

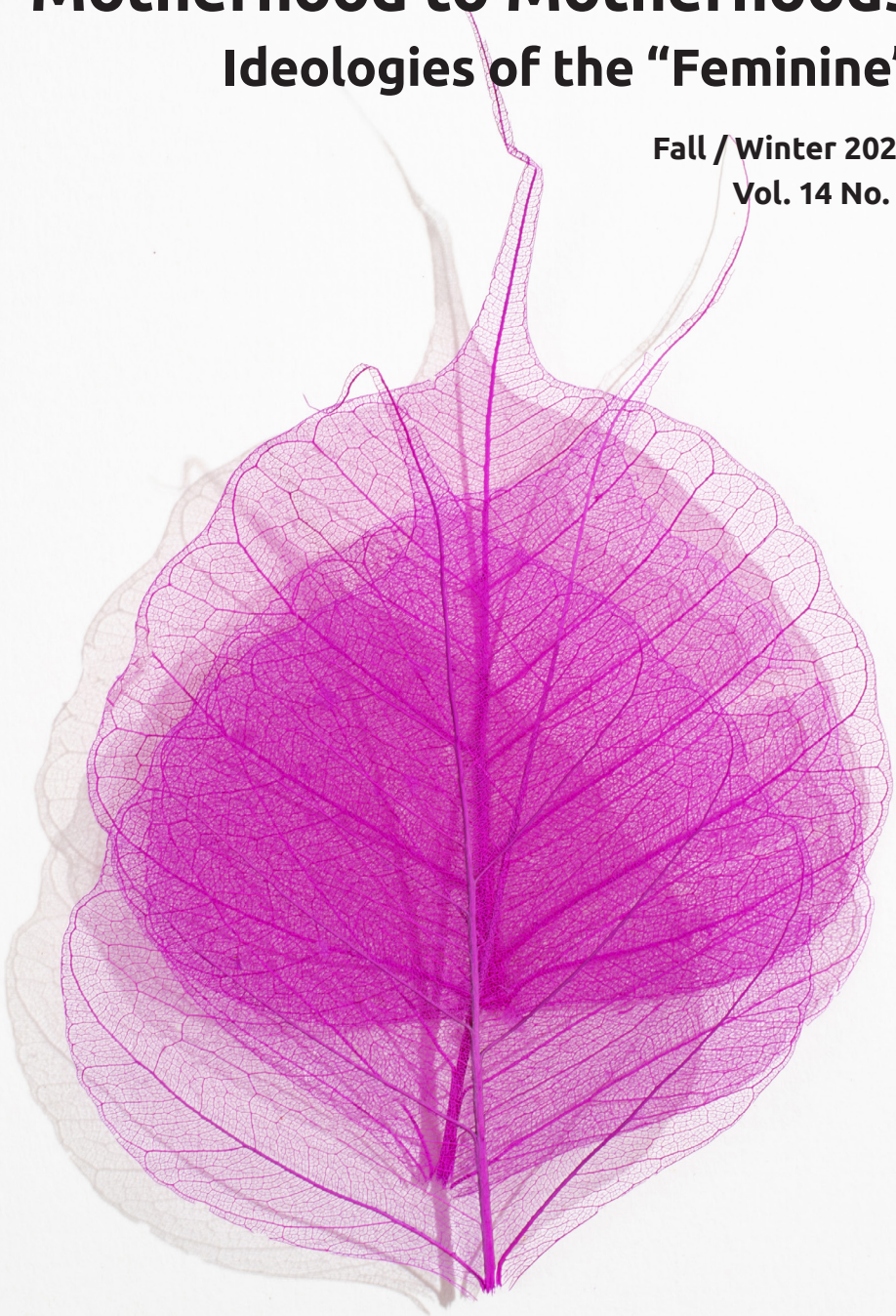
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Motherhood to Motherhoods

Ideologies of the “Feminine”

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Motherhood to Motherhoods: Ideologies of the “Feminine”

The eleven essays in this special issue originated from the “Motherhood to motherhoods: Ideologies of the ‘Feminine’” conference held at Chapman University in Orange, California, on April 28–30, 2023. Against the background of intense discussions on women’s reproductive rights in the United States (US), the conference provided a fertile ground for reexamining motherhood as a concept extending beyond essentialist and biological determinations.

