

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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My Body, Whose Choice? Or How I Learned about Righteous Mom Rage

Through an autoethnographic account of fertility treatments, pregnancy, and motherhood, this article reflects on women's rights and bodily autonomy in the context of recent political events in the United States (US). While sharing her experience with fertility treatments, detailing the physical and emotional toll of IVF, the author reflects on the difficulty of facing this process and her longing for motherhood. The political backdrop of the US Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade fuelled rage and anxiety in her, as she grapples with legal implications for her bodily autonomy and medical care during pregnancy. Abortion is healthcare, and the outlawing of healthcare for women can have dire consequences. Anger and rage have empowered women's rights movements, and feminist writers have discussed the power of women's rage as a catalyst for social change. bell hooks and Mona Eltahawy, among other feminist scholars, explain that women need to reclaim their anger as a form of empowerment. This autoethnography critiques the US political landscape that undermines human rights and healthcare, advocating for embracing rage to enact systemic change for everyone's autonomy and wellbeing.

Looking at my backside in the bathroom mirror, I try to find a place for my intramuscular shots of progesterone. After finding out I am allergic to most formulations, I have large welts and bruises across the top, muscular part of my ass. The needle for these shots looks like it is straight out of a horror movie; it is big and long. I struggle to pull the thick, viscous liquid into the needle slowly because that is the only way to draw up this hormone set in thick oil. And then I struggle more to push the liquid into my body because it is so thick, and my body is bearing the results of my allergies. It is May 2022, and I have been injecting myself with hormones and drugs for over four weeks, twice daily, to retrieve eggs for in vitro fertilization. I never thought I would be in this position, and I never thought I would be doing it alone. The first egg

retrieval I had, my spouse was home, and he would give me the shots that had to be administered on my backside. He drove with me to the many appointments, but this time, he is not here, having been deployed to Saudi Arabia, a country that has just recently given women the right to drive.

Gestating Rage

I think a lot about women's rights these days. The US Supreme Court statement for the Dobbs case overturning *Roe v. Wade* was leaked in April 2022; it looked like rights for women's health care would be stripped away because the statement would overturn the right for women and their doctors to be able to decide when to have an abortion. Medical experts tried to argue that abortion is essential healthcare; the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists published a message that "Abortion is essential health care." Experts in the field were ignored as ignorance about women's bodies and healthcare has grown, making pregnancy and bodily autonomy a political issue rather than a moral healthcare one. Even knowing that I might lose all rights to my body once I was pregnant, I still went through another egg retrieval and one more embryo transfer. I had been trying to have a baby for four years by this point and was seeing a fertility specialist the whole time. My husband and I wanted kids, and we have wound up trying everything. We have fostered, tried public and private adoption, and sought fertility treatment. I do not know that I can explain my urge to want to raise children, but I am now in my mid-forties, and I want kids. I would say "at any cost," but the cost is about thirty thousand for IVF and upwards of forty to fifty thousand to adopt. And the cost is also years of emotional turmoil, as I ride various hormone rollercoasters, and as I have had my fifth miscarriage. Five miscarriages, and I was trying again. That is how badly I wanted to be a mom and raise children.

In March 2022, the Missouri House of Representatives debated a trigger law to go into effect if *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. HB 2810, which would put doctors at risk of being charged with a class A or class B felony if "the abortion was performed or induced or was attempted to be performed or induced on a woman who has an ectopic pregnancy" (Campoamor). As lawmakers debated the bill, a lot of confusion arose about what an ectopic pregnancy is. An ectopic pregnancy occurs when an embryo implants somewhere in a woman's body that is not the uterus and grows and develops. But as Danielle Campoamor explains, "An ectopic pregnancy is 100% fatal if untreated, and never, ever results in a baby. Yet it's a common target in anti-abortion legislation." Because the gestational sack (i.e., the fertilized egg) implants and grows in an organ that cannot expand and nurture the baby, not having an abortion will lead to rupture of the woman's organs. No baby can ever come from an ectopic pregnancy.

A quick Google search reveals that this medical complication is the leading cause of death for women in the first trimester. According to Kellie Mullany et. al., “Ectopic pregnancy (EP) ruptures are the leading cause of maternal mortality within the first trimester of pregnancy” (1). Lawmakers are not doctors, but these assholes did not even do their homework before writing the bill. The trigger law that went into effect and is still in effect (even after Missouri voters voted in November 2024 to have abortion protected in the Missouri state constitution) does not contain the original statement about ectopic pregnancy. However, the vague statement about medical emergencies as a cause for abortion and the strict penalty for doctors meant that medical professionals were scrambling to interpret the law and save their patients from having their organs rupture or, worse yet, waiting for ruptured organs before performing an abortion.

