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Maternal Legacies: Reflections on the Life and Work of Dr. Marie Porter, AM

This article honours the life and scholarly contributions of Dr. Marie Porter AM (1938–2023), a transformative figure in motherhood studies whose work bridged lived maternal experience and academic theory. Drawing on her journey of mothering three sons, including one with severe physical disabilities, Marie developed the concept of “transformative power in motherwork,” which theorizes how mothers develop agency and adaptability through their maternal practice. Through analysis of Marie’s published works, particularly her groundbreaking text Transformative Power in Motherwork (2008), and unpublished manuscripts and speeches, we explore how her scholarship emerged from and was deeply informed by her mothering lived experiences. The article examines Marie’s key theoretical contributions, including her development of concepts like “incipient agency,” and her analysis of how mothers resist dominant master narratives of motherhood. As a mother and scholar who helped establish motherhood studies in Australia, Marie’s work demonstrates how mothers develop diverse agentic skills even within constraining institutional contexts. We argue that Marie’s scholarly legacy offers vital insights for contemporary maternal scholarship by emphasizing mothers’ capacity for resistance and transformation. Written by three scholars who worked closely with Marie, this article weaves together academic analysis with personal reflections to capture the enduring impact of her work on motherhood studies and the lives of those she mentored.

Introduction

In this article, we seek to honour the life and work of Dr. Marie Porter AM (1938–2023). A scholarly colleague and mentor for each of the authors, this inspirational woman was also a very dear friend; therefore, throughout this article, we refer to Marie using her first name. Marie’s death has left an

enormous hole in our lives and the lives of many other scholars and nonscholars because she unstintingly shared her hard-earned experiences and wisdom with all who came within her orbit. As the title suggests, this article highlights the rich legacies that Marie's mothering, mentorship, advocacy, writing, and presence have left through her life, family, and friendships. Our reflections seek to pull together key threads from Marie's work within motherhood studies and the interconnections between her lived experiences as a mother and her contributions as a maternal scholar and advocate. Where possible, we have used Marie's words to share pieces of her story and explain elements of her thinking.

Sophie has written this article with some input from Jenny and Lisa as our collective relationships with Marie have guided this investment in and capturing of Marie's work and legacies. For context, Sophie met Marie at the Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (AMIRCI) conference in 2014 in Melbourne, Australia, connecting through their shared research area of interest: mothers of children with disabilities. Marie encouraged Sophie to become involved in the AMIRCI committee, where Sophie eventually held the position of president for five years. Marie supported Sophie through mentorship, personally and professionally, as she completed her doctorate in sociology specializing in motherhood studies, focussing on exploring the experiences of mothers of children with disabilities.

Jenny met Marie after a travel agent connected them. They both booked to travel to Toronto, Canada, for the 2004 Motherhood Studies Conference. As they were both based in Brisbane, Australia, a connection was immediately established, which quickly turned into Marie mentoring Jenny through her doctoral studies, which focussed on the living realities of mothers with young adult children in twenty-first-century Australia. This mentoring relationship quickly morphed into a deep and caring friendship until Marie died, with Jenny's love and respect for Marie living on through her memories.

Lisa met Marie and Jenny at the same 2004 conference. Her and Marie's relationship grew during the planning and running of the 2005 Australian-based conference. Despite a twenty-seven-year age difference, they bonded through many shared values and traits, including wicked senses of humour and red hair, and their connection grew from Marie's mentorship during Lisa's doctoral studies to a wise woman and confidante. Sharing triumphs and challenges over eighteen years transformed their relationship into that of marvellous friendship, and despite a physical absence, Marie continues to be present in Lisa's life.

