode of discourse, neoliberalism extends from the economic to all other spheres of life and shapes the ideologies that regulate not only the everyday but also the conditions through which mechanisms of power are exercised. As such, neoliberalism has profound effects on subjectivization (Verdouw 525) whose effects on academic feminist discourses and politics cannot be underestimated.

Neoliberal subjectivities shift the practices of the self and its particular modes of living to align them with its ethos and remake the subject as autonomous, self focused, and self-regulating. The agency of the neoliberal subject is realized through its independence and laudable pursuit of self-actualization. Neoliberalism is “privatisation” and individualisation “all the way down” (Read 35); it is the extension of private market logic into multiple environments, such as health, policy and education, where the cultural trope of individual responsibility, autonomy and self-reliance underlies its institutional logics (Mori). In other words, in the moral theory extrapolated from these values, society is made up of “independent autonomous units who cooperate only when the terms of cooperation are such as to make it further the ends of each party” (Barry 166). This view is echoed in a number of feminist accounts, such as Martha Nussbaum’s, where “the flourishing of human beings one by one is both analytically and normatively” taken to exist prior to the flourishing of any group (62).

The tacit feminist investment in neoliberal subjectivities leads to the devaluation of the relational and, therefore, the maternal. Much feminist writing has critiqued dominant economic and moral theories, although most of this writing tends to respond to liberal individualism rather than the most recent iterations of the neoliberal variety. In defining care as an alternative global ethic, Fiona Robinson, for example, observes that giving primacy to values such as autonomy, independence, noninterference, and self-determination results in the “systematic devaluing of notions of interdependence, and positive involvement in the lives of others” (7). Diana Meyers’s work has contributed to feminist revisions of liberal autonomy by her insistence that autonomy should be defined by closer observation of the lives of human subjects, particularly women, arguing against purely conceptual approaches. As well, the field of ethics of care that grew out of feminist rethinking of philosophy and moral theory in the 1960s has rearticulated the value of experience as a legitimate mode of knowing. Although not easily classifiable under something that can be called a unified feminist moral theory, as an area of study the ethics of care shares what Virginia Held has called “a basic commitment to eliminate gender bias in moral theorizing as well as elsewhere” (25).

But the conceptual and transformative pull of institutionalized neoliberal subjectivities within academic and institutionalized forms of feminism appears to be very strong. The maternal—as based on the work of care and rooted in a subjectivity that is structurally relational and characterized by vulnerability, exposure, and interdependence—stands as an undeniable “other” to the neoliberal model of preferred selfhood. Moreover, the feminist project of eliminating gender bias in economics, moral theory, philosophy and other areas of knowledge is crucially predicated on an understanding of gender as a category that is conceptually separate from sex and that, as such, can be

subjected to rigorous analytical investigations that are for the most part independent of the body. The maternal has remained outside this project precisely because in the popular as well as the feminist academic imaginary, it continues to be firmly tied to biology and the reproductive function of the female body. According to the logic of this imaginary, biology is, indeed, destiny—in this case, destiny that is defined not only through the oppression of women as mothers within patriarchy but also through their erasure from the very discourses that were supposed to recuperate their standing on the basis of their gender and lived experience. The institutionalization of even the most revolutionary discourses and movements results in their mechanization, their discursive ossification, and their distancing from the conceptual richness of core values that propelled the revolution in the first place. Feminism is not immune to this process, as evidenced by the erasure of the maternal from its institutionalized iterations.

Alternatives: Maternal Theory and How Mothers Are Made

One way to illustrate conceptualizations of the maternal as a performative role is to trace a trajectory of the development of maternal theory through important studies. There were several Anglo American women writers prior to women's right to vote in the USA, like Susanne La Follette and Charlotte Perkins Gillman, who made important observations about motherhood in this regard. In their work, they signal that it is not women's reproductive power per se or even the work of care itself that are the cause for women's subjugation but rather the specific conditions under which that care unfolds within a patriarchal context. In 1898, in *Women and Economics*, for example, Gillman correctly identifies problems with the institutions and systems that govern domestic life and prescribe maternal activity and behaviour. Arguing that women's human impulse to grow and to create was stifled because of a sexual and an economic dependence bred in patriarchal conditions relegating woman to the domestic sphere, Gilman observes that the type of motherhood resulting from these conditions is "more pathological than any other, more morbid, defective, irregular, diseased," since children grow up being "dominated by mothers who had never been allowed to grow to mental maturity" (qtd. in Dally 139). This is an important insight, but one that is not taken up with any seriousness by feminist writers until well after the women's liberation movement in the second half of the twentieth-century.