Indeed, the conference’s title, mirrored in this special issue, signifies a deliberate shift in perspective: from the singular and archetypal narrative of motherhood to a plural and dynamic interpretation. This shift is not only semantic but also ideologically significant, marking a move away from the traditional motherhood myth and the patriarchal institution it upholds. By reframing motherhood from a singularity to plurality—Motherhood to motherhoods—the conference acknowledged a range of caregiving practices beyond the biological mother. The subtitle, “Ideologies of the ‘Feminine,’” draws from French feminist thought to challenge fixed gender categories to reconceptualize motherhood as an ethical and transformative act transcending patriarchal institutions.

This intellectual exploration of the “feminine” enriches the contemporary discourse on motherhood as a lived, contested, and dynamic phenomenon. The conference underscored motherhood as a social construct, a theme echoed and expanded upon in this issue. Consequently, motherhood is reenvisioned, transcending its biological function to become a way of being accessible to all genders. Reconceptualizing motherhood as a series of actions—that is, mothering—rather than a fixed identity allows for a more inclusive understanding of the term.

The articles in this issue, thus, collectively interrogate and deconstruct the patriarchal conception of motherhood, which has often confined women to a biological destiny bound by traditional social expectations. Instead, they propose a more inclusive and flexible interpretation. “Mothering” is understood as an act of care, concern, and love that is not exclusive to women or biological mothers. This conceptual transition from a noun to a verb—to mother or mothering—emphasizes action and agency, creating a space for anyone providing nurturing and care to be mothering (O’Reilly 377).

The act of mothering can be seen as an expression of the feminine that is both inclusive and radically other-oriented, embodying the ethical attitude towards the other that French feminists, such as H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, espouse. In their conceptualization, the feminine is not only an identity or role but a radical, ethical, and transformative force that can dismantle the masculine order of hierarchical binaries of the patriarchal structures. Both the conference and this issue engage with these French feminist ideas; they challenge the status quo and explore how motherhood and the feminine can subvert and reconstruct the patriarchal narratives that have traditionally constrained them.

Characterized by their interdisciplinary scope, these articles draw from motherhood studies across the arts, literature, film studies, and social sciences to construct a nuanced critique of the motherhood myth. This myth is interrogated not only for its role in perpetuating gender norms but also for its influence on media representations and ideological apparatuses shaping social perceptions of motherhood. The goal is to question and dismantle the image of the patriarchal mother and to address the intersections of body, labour, health, and gender identity within the concept of mothering.

This issue considers how culture, race, and national context influence personal and collective experiences of motherhood. It aims to provide a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives, especially those of people of colour, thus avoiding a binary or singular perspective on motherhood. Instead, this issue presents a global view, recognizing the varied realities of motherhood and how it is being redefined in academia and society.

Through the multidisciplinary lens of “Motherhood to motherhoods,” this issue encapsulates an ongoing dialogue seeking to redefine the contours of the feminine while offering fresh perspectives on mothering as a site of action and profound social change. It showcases how the concept of motherhood has evolved and continues to evolve, especially in light of global challenges and debates.

Motherhood and the Feminine

The June 2022 US Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* highlighted the need to reconceptualize mothering from the individual to the collective in the US and globally. In their 2018 novel *Motherhood*, Sheila Heti’s narrator portends these contentious times:

A woman must have children because she must be occupied. When I think of all the people who want to forbid abortions, it seems it can only mean one thing—not that they want this new person in the world, but that they want women to be doing the work of childrearing more than they want her to be doing anything else. There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. (32)

This yoking of womanhood with motherhood is, of course, familiar. Adrienne Rich’s 1976 *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution* disentangled women from the institution of motherhood, and the scholarly exploration of motherhood beyond patriarchy and gender essentialism began in earnest. “Motherhood,” Rich proposes, “—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism” (15). This ideology, which affects women of every class and colour, is “essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers” (15). Rich deconstructs the duality of the patriarchal mythology of the female body; this body is represented as impure, corrupting, and dangerous to masculinity until women become mothers—now their bodies are sacred and asexual, fulfilling their destiny. Rich challenges us to counter the repression of women’s bodies as “territory and machine” and to imagine a world where “women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions and the thinking necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe” (298).