On 22 May 2022, I had five eggs retrieved. Three days later, I had three fresh embryos implanted. I am going to stop here for a second to recognize that this terminology is indeed unusual. “Fresh embryos” makes it sound as if they can spoil, but the medical profession calls them “fresh” as opposed to a “frozen embryo” transfer. Three was unusual, but each of my embryos was developing at a slightly different rate; they were in three different stages. Yes, I now know more about embryos than any typical English professor. I could probably bring in diagrams and give lectures about embryos, pregnancy, and women’s fertility. Partly that is because I am a researcher: I dive in and learn and consume information. I always want to learn.

Less than a month after my embryo transfer, on 24 June 2022, I was pregnant, and the US Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Immediately, several states had trigger legislation that banned abortion (including my current home state of Missouri). I do not think I can fully explain the terror I felt being pregnant and knowing that if I had any medical complications—my little ball of cells, not even an embryo yet—would have more rights over my body than I do at any nearby hospital or medical facility. According to RSMO 188.017, titled “Right to Life of the Unborn Child Act”:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law to the contrary, no abortion shall be performed or induced upon a woman, except in cases of medical emergency. Any person who knowingly performs or induces an abortion of an unborn child in violation of this subsection shall be guilty of a class B felony, as well as subject to suspension or revocation of his or her professional license by his or her professional licensing board. A woman upon whom an abortion is performed or induced in violation of this subsection shall not be prosecuted for a conspiracy to violate the provisions of this subsection.

I was terrified, and I was angry. My doctors and I would no longer have the right to my medical decisions for my body once I was pregnant. I remain angry; my rage is actually boiling over at all times at this rate. And I am not exaggerating here. Stories were quickly sweeping news stations of women with ectopic pregnancies who were being denied abortions until they were in critical condition in Missouri.

After the Supreme Court ruling, in a *Missouri Independent* news article from July 2, 2022, reporters Tessa Weinberg and Allison Kite discuss when abortions are permitted: “The procedure is only permitted in a medical emergency, which state law defines as necessary to save the patient’s life or ‘for which a delay will create a serious risk of substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function of the pregnant woman.’” Doctors’ concerns about being charged with a class B felony and losing their licenses over providing an abortion were affecting healthcare decisions and damaging women’s bodies. Weinberg and Kite interviewed Jeannie Kelly, a maternal-fetal medicine specialist at Washington University in St. Louis and the medical director of labour and delivery, who explained that doctors “may need to terminate a pregnancy in cases of uterine infection, hemorrhaging, ectopic pregnancies or severe preeclampsia—all conditions that can result in death or irreversible harm.” But how to determine if a pregnancy and its complications might result in irreversible harm was being left in the hands of elected officials with little to no understanding of medical care and a legal system filled with people trained in law, not medicine or the female reproductive system. Medical experts began publishing about how healthcare professionals can try to help protect abortion access for patients (Fay et al).

My first sigh of relief was when I found out that my embryo had implanted in my uterus, and I would not have to potentially face having an organ rupture if I did not get a medically necessary abortion, which I might have to find someone to take me out of state to get. I want to stress again that my chosen life partner, the person who has driven me home from a medically necessary abortion at a nearby hospital, was serving our country, wearing a flag and uniform for a country that does not acknowledge my bodily autonomy or the expertise of doctors. We wanted to have a baby, not have me end up in an ICU or die. During this time, to distract myself from the country that was quickly filling me with rage, I started to turn to reading feminist texts and women’s stories to try to understand and make meaning of my experiences.

Procreating Rage

In 2006, the MeToo movement began collective action for women who were victims of sexual violence, sexual harassment, and rape culture, and this expanded with the use of #MeToo in 2017 to demonstrate the magnitude of

the problem. When Donald Trump first became president in 2017, the Women's March took place the day after his inauguration. Between the Women's March and the rise of #MeToo, followed closely by similar movements, including #MosqueMeToo and #IBeatMyAssaulter in 2018, women wrote a plethora of books about the transformative power of rage. This was a similar kind of rage that bell hooks writes about in *Killing Rage*:

Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct. Then and now I understand rage to be a necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action. By demanding that black people repress and annihilate our rage to assimilate, to reap the benefits of material privilege in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, white folks urge us to remain complicit with their efforts to colonize, oppress, and exploit. (16)

hooks explains how important rage is to social change, and to deny ourselves rage in the face of subjugation is to become complicit in our subjugation and the subjugation of others.