Two decades after DeBeauvoir's *Second Sex*, Adrienne Rich wrote *Of Woman Born* (1976), a landmark feminist study of motherhood that forms the basis for all subsequent scholarly investigations of the subject. Rich's is the first book-length study of the maternal that accords it serious, systematic attention

within the context of the women's liberation movement and feminist inquiry. Its greatest contribution rests on Rich's insight that motherhood is not a unitary concept naturally tied to the fact of reproduction—it is an institution. Rich observes that motherhood “is not the ‘human condition’ any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are”; instead, it is an institution that “has a history ... an ideology” (33). This leads Rich to postulate, for the first time, a crucial distinction between two meanings of motherhood. The aim of motherhood as an institution is to ensure that women's powers of reproduction and the potential contained within those powers, as well as women themselves, remain under male control (Rich 13). The other meaning of motherhood Rich identifies refers to the daily practice of mothering, which she defines as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children,” and which is not itself oppressive but can, in fact, be a source of joy for the mother and children.

Rich's separation between the institution and the experience of motherhood creates the theoretical space from which it becomes possible to articulate dominant and oppressive ideologies of motherhood. Its conceptual framework continues to facilitate discussions that separate woman's reproductive powers from her potential relationship to those powers—that is, to separate the capacity of the female body to conceive, be pregnant, and give birth, from her subjective orientation in the world and her experience of the maternal, apart from the institution. This space also created the possibility to articulate the extent to which particular aspects of the ideology of motherhood, decoupled from the reproductive function, oppress some or all mothers in a given sociopolitical context.

Ann Dally's 1982 book, *Inventing Motherhood*, deserves a particular mention in developing further the trajectory of inquiry opening with Rich's work. Dally begins from the important premise that “there have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented. Each subsequent age and society has defined in its own terms and imposed its own restrictions and expectations on mothers” (17). Dally's study shows the ways in which mothers have been made, not born, over the course of history; her study still contains some of the most insightful scholarship on fashions in mothering and childcare as well as that venerated thing called mother love. In a perspective that has not lost any of its currency, Dally points out that on the whole the women's liberation movement has been “seriously deficient” in the area of motherhood; it has done a great disservice “not only to mothers but to all women and to society in general,” as much modern feminist writing on the topic has been “superficial’ and has lacked an understanding and awareness “of its own deficiencies in this most important area of life” (165).

Bell hook's essay "Revolutionary Parenting," published in 1984 as part of her collection *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, also represents a very important moment in the development of maternal theory, as it articulates for the first time and from within the women's liberation movement racial biases when it comes to feminist debates on motherhood. hooks points out that motherhood and childrearing may be a locus of women's oppression and an impediment to women's liberation for white, middle-class, and college-educated women for whom motherhood resulted in confinement to the domestic sphere. But for Black women, who "from slavery to the present day ... in the U.S. have worked outside the home" (133), motherhood represented a uniquely humanising form of labour, not an oppressive reality that prevented them from being realized as women and human beings. hooks contributes to the analysis of motherhood as a particular role that is assigned to women and that women adopt on the basis of their race, class, and historical location rather than an essential category of being whose workings remain beyond the possibility of historicizing and theorizing.

Conceptually, hooks's perspective provides the basis for important feminist work on Black motherhood, such as that of Patricia Hill Collins, and paves the way for subsequent interrogations of the maternal across race, class, and culture. Collins's work in particular, as well as the work of scholars in Indigenous mothering, has demonstrated unequivocally the constructed nature of the maternal role by pointing out the ways in which the maternal is enacted within Black cultures. Within Black families, as Collins writes, mothering "was not a privatized nurturing occupation reserved for biological mothers" but a communal activity—one that encompasses at least the extended members of the family engaging in what she terms "othermothering" ("The Meaning of Motherhood" 277; *Black Feminist Thought* 178). In other words, individuals who undertook the care of children performed a maternal role. Similarly, work on Indigenous mothering reveals it to be a collective responsibility; in terms of community status, it is equivalent to any other work structurally important to the collective and performed by both birth mothers and othermothers, as well as other members of the community (Anderson).

