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Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond

Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought

This article traces the development of recent feminist thinking about maternity, identifying within it a shift from essentialism to poststructuralism, expressed as a change in terminology from “motherhood” to “mothering.” It draws on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, and Judith Butler, among others. Following Butler, it offers the notion of ‘maternal performativity’ as potentially inspiring. To understand mothering as performative is to conceive of it as an active practice—a notion that is already progressive, given the traditional Western understanding of the mother as passive—that may also be subversive. Maternal performativity also challenges the idea of the mother as origin. However, the notion does have its problems, not least because it fails to acknowledge the relational, ethical aspect of mothering behaviours. I argue, then, for a performative maternal ethics, characterized by relationality and bodiliness. A key site for its performance would be literature; reading and writing may produce new identifications with others and may therefore be viewed as “maternal,” ethical activities. The article ends by calling for further explorations of the link between mothering and artistic practice.

In recent decades, feminist thought about mothering has proliferated, growing ever richer and more complex. In so doing, it has undergone a key shift: from essentialism to poststructuralism.¹ Feminists have long been aware of the constructed nature of gender; such awareness underpins and fuels current debates about maternity. We now talk less of “motherhood” and more of “mothering.” For maternity is no longer seen as a fixed, static state; rather, it is viewed as a set of ideas and behaviours that are mutable, contextual. To talk of “mothering” is to highlight the active nature of maternity: an important move, given the traditional view in western culture of the mother as passive and

powerless. It is also to pave the way for an understanding of mothers' behaviour as performative (a term that will be discussed later) and potentially subversive. Here, I will argue that the notion of a maternal performativity is both productive and problematic, and contend that for the idea to be effective, it must take ethics into account. By way of introduction, I will trace the transition "from motherhood to mothering,"² before moving on to the questions of performativity, ethics, and, finally, aesthetics—which, I will suggest, offers a key site at which "maternal," ethical practice may take place.

Essentialism to poststructuralism

Feminist thinking about maternity since the early 1960s is often presented as "a drama in three acts," as Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes (1997: 5). The first act is defined as involving "repudiation" of motherhood and mothering, with such early second wave feminists as Simone de Beauvoir (1997), Shulamith Firestone (1979), Kate Millett (1977), and Betty Friedan (1992) being cited as exemplars. The second act is characterized by "recuperation," by attempts to reclaim and revise maternity. Such attempts began in the mid-1970s, and were carried out by feminists as diverse as Adrienne Rich (1986), Nancy Chodorow (1978), Dorothy Dinnerstein (1991) and Sara Ruddick (1989) in America; Mary O'Brien (1981) and Juliet Mitchell (1974) in Great Britain; and Luce Irigaray (1985), Hélène Cixous (1994) and Julia Kristeva (1986) in France. The third act, which is ongoing, is concerned to extend and challenge earlier thought. According to Hansen, it is increasingly characterized by a sense of impasse, explained thus:

Feminists have demanded and gained new attention for the previously ignored problems of motherhood, but they have not arrived at consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system. Many (but by no means all) women wish to refuse motherhood on the old terms without abandoning either the heavy responsibilities or the intense pleasures of bearing and raising children. The fear that no one will take care of our children if we don't makes it difficult to go forward, even as it seems impossible to go willingly back. (1997: 6)

The schema noted above is useful in highlighting key trends in feminist thinking about maternity, but as Hansen herself points out, we must be wary of glossing over differences between feminists. We must also guard against telling stories that result only in an impasse. I propose a different narrative, one that recounts the shift from essentialist accounts of mothering to a more liberating poststructuralist awareness of maternal subjectivities as diverse, multifaceted, and shifting.

Views of maternity as a uniformly and inevitably negative experience, such as those found in the "first act," can be described as resting upon essentialism. Beauvoir (1997) and Firestone (1979) view biology as inherently oppressive for

all women, thereby ignoring differences between women, as well as the complex interaction between corporeality, psychology, and culture. Maternity is presented by these feminists as a set, immutable role, not as a state involving change and exchange. While a feminist like Friedan is aware of femininity as a constructed entity (“the feminine mystique”), she does little to address “the maternal mystique.” She does not propose a new view of maternity, but rather escape from the domestic realm by means of education and employment (Friedan, 1992: 159). In all of these accounts, maternity cannot be revised; it must be sidestepped. Of course, views of maternity as inevitably and wholly *positive* could also be described as essentialist. The point here is to be aware of how the experience of mothering is constructed in ways that can be understood as either “positive” or “negative.”

Adrienne Rich’s 1976 view of motherhood as “experience” and “institution” can thus be viewed as a breakthrough. Rich’s *Of Woman Born* is a blend of academic discourse and autobiography; thus, it rests upon the assumption that “the personal is political.” It highlights the maternal subject as complex, thoughtful, and in dialogue with current ideologies concerning maternity, with what Rich terms the “institution” of motherhood. This institution is, in Rich’s view, shaped by patriarchal conceptions of women. Rich’s account does have its problems, which later feminist thought enables us to recognize. In particular, Rich’s differentiation between “experience” and “institution,” while groundbreaking, tends to obscure the interaction between subject and ideology, and it suggests a pristine kind of maternity that lies beneath patriarchy’s overlay (DiQuinzio, 1999: 215; Jeremiah, 2004: 60). Such a view is common in radical feminist thought, which also relies upon the notion of “patriarchy” as a monolithic entity, a view Rich defends in her 1986 introduction to the text (1986: xv). While this idea does furnish Rich with a powerful conceptual tool, and while it may be regarded as a useful strategy, it ignores the fragmentary, unfixed nature of institutions and ideologies.