It is not a secret that the majority of medical care and scientific research has historically focussed on male bodies, often at the expense of women. But the way this neglect affects women and intersects within patriarchy is yet another aspect causing my rage. I read the memoir *Hysterical* by Elissa Bassist, in which she details her search for help with bodily pain and health issues, finding no answers until she sees a therapist who suggests her issues are caused by unexpressed rage. Soraya Chemaly argues in *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* that women are taught to suppress their anger due to gender norms; however, we should express our rage because it is productive. Throughout US history, the subjugated and oppressed have been taught to suppress their anger and rage. As Bassist chronicles, unexpressed rage hurts and kills. In *All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership*, Darcy Lockman discusses how mothers end up carrying more of the workload when it comes to children. Studies on cognitive load and other household duties that typically fall on women demonstrate that the gender divisions of labour still affect women more harshly than men. In Minna Durbin's more recent book *Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood*, she outlines how women cannot possibly live up to society's ideals of what a mother should be. Motherhood is a joy and a privilege. I feel lucky that I have been able to have my children and to have carried and given birth to my youngest, especially. But I am also just so fucking angry at the world I have brought her into and what it has become and seems to be becoming.

Rebecca Traister chronicles how rage has shaped American women's

political struggles in her book *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*. Traister claims that “While we in the United States may not have been told the stories, our nation, too, has been transformed by women’s anger—in response not just to sexism, but also to racism, homophobia, capitalist excess, to the many inequities to which women and those around them have been exposed” (xix). What has become clear to me in my growing feelings of rage—which have only been amplified by being a mother and giving birth to a daughter and losing my right to my bodily autonomy for the span of my pregnancy—is that rage is a power we need to embrace and embody for social and political change.

In *The Seven Necessary Sins of Women and Girls*, Mona Eltahawy presents “the seven necessary sins women and girls need to employ to defy, disobey, and disrupt the patriarchy: anger, attention, profanity, ambition, power, violence, and lust” (10). Eltahawy presents these as sins against patriarchy because they work against the gender norms that leave women powerless against sexual violence and the crimes perpetrated by patriarchy. When she discusses anger, she calls anger “beautiful” and “powerful.” Eltahawy asks us to

Imagine a girl justifiably enraged at her mistreatment. Imagine if we acknowledged her justifiable anger so that a girl understood she would be heard if anyone abused her and that her anger was just as important a trait as honesty. And imagine if we taught a girl that injustice anywhere and against anyone was also worthy of anger, so that she developed a keen sense of compassion and justice and understood that injustice, whether personal or affecting others, was wrong? What kind of a woman would such a girl grow up to be? (16)

This question still echoes through me as I raise my daughter. Eltahawy begins with anger as she chronicles and discusses her sexual assaults and how all of these “necessary sins” can combat the kinds of violence perpetrated on women’s bodies.

Eltahawy discusses anger as “a valuable weapon in defying, disobeying, and disrupting patriarchy, which pummels and kills the anger out of girls” (16). Thus, by embracing and employing our anger, we can use the tool that patriarchy has tried to take away from us. As Eltahawy discusses regarding her other “sins,” the very things that are taken from us or socialized out of us are the ways to disempower patriarchy. When she argues that we should use profanity, she uses herself as an example: “As a woman, as a woman of color, and as a Muslim woman, I am not supposed to say ‘fuck’” (56). She, nonetheless, begins her speaking engagements with the phrase “fuck the patriarchy” (56). She argues that “We must recognize that the ubiquitous ways patriarchy has socialized women to shrink themselves—physically and intellectually—extend also into language, into what we can and cannot say. It is not just a fight for

airtime. It is not just a policing of women's egos. It polices women's very language" (57). Eltahawy suggests that profanity and anger are both tools to work against patriarchy. This is why I chose to keep what some readers may consider profanity in this article. I believe that our language should not be suppressed and controlled, nor should our rage.

Pregnant Rage

I found out very early, using genetic testing, that my baby had no detectable genetic abnormalities, and I found out that my baby would be a girl. At first, I thought *Cool*, and then the realization quickly dawned on me that my child would have more rights to her bodily autonomy as an embryo and fetus, without a fully developed brain, even, than when she was an independent, breathing person outside my body. FUUUUUUUUCK!

What is a mommy, a very liberal, very feminist English professor, to do?