Sara Rudick's 1989 book *Maternal Thinking* is another pivotal moment in the development of maternal theory. It is the first feminist study of mothering as experience; it asserts that the work of mothering and mother love are not instinctive but are the product of rational forms of thinking that the mother adopts in order to fulfil her maternal role. Rudick separates the biological act of giving birth from the activity of mothering itself, and defines this activity as grounded in the conscious commitment to providing daily care, nurture, and training to children who require this care. This definition frees considerations of motherhood from gender essentialism as well as biological determinism by making apparent that maternal care is a type of work that can

be performed by anyone, such as othermothers, adoptive mothers, as well as fathers. Through Rudick's book, it becomes fully possible in a philosophical way to conceive of the maternal and the work of mothering as degendered—as a cognitive and an emotional inclination that can be adopted by any woman (whether a biological mother or not), and any man (whether a biological father or not) who is willing to commit to this labour. Rudick's work shows that one becomes a mother primarily by choosing to commit to the long-term daily care of children rather than exclusively through pregnancy and the act of giving birth. The gendered connotations of the verb aside, this also means that anyone can choose to mother, regardless of sex and gender.

The establishment of the Association for Research in Mothering by Andrea O'Reilly in 1997, later to become the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, marks a pivotal moment in the development of motherhood studies as an area of research and scholarship. The association launched its own journal as well, with the aim to promote and make visible scholarship on motherhood. The creation of the association provided a formal platform for scholars, practitioners and activists working on the subject of motherhood, and facilitated their self-conscious engagement in building a field of study. In 2005, the association launched a publishing division, Demeter Press, with the publication of O'Reilly's *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Mothering, Feminism, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering*. In the following year, O'Reilly coined the term “motherhood studies” to acknowledge and demarcate scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate and autonomous discipline grounded in the theoretical tradition developed by Collins, Rich, and Rudick and as interdisciplinary in both scholarship and teaching (O'Reilly, *Rocking* 10).

In 2007, O'Reilly edited the first anthology or reader in maternal theory, *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, composed of fifty theoretical texts on mothers, motherhood, and mothering. In her book-length study, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, published in 2016, she brings together insights developed over a decade or more of her own and other scholarship on the maternal, and she calls for the further development of a particular kind of feminism that is devoted to the explorations of the maternal. The scholarship and practice of matricentric feminism as articulated by O'Reilly arise from the position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy; in her work it is understood that “feminism affords a woman a life, a purpose, and an identity outside and beyond motherhood, and it does not limit childrearing to the biological mother” (147).

It is of significant note that all of O'Reilly's scholarship, as well as the work of other scholars working on the maternal over the last two decades, is devoted to revealing the degree of distance between the biology of motherhood and the performativity embedded in the maternal role as constructed within particular sociocultural, economic, and political contexts (O'Reilly; Thurer;

Hays; DiQuinzio; Douglas and Michaels; Hayden and O'Brien Hallstein; Maushart; Smith; Stephens; Green). By critiquing the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood and the maternal role it proscribes, this scholarship shows that alternative ways of mothering are not only theoretically possible, but that women and others who have chosen to mother have been practicing them for a long time in different cultures and different historical periods. Such scholarship engages closely the conceptual crevices that have opened up by juxtaposing motherhood as a patriarchal institution against the lived experience of mothering of a wide diversity of mothers across time and location. These investigations shed light on overlooked forms of agency and resistance within dominant models of contemporary and historical motherhood, as well as establish a theoretical basis for exploring empowered and feminist forms of mothering.

