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A Case for Motherhood as an Intersectional Identity: A Feminist's Labour of Love

There are around 2.2 billion mothers ("Statistics"), and over 77 million live in the United States (US) (United States Census Bureau). Unfortunately, feminists have self-admittedly done a poor job representing the interests of mothers. Shari L. Thurer, for example, asserts that as soon as a woman becomes a mother, "her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant" (191). In short, she "ceases to exist" (Thurer 191). Moreover, even though women's unpaid domestic work in the US raises the gross domestic product by 25.7 per cent (McCann), economists often overlook the work of full-time mothers. This article situates mothers within feminist theory and discourse by demonstrating that mothers are not fully represented by feminists or economists and as such are marginalized by both identities. In short, motherhood is an experience that is not adequately addressed by the experiences of women or workers. An intersectional approach will help ensure mothers get the attention they deserve as a social identity in intersectional feminist scholarship.

*you want to keep
the blood and the milk hidden
as if the womb and breast
never fed you
(Kaur 223)*

In "The Myths of Motherhood" psychologist Shari L. Thurer alleges the following: "On delivering a child, a woman becomes a factotum, a life-support system. Her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant. Once she attains motherhood, a woman must hand in her point of view" (191). In other words, as soon as a woman becomes a mother, she "ceases to exist" (Thurer 191). But mothers do exist. Eighty per cent of women will become mothers at some point in their lives

(O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism"). Moreover, there are around 2.2 billion mothers living in the world ("Statistics"), and over 77 million live in the United States (US) (United States Census Bureau).

Adrienne Rich, author of the seminal maternal theory text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution*, proposes there are two meanings of motherhood: "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (lxi). Although motherhood as a relationship with one's children and the power of reproduction is important and makes a valuable contribution to society, it is the institution of motherhood that causes the most concern to feminists. According to Rich, motherhood, the institution, "has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (lxi). As Andrea O'Reilly posits, "A feminist mother seeks the eradication of motherhood as she recognizes that it is a patriarchal institution in which gender inequality, or more specifically the oppression of women, is enforced, maintained, and perpetuated" ("Empowered" 618). Rich further argues: "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (25). Institutional motherhood embodies society's motherhood norms, as manifested in O'Reilly's ten dictates of normative motherhood: "essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization" ("Normative Motherhood" 478). The institution of motherhood subjugates, oppresses, and impoverishes women, yet mothers until recently have garnered little attention from feminists.

Brian T. Thorn, author of *From Left to Right: Maternalism and Women's Political Activism in Postwar Canada*, defines feminism "as a movement that fights for the equality of *all* groups of women" including mothers (5). It is an ideology that "must acknowledge the existence of a patriarchal system and a belief that this system disadvantages all groups of women, even if some groups—working-class and ethnic minority women in particular—face harsher consequences because of their class, racial, and/or ethnic status" (Thorn 5). In her book *Frontiers of Feminism: Movements and Influences in Québec and Italy, 1960–1980*, Jacinthe Michaud argues that unity and solidarity among women were critical in the fight for liberation during second-wave feminism: "Women-only-spaces were built on the idea that *all women* shared the same oppression and the same interests in the process of liberation. Not surprisingly, clashes over differences emerged rapidly in many feminist/women's groups and shook the foundation of the entire movement" (my emphasis, 105). Although differences, such as education, age, occupation, socioeconomic status, and political orientation were often recognized and

acknowledged by feminists/women's groups, other categories of women were (and perhaps still are) silenced—namely, new immigrants, refugees, women of colour, Indigenous women, rural and semi-rural women, and lesbians (Michaud, *Frontiers*). A noticeable absence from this list of silenced women is mothers.

Author and activist bell hooks argues that “Female parenting is significant and valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists” (89). O’Reilly rightfully asserts that motherhood “is the unfinished business of feminism” (“Matricentric Feminism” 458). She also concludes “the category of mother is distinct from the category of women and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mothers” (“Matricentric Feminism” 458). Yet in many regards, motherhood is a “crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory” (Rich lxiii).

This article situates mothers within feminist theory and discourse by demonstrating that mothers are not fully represented by feminists or economists and as such are marginalized by both identities. By making a case for motherhood as its own social identity in intersectional feminist scholarship, mothers can receive the attention, recognition, and representation they deserve.¹

Motherhood and Feminism

The relationship between motherhood and feminism has a long and complicated history. Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* dedicates a chapter to “parental affection” and advocates that “To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands” (156; ch. X). Simone de Beauvoir argues that “I’m not against mothers. I am against the ideology which expects every woman to have children, and I’m against the circumstances under which mothers have to have their children” (qtd. in Schwarzer 76). Betty Friedan’s ground-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* was first published in 1963. Even though there was “no definitive evidence that children are less happy, healthy, adjusted, *because* their mothers work” (Friedan 284), suburban mothers in the 1960s were subjected to an onslaught of “fake news” headlines claiming working mothers were the cause of mental health challenges, academic difficulties, and juvenile delinquency in children. Friedan asserts, “Mother love is said to be sacred in America, but with all the reverence and lip service she is paid, mom is a pretty safe target, no matter how correctly or incorrectly her failures are interpreted” (295). Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, and Friedan show that mothers suffer from a lack of independence, unfair expectations, and harsh judgment.