I decided from the moment I could first feel the little flutters that I needed to name her, and it had to be a name with a meaning of strength or warrior. This little lady was going to need to be a tenacious, fearless, strong little warrior to live in this world. I also decided she needed a name defying gender conventions, one she could use no matter where her gender fell on the great grid of gender possibilities (yes, grid, not binary line). Maybe a four-dimensional thing that we cannot even conceive of yet. Societal gender ideas are too limiting and promote dominance and unhealthy norms for everyone. So, I researched names. I settled on Louella, which means strong or beautiful warrior, and Louie as a nickname (coincidentally, the name of both my husband's maternal grandfather and mine). Spoiler: Louie is a healthy and happy little one now. She is great! But I worry just the same about how she thinks of her bodily autonomy and how others perceive her rights to her own body.

In her chapter on lust as a necessary sin, Eltahawy says, "I own my body. I own my body: not the state, not the street, and not the home. I own my body: not the temple, not the church, not the mosque, not any other house of worship" (157). This is a refrain I will have to teach my daughter, as men in the US, since Trump's second inauguration, have taken to chanting and carrying signs at protests proclaiming "your body, my choice" in response to women's insistence on being able to have bodily autonomy (Tolentino). To legislate away a woman's right to decide what to do with her own body is bad enough, but now these men also seem to feel emboldened to threaten ownership of women's bodies in violent ways, grossly expanding rape culture. All these rhetorical choices on the part of prolife groups harken to privileging a ball of cells or a fetus ahead of a fully grown person. And it vastly diminishes what pregnancy and birth do to a female body and the harm pregnancy and birth can inflict on particularly young or vulnerable female bodies.

Nurturing Rage

In addition to not having legal rights over my body at this time, I was also dealing with issues at work. My department chair wanted to deny me time for maternity leave before and after I gave birth. I was doing something enormously and intensively embodied by growing and birthing a human, so I turned to narratives to process my rage. The novels *When Women Were Dragons* by Kelly Barnhill and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman use narrative devices of artifacts: newspaper clippings in the former and archaeological objects in the latter. These narrative devices serve to offer a documentary feel to the stories. Both stories are about women feeling fed up and angry. In *The Power*, women take over the world and decimate the male population. In *When Women Were Dragons*, women turn into dragons and eat the men who have wronged them. Add to this the novel *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, in which an artist-turned-stay-at-home mom with her baby boy begins to think she turns into a dog at night, and she proceeds to care for her son in animalistic ways, such as licking him clean and carrying him around in her mouth. As I fought to get maternity leave from my position and stayed home with my newborn daughter, these alternative stories made me not feel so alone in my struggles as the female parent of an infant. Considering the lack of available and affordable childcare in the US, we have reason to fuel our rage at the mistreatment of expectant and new mothers in more than just healthcare.

I do not think we could find a more effective way to kill women and to push women out of the workforce than this storm we are currently weathering in the US. If I get pregnant, I cannot make informed choices about my body in consultation with my doctors. Maternal mortality rates have increased. As of January 2025, the Gender Equity Policy Institute (GEPI) reports that “mothers living in states that banned abortion are nearly two times as likely to die during pregnancy, childbirth, or soon after giving birth” (GEPI, “Maternal”). In Texas, where courts have upheld some of the strictest abortion bans, maternal mortality rose 56% ... in the first full year of the state’s abortion ban; up 95% among White women.... Women’s risk of maternal death in Texas was 155% higher than in California” (GEPI, “The State”). And women who face intersectional forms of oppression have experienced a greater increase: “Black mothers living in banned states were 3.3x as likely to die as White mothers in those states.... Latina mothers in Texas faced nearly triple the risk of maternal mortality as those in California” (GEPI, “The State”).

In Missouri, where abortions and necessary maternal care are illegal, doctors have been leaving the state. All the doctors I had for infertility and my high-risk pregnancy have left their positions at the University of Missouri medical facilities, where I received care and delivered a healthy baby. I am afraid that women and mothers will soon face greater numbers of healthcare deserts, and

fewer doctors will be trained in proper maternal and reproductive care for women, which extends beyond prenatal, neonatal, and postnatal care. I am filled with rage when I look at these statistics for the people who have lost their lives or their loved ones due to a lack of healthcare options. While I am encouraged by the community fundraising that helps women get maternal care and abortions, and the number of people stockpiling Plan B, which has a shelf life of five years, I am so angry that women and their care are not prioritized. The irony of a so-called prolife movement that does not foster maternal, life-saving care, does not subsidize childcare, and effectively removes care and concern for living and breathing humans raises my ire more. The movement is not about life; it instead wishes to control female bodies, careers, lives, and health.