Due to the significance and scope of this scholarship, it is no longer possible to speak of something called motherhood without carefully contextualizing the term. Cultural ideologies of motherhood in the Western tradition—as in any tradition—construct the image of the good mother and, thus, prescribe certain behaviours that are seen as appropriate and desirable for practicing good mothering. These ideologies also define the normative emotional framework that is supposed to govern the mother-child relationship (Takševa, “Mother Love”). The two major twentieth-century middle-class ideologies of motherhood prevalent in Anglo American contexts—intensive mothering and new momism—continue to reflect and embody the idealized nature of maternal love promulgated by traditional discourses on motherhood. New momism, for example, insists that “no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being 24/7, to her children” (Douglas and Michaels 619).

New momism is, in fact, founded upon another late twentieth-century middle-class ideology, which sociologist Sharon Hays has labelled intensive mothering. She defines it as a still dominant “gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children” and requiring that mothers think about their children at all times (Hays 22). Underscoring the mother’s constant cognitive, emotional, and physical preoccupation with her children as the basis of mother love and the consequent denial of any of the mother’s own immediate and long-term needs, interests, and desires, these ideologies are intolerant of and even hostile towards signs of ambivalence in mother-child relationships (Takševa, “Mother Love”).

In light of extensive scholarship on the subject of how mothers are made by the complex workings of patriarchal ideology, maternal scholars can now more fully understand the myriad unrealistic demands placed upon women by

patriarchal maternal roles in different time periods, including our own. The discourse of patriarchal, normative motherhood positions maternity as a basis of female identity; it presupposes that mothering is the work and responsibility of one person primarily (the woman), and it assumes that mothering is and should be natural or instinctive to women rather than the product of skill and conscious commitment (O'Reilly, *Matricentric* 14). Understanding the nature of sociocultural constructions of motherhood also allows us to understand the political utility of those cultural models to define the maternal in the context of unconditional love, self-sacrifice, and constant physical and psychic availability, which mothers have been required to possess in relation to their children and, frequently by extension, to the fathers of those children. As Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey point out, “current ideas about children as having needs to be met by a mother are not universal, timeless laws, but were developed in specific historical and political conditions,” which make mothering a function that is central to the operation of the modern state (226). As such, normative patriarchally defined motherhood marginalizes and renders illegitimate alternative mothering practices.

Along similar lines to feminist scholarship that has worked to debunk the corollary concepts of the good woman vs. the bad woman, maternal theory has put forward numerous analyses of so-called good motherhood alongside motherhood constructed as bad (Byvelts and Jackson; Hughes Miller et al; Buchanan; McDonald Harker; Filax and Taylor; Bromwich and Eljudpovic; Wong; and Ladd-Taylor and Umansky). These works examine motherhood and mothering across a number of different precarious contexts, such as social exclusion, madness, disability, domestic violence, and incarceration. By focusing on the contexts within which mothering occurs and the structures that constrain mothering choices, this work demonstrates how various patriarchal social discourses and institutions construct bad mothers. These works also show that the constructed dangerous or bad mother continues to trouble major institutional areas—such as law, governance, economy, and child protection services—in ways that reveal why society remains invested in marginalizing mothers instead of seriously addressing the numerous, interconnecting obstacles they face. At the same time, these works record multiple scenarios of maternal resistance and agency, despite oppressive circumstances. Such theoretical interventions reveal that the same interlocking systems of patriarchal oppression that seek to mould and shape the category of good womanhood also come to bear on what the dominant discourse represents and recognizes as the category of good motherhood.

Finally, in terms of alternative conceptualizations of selfhood and agency, a new area of feminist scholarship rooted in explorations of love as well as the ethic of care on individual, social and global levels, has been deconstructing essentialist views of motherhood and providing an alternative to neoliberal

subjectivities (Gilligan; Noddings; Tronto; Bryson; Lowe; Overall; Held; Baraitser; Cavarero). Instead of emphasizing personal identity and agency as fixed, autonomous, and unitary, these works put forwards a different kind of preferred self. This self is relational, is embodied in a complex but loving relationship between mother and child, and is rooted in an understanding of relationships that are not only interpreted in terms of biology or a power differential but also in the context of openness, reciprocity, and structural interdependence. Empirically grounded analyses detailing forms of empowered mothering as well as theoretical studies of feminist mothering (hooks; Hill Collins; Anderson; Bourassa et al.; Horwitz; O'Reilly; Green; Linker; Copper; Gibson) have redefined patriarchal modes of motherhood. They demonstrate that the goal of empowered mothering, “to confer to mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy and advocacy-activism” (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 69), is both in theory and practice consistent with broader feminist goals of empowerment.