Birth and Growing a Motherhood Career

Marie's career was birthed through her role as a mother and, as she would describe it drawing on Patricia Hill Collins, her motherwork with her three sons. In Marie's words:

I am the mother of three sons. Simple statement, but behind this simple statement is the story of half my life. It is a long and involved tale of a life lived on the edge of unknowing. It too frequently descends into the darkness that exists where life meets death, where we stand waiting to meet the victor of these basic forces. Sounds a dramatic outcome from deciding to become a mother? I assure you it is not as dramatic as the reality. (Porter, "A Mother" 114)

From early childhood, Marie dreamed of being a teacher, which became a reality after completing teacher training. However, after working as a primary school teacher for only a few years, Marie married her beloved Alan but was forced to comply with government regulations prohibiting married women from being in paid employment. Marie gave birth to her first son in 1963, and many years later reflected: "It was he who gave me my mother identity, who caused the most extreme of feelings to wash over me, who had to cope while I learnt to mother" (Porter, "A Mother" 114).

She described her feelings of intense love, alongside anxiety, as she learned to mother, feeling the contrast between her routinized and organized days as a teacher and the unpredictability of mothering a baby: "The mother road, full of twists and bumps was both unfamiliar to me and being covered at breakneck speed with my baby son in the driver's seat" (Porter, "A Mother" 114). Three-and-a-half years later, the birth of her second son left Marie believing she had discarded her "training wheels" (Porter, "A Mother" 114–15) in learning how to mother, but she also noticed the adaptation and new learning she experienced in adjusting to the different needs of her two sons. When these sons were six and two and a half, Marie and Alan decided to have a third child:

By now, I suppose if someone had asked me, I would have said I was an experienced mother. No doubt that was true. Sara Ruddick (1989) argues that maternal work consists of preserving, growing, and training the young in social responsibility. My two sons were well on this road. Six weeks before my third baby was due, I wrote to my close friend telling her of my fears for my baby. This feeling was new to me. Such fears had never entered my head during my other pregnancies. (Porter, "A Mother" 115–16)

Marie's third son, Anthony, was born after what she described as a short and easy labour but recalled: "It puzzled me at the time, and still puzzles me, why,

with this easy birth, I spent the next twenty-four hours crying. I had not descended into sadness after the others were born. Do we sometimes ‘know’ the future on some inexplicable level? At this stage, there was no inkling of the problems ahead” (Porter, “A Mother” 116).

When Anthony was six weeks old and in hospital with the first of many chest infections and challenges, Marie further recalled, “I needed all my professional and organizational skills and every bit of experience I had gained in my mothering of my other sons just to get through a day” (Porter, “A Mother” 116). When Anthony was four months old, Marie sensed he was experiencing challenges her older boys had not. After much testing and investigation, nothing wrong could be found but then: “Four months later, when he still hadn’t improved physically, we were told he would not survive until his first birthday. He didn’t have enough muscle tone to support life and would either choke or die of pneumonia.” (Porter, “A Mother” 118). Along with the heartache such news brought, Marie described it as validation of the worries and concerns she had held: “My main concern apart from keeping Anthony alive, was how to prepare my two older sons” (Porter, “A Mother” 118).

Over time, Marie had to learn how to cope with and support Anthony’s challenges of heart failure, choking, and massive spasm attacks that could prove fatal if they were not responded to quickly and properly while also meeting the “demands of mothering” (Ruddick) her older sons: “We all learned to rejoice in the many small victories and recover from the many crises quickly. Anthony was a great help as his wonderful optimistic nature and his determination to live was always there for us to draw on” (Porter, “A Mother” 119). Anthony’s needs increased as he got older, and at the time of Marie’s writing in 2000:

Anthony is 30. He has been near death countless times. His disabilities became worse as he got older. He lost his ability to swallow, to make sound, the very limited function he had in his right index finger. He can no longer say or do anything, but he can communicate well with his vital brown eyes and also with his yes/no. He is fed through a tube. He was told a year ago that his lungs would be lucky to support life for another six months, but my smiling, determined son is still with us, enjoying his circumscribed life. He listens patiently to, and sympathizes with, other people’s problems despite the vastness of his own. He is the only person I know who can throw a party with five days notice and have 85 people come. (Porter, “A Mother” 119)

After a full and loved life, Anthony died on December 5, 2000. Marie forever stayed a mother of three sons, with her love and commitment to each of them shining through all her conversations.