As mentioned previously, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, first published in 1976, brought some much-needed attention to the institution of motherhood. However, in the introduction that she penned for the 1986 edition, she admits to the white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon focus of the original text and acknowledges the significant differences among Black, Asian, Indigenous, and queer mothers. This lack of diversity was typical of the time. As hooks points out, "During the early stages of the contemporary women's liberation movement, feminist analyses of motherhood reflected the race and class biases of participants" (87). Patricia Hill Collins further explains: "Centering feminist theorizing on the concerns of white, middle-class women leads to two problematic assumptions. The first is that a relative degree of economic security exists for mothers and their children. The second is that all women enjoy the racial privilege that allows them to see themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy, instead of members of racial ethnic groups struggling for power" ("Shifting the Center" 169). The truth is that it was primarily middle-class, educated white women who viewed motherhood as a "serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and childcare" (hooks 87). As hooks powerfully articulates, had anyone asked Black women what they perceived to be obstacles to their freedom, motherhood would have come after racism, unemployment, and lack of education and training. Unfortunately, this lack of diversity in feminist and maternal theory is still evident today.

In 2016, O'Reilly, who coined the term "motherhood studies," published her field-defining book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*. This mother-focused brand of feminism is based on the following governing principles and objectives:

- Asserts mothers, mothering, and motherhood are worthy of scholarly inquiry.
- Regards mothering work as essential and should not be the sole responsibility of mothers.
- Challenges patriarchal oppression and empowers mothers.
- Shifts the child centredness that defines current scholarship and activism to a mother focus.
- Commits to social change and social justice to reposition mothering as a site of power.
- Understands mothering and motherhood to be diverse across race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and geographical location.
- Endeavours to establish maternal theory and motherhood studies as legitimate scholarly disciplines. ("Matricentric Feminism" 461)

Although matricentric feminist theory focuses on motherhood, it is both multi- and interdisciplinary, drawing not just from feminist theory but “anthropology, history, literary studies, sociology, philosophy, psychology, sexuality studies, and women’s studies” (O’Reilly, “Matricentric Feminism” 461). Although O’Reilly believes motherhood should be the business of feminism, she does not think it should by any means replace feminism (“Matricentric Feminism” 458). The goal of matricentric feminism is to emphasize that “the category of mother is distinct from the category of women and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mothers” (O’Reilly, “Matricentric Feminism” 458). As such, the needs of mothers are distinct from the needs of women generally, and these needs have not been met by feminists.

Hooks opines that early feminists did not give mothers or mothering the attention they deserved: “Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated” (88). In her article, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” Leslie McCall aptly acknowledges that one of the critiques of feminism is that it claims “to speak universally for all women” (1771). As such, “feminist researchers have been acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a single analytical category” (McCall 1771). Leah Williams Veazey suggests that the reason motherhood is noticeably absent from most feminist scholarship is that many feminists feel ambivalent about motherhood. She posits that feminists “do not want to reify or essentialize it” and fear “that a focus on motherhood can be more easily co-opted for a conservative rather than a progressive agenda” (4). She notes, however, that “the vast majority of women will experience motherhood in their lifetime and it will affect their identity, their financial and material circumstances, their relationships, their social status, their epistemic status and so on” (5). In summary, motherhood’s absence from feminist discourse serves to exclude the majority of women and contributes greatly to their isolation, subjugation, and lack of power.

Intersectionality: A Case for Mothers

Law professor, civil rights advocate, and critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw “coined the term “intersectionality,” a concept that is widely seen as a foundation of third- and fourth-wave feminism” (McCann 242). Crenshaw’s influential article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” examines where racism and sexism intersect as witnessed through the lens of violence against women of colour. According to McCall, intersectionality “is the most important theoretical

contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (1771). Crenshaw asserts the following: "Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (1242). She argues that feminists and antiracists advanced their respective causes in a mutually exclusive fashion, ignoring the fact that sexism and racism can simultaneously affect someone.

Crenshaw recognizes that because the identity of women of colour encompasses both gender and race, they can be marginalized by both identities: "The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women" (1252). Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard Eibach posit that because "people with multiple subordinate identities (e.g. African American women) do not usually fit the prototypes of their respective subordinate groups (e.g. African Americans, women), they will experience ... 'intersectional invisibility' (qtd. in Carbado 814). The gap between the two identities of gender and race is essential to understanding the intersectionality framework. Women of colour are not fully represented by feminists or antiracists, as such they fall between the two and are politically invisible (Michaud, "Feminist Debates").