Such criticism may also be applied to much feminist psychoanalysis. According to Marianne Hirsch, feminist psychoanalysis has failed to articulate maternal subjectivity adequately (1989: 167). Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) *Reproduction of Mothering*, an important contribution to feminist psychoanalysis, indeed tends towards essentialism. Chodorow’s compelling fusion of psychology and sociology highlights the interaction between maternal subject and ideology. But despite Chodorow’s awareness of the contingent nature of mothering and of the nuclear family, she ultimately presents the mother as originary, as outside of culture, thereby offering a thin account of politics (Doane and Hodges, 1992: 38).³ This is a concern that has also been voiced with regard to the Lacan-inspired theorists Cixous (1994), Irigaray (1985) and Kristeva (1986) who are charged with consigning the mother to a realm outside of culture, rendering her silent and powerless (Daly and Reddy, 1991: 7). Psychoanalysis, then, is often problematic for the theorist of maternity wishing to avoid essentialism and disempowerment. So where to now?

Having offered a persuasive critique of much feminist psychoanalysis, Hirsch cites positively the work of the philosopher Sara Ruddick. In *Maternal Thinking* (1989), Ruddick defines mothering as a kind of work, involving protection, nurturance, and training, and argues that maternal activity gives rise to a specific mode of cognition. Such thinking is characterized by what Ruddick terms “attentive love” (1995: 119-23). Ruddick offers the most detailed description of mother-child interaction ever advanced in feminist theory, and thus she contributes significantly to the current and growing awareness of mothering as relational, as constituting a complicated, ever-changing relationship. This notion of mothering as relational is also to be found in the work of the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin. Benjamin challenges traditional psychoanalytic paradigms, which place the mother in the position of object, and posits an “intersubjective” view of child development (1990: 15-24). According to this view, the child develops within and through interaction with the mother, who must also be a desiring subject. The child seeks recognition, and that recognition must be given by someone who is herself an agent.

Both Ruddick and Benjamin, then, conceive the mother as active and relational, and both show an awareness of how mothering is shaped and defined by context. But this awareness is, in both cases, limited, as Christine Everingham (1994) argues. Everingham notes that Benjamin assumes that the mother instinctively “knows” the needs of the child, thereby ignoring the interpretative aspect of caretaking, and suggesting an essentialist view of mothers as naturally caring (1994: 18-19). Everingham also argues that Ruddick should talk of “maternal attitudes” rather than of “maternal thinking,” a term that implies homogeneity and fixity (1994: 32). Everingham, then, is concerned to show mothering as an activity that is contingent upon context. She also fruitfully seeks to redefine the notion of autonomy as a relational concept, as something that “must be actively produced by another in a particular socio-cultural context” (Everingham, 1994: 6; compare Lawler, 2000: 172). In addition, Everingham argues that the particular kind of mothering evoked by Ruddick needs to be theorized as an ethical ideal (1994: 32). We will look further at this idea a little later.

Everingham’s reference to “particular ... context[s]” points to the contingency and constructedness of maternal experience. As has already been suggested, deconstructive methods are now an important feature of feminist examinations of maternity. For example, it has fruitfully been argued that motherhood in Western culture has rested upon a number of binary oppositions, such as man/woman, culture/nature, labour/love (Glenn, 1994: 13). Such oppositions have been challenged by feminists concerned to revise maternal subjectivity.

Recent thinking about maternity has drawn on the work of Judith Butler, who conceives gender as a series of performative acts, as we will shortly see. Viewed in the light of Butler’s work, maternity is a practice, and maternal subjectivity is not static, but rather in process, constantly constructed or

“performed.” One should indeed speak rather of “maternal subjectivities,” critiques of the essentialism of early second wave feminist thought having alerted us to the differences amongst women (Spelman, 1990); and this idea has been central to postmodernist feminism, which insists upon diversity and multiplicity (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 34-35). But what does it mean, to talk of maternal experience as a “construct” or a “performance”? A liberal humanist might find all this talk highfaluting, and might wonder: what about the experience of real mothers in the real world?

Constructivism and performativity

Firstly, the idea that experience is separable from its construction is a fallacy; there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated (“real”) experience. But that does not mean that maternal subjectivity is *only* “constructed.” Judith Butler asserts with regard to sex and discourse: “to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference” (1993: 1). To adapt this formulation: to claim that maternal experience is constructed is not the same as claiming that construction causes maternal experience. The term “construction” is problematic, in that it could be understood to denote a complete and closed process, and in that it may suggest the existence of a pre-discursive subject,⁴ something I want to avoid. Butler’s idea of “performativity,” “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1993: 2) avoids this artificial fixing, and, crucially, it allows for the possibility of interrupting and disrupting this discursive production to effect transformation.