Marie as a Scholar

Marie's life and work were transformed through her motherwork and relationships, and the cornerstone of her research and theoretical findings from her dissertation reflected this. With her commitment to the demands of mothering three sons and the emotional and physical labour involved in caring for Anthony overriding any possibility of a return to her previous professional life, Marie returned to her first love, research, learning and teaching: "While all my friends returned to their profession eventually, my commitment to my disabled son resulted in this possibility being discounted. By 1981, exhausted from motherwork, I sought a challenge away from it, and returned to my old love of study. I have been involved in academic work ever since" (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 4). Concerning her doctoral studies, Marie notes: "The choice of a topic for my doctoral studies was influenced by my past and my circumstances at the time I undertook the research. My adult life had been dominated by two working situations—teaching and mothering. The desire to teach was my first love. I regretted the loss of my profession when I had to resign on marriage... I missed my work" (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 4).

During her doctoral studies, Marie attended her first motherhood scholarship conference in Canada in the late 1990s, which spurred her to bring motherhood studies to Australia. The first Australian feminist motherhood conference, organized single-handedly by Marie, was held in 2001, followed by another in 2005. Marie then quickly set about formally establishing the first, and so far, only, organization for maternal scholarship in Australia. Originally called the Association for Research on Motherhood, Australia (ARMA), after the Association for Research on Motherhood (ARM), the group changed its name to the Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (AMIRCI) after ARM changed its name to the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI). Marie steered the organization through all these changes. In 2019, with Marie having handed over the leadership to others, AMIRCI changed its name to Maternal Scholars Australia (MSA), and it continues to support and promote feminist motherhood scholarship and scholars.

After being awarded her PhD in 2006 from the University of Queensland and receiving the dean's commendation, Marie set about establishing a teaching course at the University of Queensland with the support and guidance of her mentor and dear friend, Dr. Andrea O'Reilly, the founder of feminist motherhood studies as an internationally recognized field of scholarship. Despite its success, the course, *The Mother: Images, Issues and Practices*, was cancelled by the university due to timetabling issues.

Marie's Works, Publications, and Awards

In 2008, Marie published *Transformative Power in Motherwork*, based on her 2006 thesis exploring the experiences of a group of Australian women who first became mothers in the 1950s and 1960s. Over the years Marie has co-edited and published several texts on motherhood and lectured and presented internationally.

Marie was made a Member of the Order of Australia AM¹ in the 2018 Queen's Birthday Honours and advocated for mothers and maternal scholarship throughout the rest of her career and life. She shares in her *Reflections on the Continuing Need for Maternal Scholarship* after being awarded the AM:

I am an ex-schoolteacher, a lover of education and learning, an academic, and, most importantly, a mother and a grandmother.... My aim has always been to create in our society a recognition of the importance of mothers and the work they do caring for, rearing, and training their children to fit into the society in which they live.

This aim grew out of my experience of the contrast between the respect I received as a teacher when compared with the incredible absence of legitimization of my work as a mother. I was "just a mother," although as a mother of three small sons, one of whom was severely physically disabled and frequently had life-threatening episodes of illness, I had no time off, no holidays and no weekends. I worked far more hours and the work was physically onerous, emotionally and mentally draining.

I became aware of the many mothers in a similar situation, most of whom did not have the advantages that I had. When I researched the experiences of a group of Australian mothers for my PhD, a common factor was that none of these women thought their mothering was valued by society although every one of them highly valued the work they had done mothering their children. (Porter, *Reflections*)

Reflecting on her 2016 *AMIRCI President's Report*, Marie states, "I consider maternal research and study as the most neglected, but most important area of study." Based on her extensive experience in the area of disability care, she further contends: "That no matter how busy you are, if you want a need fulfilled, the only people who will drive it are the people who have the problem" (Porter, *AMIRCI President's Report*). This reflection is emblematic of the tenacity, resilience, and drive that Marie developed throughout her life and in her mothering. It also reflects her calling to encourage the rising and power-claiming of mothers and maternal scholars.