French feminists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément provide imaginings of liberation, calling out the patriarchal “hierarchization” that has led to the need to imagine a new world: “Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man. Male privilege [is] shown in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*... Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity ... woman is always associated with passivity in philosophy” (64). Cixous sees hope in upsetting the hierarchy, knowing that there must “be ways of relating that are completely different from the tradition ordained by the masculine economy,” ways of relating that are not “threatened by the existence of an otherness” (74). In calling for radical transformation, Cixous acknowledges the “ideological theater” that entraps us, calling for liberation that includes “an abundance of

the other” (84). The new feminine cannot be contained by a masculine hierarchy or a motherhood myth; it is, rather, a woman “com[ing] out of herself to go the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be” (86).

The Body and the Intersectionality of Mothering

Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) examines reproductive rights and argues that “some of the most resilient inequalities in our legal and social treatment of women lie in the domain of reproductive control” (71). Bordo challenges readers to consider yet another deeply embedded cultural duality—that of the legal “embodied subject” or that of “mere bodies,” in which the women are constructed as “fetal incubators,” and the fetus is constructed as an “embodied subject.” Bordo argues that the body “is not only a *text* of culture” but also “a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (165).

Bordo shows how racism, classism, and sexism intersect when considering the history of reproductive justice. In thinking through this argument, Bordo returns to women’s “experience” and the danger of “essentializing the experiences of some groups of women while effacing the histories and experiences of others” (94). As we challenge the singular and archetypal concept of Motherhood and transition to mothering—a concept that moves beyond essentialist and biological determinations—it is imperative to consider intersectional radical feminist theory as a way to “find each other and beyond that, find each other *in* each other” (Ross xiii), which is reminiscent of Cixous’s call for liberation that includes “an abundance of the other” (84). Reproductive justice theory, developed through the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, conceptualizes reproductive justice as a human right, bringing attention to important concepts running through French feminism and motherhood studies. The collective defines reproductive justice as “1) the human right to not have a child, 2) the human right to have a child, and 3) the human right to parent in safe and healthy environments” (Ross xvi).

As motherhood studies has expanded, mothering has become linked to caregiving, to those engaged in “the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life” (Gumbs, “Introduction” 9). Angela Garbes writes about her experience coming to understand her mother, a Pinay woman who immigrated to the US and worked as a hospice nurse: “The terrain of mothering is not limited to the people who give birth to children; it is not defined by gender” (9). Mothering is not an individual or private activity; it is a “social responsibility,” requiring “robust community support” (Garbes 10). This delinking of mothering from biology has a substantive impact, as motherhood

studies challenges the patriarchal institution of motherhood: “Mothering is a primary front in this struggle, not as a biological function, but as a *social practice*” (Oka 51). Oka argues that the home is “*the front of human sustenance* that is constitutive of hetero-patriarchal, white supremacist capitalism *and its limits*” (53-54). Oka calls for ten steps of mothering that will dismantle the motherhood myth and transform society. These include a “fight for reproductive integrity and self-determination of all indigenous women, women of color, queer, trans, disabled, and poor women,” as well as reclaiming “communal responsibility for caregiving, including childrearing” (54). Andrea O’Reilly, too, forwards this position, using the term “maternal empowerment” as a theoretical stance, “an oppositional stance that seeks to counter and correct the many ways that patriarchal motherhood causes mothering to be limiting and oppressive to women” (369). As we reexamine motherhood as a concept beyond essentialist and biological determinations and as we embrace the “feminine” as a radical, ethical, and transformative force that can dismantle the masculine order of hierarchical binaries in patriarchal structures, we can see the “practice of mothering as an alternative building practice of valuing ourselves and each other” (Gumbs, “M/other Ourselves” 31). If we can reimagine our approach to mothering, we can bring life to a transformed society.

From Motherhood to motherhoods: Major Themes and Approaches in This Issue

The articles in this issue challenge the essentialization of mothers and the institution of motherhood. They reconceptualize motherhood, examine the radical feminine, body and sexuality, and explore motherhood at the intersection of race and religion.