Before I make the case for motherhood to be included as an intersectional identity, I first address the assertions by some that intersectionality should exclusively be applied to race, gender, and class. Kathy Davis outlines how Crenshaw and other scholars have voiced concerns that the original concept of intersectionality has been distorted, inverted, corrupted, co-opted, and, as such, is now unrecognizable. Perhaps the most damning criticism comes from Vivian M. May. In May's article "Speaking into the Void: Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash," she alleges that "hermeneutic marginalization ... interpretive violence ... the politics of citation ... and dominant expectations or established social imaginaries on meaning-making" serve to support what intersectionality was designed to oppose, namely "misrepresentation, erasure, and violation" (94). Davis wonders "how we should view the transnational circulation of ideas and theories in a globalizing world and what this means for how critical feminist scholars ought to think about the ownership and uses of the knowledge we produce and disseminate" (114). In other words, in today's world, can anyone own or control the mobilization of knowledge?

Author and law professor Devon W. Carbado proclaims that scholars have used intersectionality across many disciplines and professions to support the important work they do. He adds, "Scholars have mobilized intersectionality

to engage multiple axes of difference—class, sexual orientation, nation, citizenship, immigration status, disability, and religion (not just race and gender)” (814-15). The bottom line to Carbado is that “many scholars frame intersectionality more narrowly than is theoretically necessary” and he hopes that “more scholars [will] push the theoretical boundaries of intersectionality rather than disciplining and policing them” (841). Although Crenshaw’s view changed, her original thinking regarding intersectionality was much more inclusive. In “Mapping the Margins,” she concludes: “This article has presented intersectionality as a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color. Yet intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics” (1296). I agree with Crenshaw’s original assertion and that of Carbado. Intersectionality is a framework that should be explored, utilized, shared, developed, and debated, even if it means that at times, it is exploited or misused. Knowledge and scholarship inside and outside the academy are meant to be studied, critiqued, discarded, and built upon by other scholars.

With the above in mind, I now make the case for motherhood to be included as an intersectional identity. Carbado states, “Black women were too different to represent either white women or Black men as a group” (813). As I explained previously, this gap between the two identities of gender and race is essential to understanding the intersectionality framework. We have already determined that feminists self-admittedly have done a poor job representing the interests of mothers. But that alone does not justify an intersectional identity. I assert that because mothers engage in unpaid labour, they have also been neglected by economists. As Eula Biss observes in her introductory essay “Of Institution Born,” which was published in Rich’s 1986 edition of *Of Woman Born*, “For many women, the forced labor of childbirth is followed by years of unpaid work” (xvi). To use Carbado’s language, mothers are too different to represent women or workers as a group. An intersectional identity for mothers is needed to fill the gap between the two identities of women and workers.

Mothers as Labourers

Women have always received the short end of the stick when it comes to labour. Women’s work at home and in the industrial economy was often tedious, repetitive, and low status; they often earned little to no pay (McCann). Unmarried women “were assumed to be working only until they found a husband” (McCann 48) and started a family. Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels both wrote about the unfair treatment of labourers under the capitalist system and looked for socialist alternatives, they wrote little about women (McCann). In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), they briefly discuss

how capitalism not only oppresses women but also subjugates them as second-class citizens (McCann). Marxist feminist theory has tried “to seek women’s emancipation through the dismantling of the capitalist system” (McCann 52).

In the early twentieth century, labour unions were still only accessible to men, and women were forced to organize their unions (McCann). A brief history of the collective action of women in the US demonstrates that the focus of the women’s labour movement was strictly on women working outside of the home:

- In 1828, Lowell Mill Girls became the first female union in the US.
- In 1866, formerly enslaved washerwomen unionized in Mississippi.
- In 1869, the Daughters of St. Crispin shoe workers became the first national women’s US labour union (McCann).

In Russia, communist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai “placed female emancipation and gender equality at the center of the international socialist agenda” (McCann 55). In her book *Society and Motherhood*, published in 1916, Kollontai looks at motherhood through the prism of factory work (McCann). She argues that hard labour led “to health and social issues for women and children” and advocates for “improved working conditions and state recognition of the value of motherhood through the provision of national insurance” (McCann 55). Once again, however, the focus was on mothers working outside the home.