Situating Marie's Scholarship within Motherhood Studies

As has been the case for so many of us whose careers are within motherhood studies, Marie's key influences were foundational maternal scholars, such as Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, and Patricia Hill Collins. In the opening of *Transformative Power in Motherwork*, Marie cites Rich: "I told myself I wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored area of feminist theory. But I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me" (Rich qtd. in Porter 15). Marie draws parallels between Rich's blending and amalgamation of multiple subject positions as a mother and scholar with her own experience: "The book that she [Rich] wrote could not have been written by any other person, nor written if Rich had not been a mother. This book has a similar history. My experiences in mothering have developed my personality, my intellect, my awareness, my emotional life, my understanding and empathy, my ideas and my ethics" (Porter, *Transformative* 1).

Although Marie uses Rich's foundational distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as an experience, it was Ruddick's work that had the most profound influence on her and the development of her scholarship:

She [Ruddick] argues that mothering has three aims: to preserve, grow and train up the young to be independent and socially adept members of the society in which they live (1989). She further argues these maternal practices of preserving, growing and transforming life lead to a particular way of thinking that she refers to as maternal thinking... Her ideas on what mothers do and how their actions lead to a particular way of thinking resonated with my own ideas and practices. I had a clear understanding of this process because Anthony, my youngest son, was a challenging child to mother. Ruddick's work, like Oakley's, had the authority of authenticity. (Porter, *Transformative* 10)

Marie's life and scholarship both centred on the act and practice of mothering in the context of the relationship between the mother and her individual children. She references Martha McMahan's argument that while "mothers produce children, children produce mothers" (3) and takes McMahan's work further: "The transformative relationship is one of power which transforms both the child into an adult and the mother into a multi-skilled, capable woman in many essential areas of life" (Porter, *Transformative* 2).

This focus on the act and practice of mothering and the relationship with the individual children is also placed within a wider social and cultural context that shapes both mothers' and children's experiences. Marie also draws on African American theorizing on mothering in both fiction and academic work: "Afro-American and Native American maternal scholars, in particular

Collins, became my fourth mentor/s... These scholars argue that mothering is a relationship of power wherein the mothers are agents who prepare the next generation to understand their culture and to be proud of who they are” (Porter, *Transformative* 11).

It was Marie’s own experience of mothering Anthony within an ableist society that shaped her mothering values and necessitated honing specific mothering skills:

My self approach was that I decided that when Anthony died it would not be because I was incompetent. I would preserve, grow and train this child as I did my older two. I’d just have to learn more, be more efficient, and I must create a pattern to do this because the patterns of life on offer for disabled people that I saw in Australia in the 1970s were not good enough for my darling son with his many gifts. (Porter, “A Mother,” 118)

Through adapting and responding to the unique needs of each of her children and doing so within a social structure and system of patriarchal motherhood, Marie developed specific skills and perspectives that were integrated into, and which fuelled, her academic drive.

Key Research Findings that Led to Conceptual Development

Marie’s doctoral thesis explores the experiences of twenty-four Australian women who first became mothers between 1950 and 1965. She says of her research:

I present a grounded theory of transformative power in motherwork that has emerged from the analysis of interviews. The mothers talked about what they did in their active mothering years.

I argue that despite being constrained by the gender bias in the patriarchal context, these mothers were agents who developed skills that enabled them to resist or creatively deal with the constraints they faced. Their emphasis was on their agency and the power to nurture their children into reasonable adults. Their awareness of the importance of their motherwork acted as a motivator in this development.

I argue that the relationship between each mother and each of her children is a transformative power relationship in which both mother and child are transformed—the child into an independent adult and the mother into a skilled self-motivated agent through her motherwork....