Such substantial developments in maternal theory have established a line of inquiry that theorizes individual as well as collective types of maternal subjectivity that can be examined alongside, but also as separate from, critiques of the patriarchal institution of motherhood. They have revealed mothering in all of its diverse complexity and opened up the possibility of empowering mothers in their carework by outlining the possible terms of maternal empowerment within a broad feminist context. They have politicized motherwork and continue to recuperate and reposition its practice outside of privatized sphere of the domestic. Most importantly, they have demonstrated that a mother is not born but created in the image of dominant ideologies and that the maternal role is performed in the context of social, political, and legal discourses that also shape other identities.

Conclusion: Politicizing Maternal Exclusions From Mainstream Feminism

Feminist scholarly practices reflected in mainstream, institutionalized forms of feminism and women and gender studies programs, departments, and curricula, as with most other forms of scholarly and institutional practices, are political, discursive, and ideological. Because of this, they are inscribed with a particular positional power to produce authoritative definitions of the field and to shape the political agenda regarding what belongs and does not belong within its scope. This particular positional power makes mainstream feminist iterations hegemonic. In writing about knowledge production and the recreation of preferred subjectivities within hegemonic feminism, Mridula Nath Chackraborty argues the following:

Hegemonic feminism's prioritization of sex over race has been characterized by—and is symptomatic of—its anxiety over race, racial identity politics and racialized essentialism. This anxiety, in turn marks itself white, neutral and normative.... Hegemonic feminism derives its very definition and understanding of its subjectivity from the idea of difference. Whether it is the New Woman engaged in its imperial mission of civilizing the heathen woman, or the neo-colonial feminist invested in bringing liberty and freedom to the veiled Islamic one, hegemonic feminism imagines itself only by creating its Other (101, 103-104).

Chackraborty's assertion that hegemonic feminism can imagine itself only by imagining its "other" bears significance for the present context, as her critique can be applied to its exclusion of motherhood studies from its mainstream agendas. Motherhood and the maternal have come to function as one of hegemonic feminism's "others"—an othering that as a discursive and institutional practice legitimizes the reproduction of its preferred subjectivities. By marginalizing, ignoring, and side lining decades of maternal theory that has deconstructed essentialist notions about the maternal, hegemonic feminism "transcodes political practice to reproduce exclusionary forms of knowledge" (102) and betrays its tacit and paradoxical alliance with modern, Western, and individualist conception of the self, with its accompanying implied devaluation of caregiving. Despite professing the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion in a field "that is at the forefront of critical thinking about inequalities and social justice" (Hobbs and Rice, xvii) and introductory textbooks promising to rethink the foundational assumptions within the field of women and gender studies, academic feminism continues to ignore the maternal. The continued elisions of motherhood and maternal theory from academic feminism continue to transmit unambiguous messages about the incompatibility of the maternal and feminist identity as a deeply ingrained schema that continues to structure attitudes and perceptions. Continuing to essentialize motherhood and maternity serves the purpose of protecting the imaginary boundaries of hegemonic feminism's ideological project.

Mainstream feminist practice must recognize that just as with a woman, a mother is not born but is made. It is time for curricula in women and gender studies programs and departments to reflect that there have always been mothers, but that motherhood was invented. It is time to recognize that the universal and essential category of mother exists only within the fictional landscapes of patriarchy, and that the traits traditionally associated with it are socially constructed through specific patriarchal ideologies and practices. Finally, it is time that academic feminism aligns its aims and curricula with important developments in feminist philosophy and maternal theory that challenge the view that the maternal role and caregiving curtail the exercise of

autonomy and self-determination.

Early feminist writers examined issues of gender bias in traditional social and political institutions. By asking the question “who benefits?” they demonstrated that the mainly unspoken practices of gender-based exclusion and discrimination favoured the interests of men (Meyers, *Philosophical Feminism* 2). Now it is time for us, as maternal scholars and as feminists, to ask the question “who benefits?” from excluding motherhood studies from mainstream feminist and women and gender studies agendas.

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