The collection’s first four articles encourage us to rethink the notion of motherhood through intersectional nexuses, including economics, race, and politics. In “A Case for Motherhood as an Intersectional Identity: A Feminist’s Labour of Love,” Tina Powell engages with the evolution of motherhood studies and feminist theories to reconceptualize motherhood as an intersectional identity. Powell argues that neither feminists nor economists adequately address mothers. Katrina Millan’s “Only Mom Can Save the World: Myths of Salvation and Destruction in Post-Apocalyptic Film” calls for a reconceptualization of motherhood by analyzing two recent post-apocalyptic films: *A Quiet Place* and *Birdbox*. Despite featuring nonconventional mothers, both films still rely on mythic “mother love” as the emotional and social core of salvation, thus reaffirming white, middle-class, heteronormative motherhood. In “Motherhood and Gender Roles: A Study of Employed Myanmar Diasporic Mothers in the Greater Toronto Area,” Ame Khin explores the way migrant women from Myanmar reconceptualize motherhood

and gender roles in Toronto as they juggle their multiple identities as mothers, wives, and employees at the intersection of two different cultures. Amber Power's "Updating *The Mother*: Contemporary Intermedial Approaches to Brecht's 1931 'Learning Play'" analyzes two contemporary experimental performance groups' intermedial productions of Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* and explores the techniques used to address contemporary social and political issues. The productions, Power argues, represent the mother as a powerful mode of resistance, helping us reconceptualize revolutionary mothers.

The next three articles epitomize the feminine as the radical body politics of subverting patriarchal, heteronormative motherhood. In "Subverting 'Divine' Bengali Motherhood in Rituparno Ghosh's Film *Titli*," Manjima Tarafdar analyzes how the film *Titli* challenges and subverts the traditional idea of "Goddess mother" in Bengal, India, by depicting a sexual mother. This radical subversion presents a new representation of the mother, not as a figure of sacrifice but as an individual with the sexual desires and aspirations of a woman. Thea Jones's "The Outlawed Nipple: Breastless Parents and the Desire to Conform to Normative Motherhood" presents a radical image of breastless parents, which problematizes the pervasiveness and politics of breastfeeding as a tacit component in normative mothering posing harm to nonnormative parenting bodies, including trans parents. JWells's "I Don't Want Dirty People Holding My Kids': Analyzing White Mothers' Perpetuation of Misogynoir in *Born Behind Bars*" focuses on pregnant-incarcerated mothers in US prison nurseries. Through an analysis of the docuseries *Born Behind Bars*, JWells examines how prison nurseries position white mothers as the pinnacle of motherhood while pathologizing Black motherhood, replicating the systemic criminalization of Black mothers.

The next four articles in this issue explore motherhood at the intersection of race and religion. In "Mamie Till-Mobley: Paradox and Poetics of Racialized Public Motherhood in Chinonye Chukwu's *Till*," Bernadine Cortina focuses on the biographical film *Till* and its matrifocal lens as it explores racialized public motherhood and Black maternal necropolitics throughout American history. Cortina highlights the long line of Black maternal activists initiated by Mamie Till-Mobley. Anika Manuel's "(In)Visible Boxes: Racialized Intersubjectivity and Transracial Mothering in Senna's *Caucasia*" analyzes Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia* to explore the challenges of racialized intersubjectivity in transracial mothering. Focusing on the portrayal of a mixed-race daughter and a white mother, Manuel demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters impact their intersubjectivity and complicate their mutual understanding. In "Muslim Motherhood," Sofia Ahmed argues that the intersectionality between religion, culture, and ethnicity in Muslim motherhood not only portrays oppressive and unrealistic expectations imposed on Muslim mothers but also highlights the resilient

forms of resistance that Muslim mothers employ as they negotiate to raise children in the host country. Leah Aldridge’s “‘Your Children Will Soon be Forgotten’: *12 Years a Slave* and the ‘Seeding’ of African American Motherhood” focuses on the historical relationship between Black motherhood and bondage through her analysis of Steve McQueen’s 2013 film *Twelve Years a Slave*. Aldridge examines the film from the perspective of the twenty-first-century Black Lives Matter Movement. Eliza’s story, in Aldridge’s reading, becomes the seed of all grieving Black mothers who lost their children to racialized violence.

The issue culminates with an investigation of ancient notions of motherhood, maternity, and childbirth. In “A Matter of Life or Death: Maternity in Antiquity and Beyond,” Janice P. De-Whyte connects the ancient ideologies of motherhood and childbirth with contemporary issues, stressing the deep roots of our current challenges. De-Whyte advocates for urgent change because maternal morbidity and mortality are still a matter of life and death.

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