Transformative power expressed in motherwork can be recognised analytically by several characteristics. It empowers both parties in the

mother-child duality. Complexity, diversity, fluidity, and responsiveness to the physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects of the relationship are all evident in transformative power relationships. (Porter, *Transformative XIV*)

Four key themes emerge from Marie's work, providing the basis for her concept of "transformative power in motherwork." The first is "master narratives" of motherhood, shaped by and enacted through cultural representations, family structure, education, paid employment, and religion. A key theme connecting all these elements of the master narrative of motherhood is the underlying assumption of obedience. The second is "incipient agency," which emerged through participants' self-reflections on master narratives and assumptions of obedience:

[This is] a conceptual tool to show how the women thought they would mother at this stage in their life—the period before they became mothers. The term "incipient agency" refers to the degree of affirmation or resistance to the master narratives of motherhood present in each interviewee's practical and/or discursive consciousness before she became a mother. The level of awareness is revealed in her ideas and intentions, but they do not constitute agency. Agency, however, was strongly influenced by such ideas and it is possible to observe the likely agentic position of an interviewee toward their future motherhood in this way.

Like the bulb in the ground in winter, the flower was not yet there. As the bulb shapes the flower, so did an interviewee's ideas about, and intentions of, mothering influence her subsequent motherwork. Because they had formed ideas on which they believed they could base their style of motherwork, their motherwork agency can be said to be in an incipient stage. (Porter, *Transformative 86–87*)

Marie uses this orientation and conceptualized point of inquiry to explore the change in mothers' thoughts and beliefs from their premothering ideals and their perceptions based on the lived reality of their mothering experiences. Through analyzing this change, Marie identifies how participants developed and exercised "agentic skills as they carried out their motherwork" (Porter, *Transformative 241*) even when they were experiencing constraint because of institutional and social factors.

Connected to participants' enactment and practicing of incipient agency, the next theme is experiences of constraint in the context of participants' transitions to motherhood, specifically throughout pregnancy, birth, and an initial coming home period that participants experienced with their babies.

Through this theme of constraint, Marie concludes as follows:

In pregnancy, labour and birthing, and the subsequent time in hospital, the interviewees were so constrained by the powers wielded over them that their development of agency was restricted. Having trusted in master narratives of motherhood that presented mothering as a desirable and happy state, achieved by relying on the knowledge and support of the health system, this first encounter with motherhood was not what most of the women had expected.

The young women were disempowered by strategies of isolation, lack of knowledge, and the training they had had in obedience. Every one of these negative experiences acted to emphasise to the “becoming” mother that she was not in control of her own body. When some mothers resisted, if someone from the medical hierarchy learned about it, the mother was chastised as if she were a child. The treatment most of them received supports the claim by maternal scholars that the mother was to be controlled and told what to do (Porter, *Transformative* 126).

The fourth theme explores how mothers took their first steps in developing their motherwork and how participants navigated and resisted the master narratives of motherhood that they had been enculturated into. Master narratives of motherhood portrayed the good mother and rendered the adaptation, skill building, and work required in learning how to mother invisible:

If a woman was not a good mother, then she was a bad mother who could be blamed for a wide variety of social problems (Ruddick 1989:31-3). This meant that when participants had any challenges or in any way fell outside of the “good mother” ideal, they experienced significant feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and guilt. A significant contradiction, occasioned by the bad/good mother narratives is apparent from the contradiction in the belief that mothers, according to the social conventions, were supposed to know instinctively how to nurture, yet, when problems did occur they were expected to seek advice from some “expert.” (Porter, *Transformative* 131)

It was through their navigation, resistance, and development of mothering skills that participants practised and honed their motherwork and emphasized how it is verbally lauded but is given no monetary value. Therefore, motherwork is excluded from the economic system and becomes invisible (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 133). Participants navigated constraining contexts through their skilled motherwork and when they were not able to navigate a barrier successfully, they continued to draw on their agency where

possible to alleviate the barrier's impacts.

Marie discusses multiple strategies that mothers drew on in developing their motherwork within the context of the relationships with their children and broader contexts. All related to power in some way and included adapting work patterns to cope with heavier loads of motherwork; they used creative skills and creative processes, negotiated priorities, sought support in diverse areas from different people, and refined adaptation skills.

Some participants felt that their relationships with their children and their motherwork were not necessarily adversely affected by external restraint or context, and some described the development of their motherwork and the transformative power relationships with their children as emergent in response to situations where they saw their relationships with their children threatened in some way.