The Wages for Housework Campaign, launched by Marxist feminists in Italy, stressed that “all women, whether they work in the productive labour force or not, perform unpaid domestic labour” (McKeen 22). Their ultimate goal was the “abolition of domestic labour” as a means to facilitate financial autonomy for women and economic independence from men (McKeen 22). Canadian feminists adopted this perspective in the mid-1970s and formed Wages for Housework committees in various cities across the country including Toronto, Winnipeg and Regina (McKeen). Unfortunately, the Wages for Housework initiative was not embraced by feminists or Marxists of the time (McKeen). The women’s liberationists viewed their ideas as “anti-feminist” and the socialists thought their Marxist vision was “narrow and uninspired” (McKeen 37). According to McKeen, the Wages for Housework movement did, however, “help spark a theoretical debate within feminism and Marxism that pushed forward socialist feminist theory” (37) while leaving mothers stuck in the private, domestic sphere. Regardless, the needs of mothers as workers were left unfulfilled by both feminists and Marxists.

This discussion of mothers as labourers would not be complete without including BIPOC mothers. As Collins points out, “Whether they wanted to or not, the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female

‘occupation’” (“Meaning of Motherhood” 157). hooks contrasts the perspectives of white mothers with Black mothers. Whereas white women complained, “we are tired of the isolation of the home, tired of relating only to children and husband, tired of being emotionally and economically dependent; we want to be liberated to enter the world of work,” Black women, who always worked outside of the home, were saying, “we want to have more time to share with family, we want to leave the world of alienated work” (87).

There is no doubt that although motherhood can be a labour of love, it is still labour. As Friedan asserts:

For women to have full identity and freedom, they must have economic independence. Breaking through the barriers that had kept them from the jobs and professions rewarded by society was the first step... But the economic part would never be complete unless a dollar value was somehow put on the work done by women in the home, at least in terms of social security, pensions, retirement pay. And housework and child rearing would have to be more equally shared by husband, wife, and society” (520).

Rich points out that white Marxist feminists have encountered difficulties combining feminist and class analysis (xliii). She further argues:

The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. It cannot be compared with slavery or sweated labor because the emotional bonds between a woman and her children make her vulnerable in ways which the forced laborer does not know; he can hate and fear his boss or master, loathe the toil; dream of revolt or of becoming a boss; the woman with children is a prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. (Rich 36-37)

Although motherhood includes physical and emotional labour—a contribution that is often unrecognized, unpaid, and undervalued—it is estimated that women’s unpaid domestic work in the US raises that country’s gross domestic product by 25.7 per cent (McCann). Consequently, an intersectional identity would legitimately recognize mothers as the workers they are.

Conclusion

That motherhood has received little scholarly attention as a social intersectional identity shows that mothers are often overlooked as feminists and labourers. As indicated in the discussions above, many feminists feel ambivalence towards motherhood and are concerned that recognizing mothers may only serve to essentialize it. O’Reilly found that motherhood as a topic appeared in

less than three per cent of the top feminist journals, gender and women's studies textbooks, conference panels, and course syllabi ("Matricentric Feminism"). There remains a lack of scholarly attention to motherhood. Veazey argues that "motherhood's invisibility within intersectional analyses can be linked to its lack of visibility within feminist theory" (para. 1). She also articulates that although intersectionality is a "travelling theory" (Said qtd. in Veazey, para. 1) and that "motherhood is prominent in the works of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, and of course Adrienne Rich and Andrea O'Reilly, intersectional feminist scholarship as it is presented in contemporary textbooks and conferences, rarely considers motherhood" (Veazey 4).

Although most of the world's labour is done by women, this brief history of motherhood and labour above shows that more support and recognition have been given to women or mothers working outside the home. Any initiatives recognizing mothers as labourers inside the home have failed. Women and mothers are not synonymous and on behalf of all mothers—teen mothers, BIPOC mothers, gay mothers, trans mothers, adoptive mothers, foster mothers, stepmothers, disabled mothers, othermothers, fathers who mother, and last, but not least, white, suburban mothers—it is time to acknowledge their labour inside and outside of the home, not just their labour in the delivery room.

By recognizing mothers as their own intersectional social identity, the needs of this vital group of people will get the attention and recognition they deserve inside and outside of the home and inside and outside of the academy. Mothers must unite to demand a place at the intersectional table. When mothers are recognized with a separate intersectional identity, they will be in a better position to lobby for more support in public policy and their workplace—be it their home or elsewhere. More scholars will receive funding to research the unique position mothers are in and the oppression that they experience, and both feminists and economists will be more inclined to embrace this significant yet invisible group—and their labour of love.

Matricentric feminism can serve as a springboard towards these outcomes but only if feminists and economists include and value the contribution of mothers. The need is great. As hooks argues, "Right now in your community there are hundreds of thousands of children and mothers who desperately need individual and community support" (hooks 96). The time has come for feminists and economists to remember the womb and breast that fed them.

Endnotes

1. Some of the material in this article was previously presented at the Motherhood to Motherhoods: Ideologies of "the Feminine" Conference at Chapman University, CA, April 28-30, 2023.

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