While I recognize that I benefit from certain privileges, that only makes me angrier. Other people have it worse. Different forms of oppression—such as racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and bigotry—are becoming worse in the US. We have to think about intersectionality and the effects this has on nonwhite bodies, gender-nonconforming bodies, and intersex bodies (like we see glimmers of in *The Power*, when a male-appearing teen is outed for having a special power to control electric currents, which appears only in women). This only leads me to more rage, though. Injustice for so many cannot possibly be good for society. I believe in compassion and that love is a unifying force built into the commonality of the human condition. But I am also really fucking angry.

Mothering Rage

As I wrote this article, several things happened to erode the rights and welfare of women. In my state of Missouri, the House of Representatives passed a bill to overturn Amendment 3 of the Missouri Constitution, which was created as an initiative petition brought forward by Missouri voters and passed by 51.6 per cent in November 2024 (Kellogg). What is perhaps most insulting about the Republicans in our state overturning the will of the democracy and will of the voters, not for the first time, is the fact that they have characterized voters as ignorant. Anna Spoerre explains, “Missouri anti-abortion elected officials have since vowed to either restrict or repeal the reproductive rights amendment, known as Amendment 3, arguing that Missourians didn’t understand what they were voting on when they checked ‘yes’ at the ballot box.” This minimization of voices of opposition is too similar to the silencing effects of misogyny that Kate Manne discusses in *Down Girl*, where she connects strangulation, silence, and misogyny:

One can silence and be silenced in numerous different ways.... You can put words into her mouth. You can stuff her mouth and cheeks

full of deferential platitudes. You can threaten to make her eat certain words that she might say as a prophylactic against her testifying or so much as recognizing what is happening to her and others. You can stonewall, and make her utterance doomed to fail, less than hollow. (4–5)

Silencing part or even all of the voters has become *de rigueur* in the American political landscape, both locally and nationally, as elected representatives refuse to meet with the people they represent and refuse to acknowledge opposition to the rise of fascism in the US. But what is perhaps more absurd is how the presidential executive orders lately have moved from targeting trans and immigrant populations to targeting women as voters and citizens. On 23 April 2025, President Trump signed an executive order titled “Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy,” which targets the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA). The ECOA was first passed in 1974 and amended in 1976 to prevent lenders from discriminating against women based on marital status (Clark). This is part of what granted women the right to take out credit cards in their name. This follows the Executive Order of 25 March 2025 titled “Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections,” which unduly affects married women who have changed their last name at marriage because they will need to acquire a passport to vote. Setting aside the fact that executive orders cannot constitutionally repeal laws in the US, the terror and attacks on many people in the US are relentless now, and while our federal courts have been blocking these acts, the rapid pace with which they continue to assault some of the most vulnerable people in the US is exhausting and unnerving. When politicians begin to legislate women’s bodies to remove bodily autonomy, their access to financial equality, and even access to due process in many cases, it is easy to understand why so many countries have issued travel advisories to not travel to the US. But as a mother and someone whose sex is listed as female on my documents, I am finding it next to impossible to be a woman and a mother to female children in the US. How can I raise my baby to have fewer rights now than she did when she was not a viable, fully formed human? And this does not even touch upon my motherly relationship with my stepson, whom I do not want to live in a system where he may have extreme male privilege and power over those who were assigned female at birth.

As I put the finishing touches on this article for submission, I am perplexed and outraged by the US. Just a few days ago, President Trump spoke about offering five thousand dollars to any mothers who gave birth to a baby and awarding a “national medal of motherhood” for mothers in the US (Speakman). Immediately, I thought of the Nazi Germany “mother’s cross” that was used to encourage the rise of the Aryan population while the Nazis murdered so many mothers and children. The idea of valuing some people over others is

particularly troublesome in our current climate. This small sum of money would not go far to even pay the medical bills for birthing a child, when the national average before health insurance is USD 18,865 and \$2,854 out of pocket with insurance (UW Health), not to mention all the other expenses of maternity and childrearing, especially the cost of daycare. And this does not consider all the people in the US who are living at the margins of poverty and all the people who do not have health insurance coverage. There is so much more to being a mother than simple finances: we need reliable, affordable healthcare for mothers and children; we need good daycares and public schools; we need stable jobs that provide a living wage; we need supportive communities; we need paid parental leave; and we need so much more. But our children, above all, deserve better, always, and that is what really incites my rage. Everyone deserves bodily autonomy and human rights, and when our government and legislature ignore these facts, well, then, fuck patriarchy and bring on the mom rage and the righteous rage that comes from caring for other humans. Let us breed our rage, develop it, nurture it, and mother it. Let us allow it to flourish and mature until we can channel it into lasting change for the good of all humans.

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