There were also a small group of participants who felt that their relationships with their children were impeded significantly, and these mothers suffered as a result. Within this group of mothers, some suffered repeated violence, alcohol abuse and financial injustice, had a child with a disability, and one was geographically isolated with a gravely ill husband. Marie frames these mothers' experiences within broader contexts of patriarchal law and culture and systemic violence. Mothers found ways to draw on strategies of resistance and survival that included a greater emphasis on prioritizing paid work, getting support and seeking out knowledge, and engaging in their processes of reflexivity: "These reflexively devised strategies can be conceptualized as: taking 'time out,' hiding, emotional distancing, and redefining meaning. With the exception of time out, these strategies were practiced only by the individual mother" (Porter, *Transformative* 229). From analyzing the mothers' stories, contexts, and interview themes, Marie develops the concept of transformative power in motherwork. She says of her participants: "They were oppressed as a social group and many were also oppressed as individuals. In arguing for what the mothers did do, for how and what they achieved despite the oppressive context, I am highlighting their strength and determination and giving prominence to the power and agency they did have (Porter, *Transformative* 241).

Marie's Concept of Transformative Power in Motherwork

In developing the concept of transformative power in motherwork, Marie draws on Rich's distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience and role of being a mother and incorporates Ruddick's theorizing on the practice of mothering and maternal thinking. In Marie's theory of transformative power in motherwork, she centres a mother's agency and positions it in the context of motherhood (Rich), as engaging in the practice of mothering (Ruddick) but as developed as motherwork and produced

through transformative power relationships between mothers and their children:

These mothers developed diverse agentic skills as they moved from practice to discursive consciousness. Even though mothers, whose transformative power was clearly impeded, were creative and, like other mothers, they developed diverse agentic skills, they took strategic actions to preserve and extend as far as possible their limited capacities to develop their relationship with each child.... The mothers recognised the flaws in the 1950s and 1960s ways of mothering, but they also recognised their own capabilities and developed them. (Porter, *Transformative* 241)

Through caring for, attuning to, and building relationships with their children (i.e., motherwork), mothers developed “diverse agentic skills as they moved from practice to discursive consciousness” (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 241). Mothers recognized and named the transformation that they had been through and spoke about the knowledge and skills that they had gained, including “their increasing capability to be flexible, to listen and watch with a heightened awareness of both the spoken and the unspoken body language of the ‘other’ individual. Several women spoke of a renewed consciousness of the sacred” (Porter, *Transformative Power in Motherwork* 242).

Importantly, in the naming of motherwork and the transformative power of motherwork, Marie draws on a mother-centric lens. Motherwork is an active practice and is adapted across the lifespan of the mother and her children. This has benefits for both mothers and children:

The love that developed within the transformative power relationship not only benefited the children, but also transformed the emotional life of the mother. The permanency and the flexibility of love that is characteristic of this relationship is formed by the strong emotional, intimate and long-term bonds that are created in the mother and child relationship. Although the nature of the relationship changes radically as the child becomes an independent adult and the mother’s involvement gradually lessens, the bonds that tie the relationship together slacken rather than break. (Porter, *Transformative* 243)

The grounded theory of transformative power in motherwork is characterized by the following four features:

1. Attention to the power dynamics that exist between mothers and children. Mothers are attuned to the unique needs of their child/ren physically, intellectually, and emotionally, but power operates in diverse, complex, fluid, and flexible ways within the relationship.

2. Understanding that transformative power within relationships is shaped by both master narratives and structural and social constraints. Mothers have different capacities to develop their relationships of transformative power in motherwork with each child.
3. Mothers responded to contextual limitations and did so through their motherwork. They were “transformed” not merely by their being in a relationship with their children but by/through their own agency, as they encountered institutional constraints that limited their motherwork.
4. Mothers developed a counter narrative through their own transformation, which was “revealed not only in the telling of their stories but in their discursive/reflexive practices as mothers. They had the ability to understand the societal value of their work and to maintain a belief in its value despite the lack of legitimation from society” (Porter, *Transformative* 234).

As indicated within the fourth feature, an important part of the concept of transformative power in motherwork includes the mothers’ building of agentic skills and the creation of a counter-narrative to the culturally prevailing master narrative of motherhood. This master narrative incorporates the imagery, archetype, and ideology of the good mother, who is happy, serene, and mothers instinctively and whose children are equally happy, content, serene, and obedient. However, Marie notes the following:

Master narratives that constantly showed positive images of happy mothers and babies quickly were seen by the new mothers to be false stories when compared with the real experiences of motherhood. This awareness combined with the workload, the need to learn new skills, the anxiety that being totally responsible for a new and precious life generated, and the lack of sleep ensured that the women moved further into discursive consciousness as they questioned the master narrative images. Their experiences contradicted the image of the mother who instinctively understood motherwork and who was depicted as the calm, in-control mother of the perfect baby. The mothers on the basis of their experience of mothering could not support the idea that mothering was not time-consuming and demanding work. (Porter, *Transformative Power* 250)

In developing a counter-narrative to the master one, several features emerged from participants’ experiences as avenues through which mothers resisted dominant narratives:

1. They recognized that romanticized cultural portrayals of marriage and motherhood were false.

2. They spoke about the physicality of being a mother and critiqued the impact of the medical system on their births and labour.
3. They resisted the assertion that motherwork was instinctive and instead spoke about their need for support and new learning.
4. They spoke about developing motherwork as a skill that was ongoing, developing, and in an active state.
5. They recognized that motherwork did not have a high social value, but they still valued their motherwork highly.
6. They recognized the ways that motherwork is affected by broader social and institutional contexts.

Marie's Maternal Scholarship, Legacy, and Future Directions

Marie brought together maternal theory and lived experience throughout her research and writing, her lived experience as a mother, and her career as an academic and mentor. Through the development of the theory of transformative power in motherwork, Marie offered an avenue through which mothers can draw on, narrate, celebrate, describe, and advocate for how their practice of mothering—motherwork—transformed them, their children, and the broader world. When mothers are living within the patriarchal context of the institution of motherhood (Rich), they face constraints on their agency and limitation of choice, yet they also find avenues for resistance and transformation through their practising of motherwork and, therefore, the transformative power relationships that they have with their children:

We need to record women's views of history and, where master narratives that purport to tell the stories of our lives are erroneous, we need to tell a counter narrative based in the reality we experience. Mothers and the work they do have been disregarded for too many years. Women in general, and mothers in particular, need to recognize the strength of their motherline and the valuable transformative relationships of power that exist and are expressed in motherwork. There are capacities and opportunities for power in motherwork. These may be unacknowledged, but they cannot be denied. (Porter, *Motherwork* 250)

To finish with Marie's words:

We all have understanding, depths, and skills that have developed from the challenges we faced. I have been well supported by other mothers—family, friends, and acquaintances. As a result, I know so many strong, talented mothers. I have great respect for mothers. It is

my dream to have society similarly recognize and respect the value of mothers and their motherwork. (Porter, “A Mother” 119)

We hope that we have inspired you with some of Marie’s insights and expertise, and you feel infused by some of the wisdom she gained and honed through her practice of motherwork. To consider integrating motherhood studies within your own lived experience of mothering and/or work within this space, we encourage you to reflect on the master narrative that is most prominent in your culture and context. How may this master narrative have influenced your perceptions of mothers or experience as a mother? Marie Porter’s work highlights how a mother’s agency and agentic skills can be drawn on to navigate institutional or social constraints. You may like to consider how you have witnessed this in your own life or work, along with Marie’s concept of incipient agency in how premothering ideas and intentions can influence motherwork. We hope that together our communities and professional spheres can achieve Marie’s dream of a society that recognizes and respects the value of mothers and their motherwork.

Endnotes

1. AM, Member of the Order of Australia is an award which recognizes and honours Australian citizens for outstanding achievement and service. Only 605 Australian citizens are awarded the Member of the Order of Australia each year.

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