Butler understands gender as “a doing”: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990: 25). As already suggested, to understand maternity thus is to open up conceptual room for mothering as a practice—a notion which, as stated, is already progressive, given traditional views of the mother as passive. It is also to suggest that mothering behaviour could be transformative, subversive. Mielle Chandler (1998) takes up the idea of performative mothering, stating: “It is my position that ‘mother’ is best understood as a verb, as something one does.” Quoting Butler on gender, she goes on: “To be a mother is to enact mothering” (1998: 273). Mothering behaviours, viewed in this light, contain the potential for a disruption of dominant discourses on maternity, which depend upon their enactment for validity and which, therefore, are vulnerable, open to change. To understand mothering in this way is to make room for the idea of maternal agency. According to Butler, it is variation on the repetition of the practices that make up gender that constitutes “agency.” By restaging the processes that cause the constitution and subjection of the “I,” one can “work the mobilizing power of injury” (Butler, 1993: 123). Thus, to vary the repetition of maternal practices is to exert maternal agency.

Such an understanding of mothering also poses a challenge to the idea of the mother as origin, a notion that was mentioned with regard to feminist psychoanalysis. Just as drag exposes “the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (Butler, 1990: 31), so the idea of mothers as performing maternity refutes the normative ideal of the naturally selfless mother, who is imagined as existing prior to culture. This view of maternity as a precultural, prediscursive entity is indeed explicitly challenged by Butler in her reading of the work of Kristeva. Kristeva (1986) takes on the Lacanian notion of “the Symbolic”⁵ and develops the idea of “the semiotic” to argue that the latter is a dimension of language occasioned by the maternal body that acts as a subversive element within the Symbolic, in the form of poetic language. According to Butler, Kristeva “describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself,” and thereby “safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality” (1990: 80).

There are problems with the idea of maternal performativity. What about, for example, the (relatively recent, western) idea of mothering as a “choice”? Butler argues that agency is not to be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, and that agency in no way presumes a choosing subject; it is, she asserts, “a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (1993: 15). The “I,” in her view, does not exist prior to discourse; gendering, for example, is conceived as the matrix through which the “I” emerges (1993: 7). Maternity, then, can be seen as the matrix through which the maternal “I” emerges. But here the issue of voluntarism does come into play; this emergence of a maternal subject can be the consequence of decision-making on the part of the individual woman, that is, of a decision to become a mother. This is not to lapse into liberal assumptions concerning choice and individual freedom; it is simply to problematize performativity as a way of understanding mothering.

This notion of choice, of will, raises the question of ethics, and the making of moral decisions. Chandler (1998) touches on this issue when she, like Benjamin (1990), Ruddick (1995), and Everingham (1994), stresses the relationality involved in mothering practice; the acts performed by the mother are responses to the needs of another. And Chandler challenges the ideology of individualist freedom that perpetuates the devaluation of “the blatantly encumbered: mothers” (1998: 272; see also Chandler, 1999: 21).⁶ She thereby raises the question of whether performativity as a notion can accommodate the issue of care. While the identities “masculine”/“feminine,” “heterosexual”/“lesbian” might be refused as perpetuating heterosexist binarism, that of “mother” is not so dispensable, surely, given the needs of a screaming child. Butler argues that “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found ... in the arbitrary relation between such acts [that make up gender], in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity” (1990: 141). But the possibilities of maternal transformation do not generally admit of such a refusal, assuming

that children should be cared for, and that caretakers feel bound “to clean, to mop, to sweep, to keep out of reach, to keep safe, to keep warm, to feed, to take small objects out of mouths, to answer impossible questions” (Chandler, 1998: 274). Chandler advocates “refusing to refuse” as a solution, suggesting that mothers should “embrace motherselfhoods and ... demand social, economic and political respect for mothering practices” (1998: 284).

Performative ethics?

Chandler thus highlights usefully the limits of performativity as far as an understanding of mothering is concerned. Following her, I would suggest that if we are to develop a notion of maternal performativity, it must include the idea of mothering as a form of ethical behaviour, such as the “should” and the “feel bound to” in the above paragraph already suggest. Let us return to Kristeva (1985), and her essay of 1977, “Stabat Mater,” for some suggestions as to how this can be done.

In Kristeva’s essay, the maternal body is figured as a site of splitting and exchange: “a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh” (1986: 178). Kristeva suggests that the infant’s relationship to the maternal body is manifested and reproduced within “the Symbolic,” in the silent ways in which women connect (1986: 180-81). This “semiotic” communication is described as an “underwater, trans-verbal communication between bodies” (1986: 182). Like Chandler later, Kristeva challenges the idea of individualism, of “singularity”: “it is not natural, hence it is inhuman; the mania smitten with Oneness” (1986: 182). She links her idea of a relational subjectivity and expressivity both to the experience of birthgiving and to ethics, in the following reflection:

Although it concerns every woman’s body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child’s arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility—but not the certainty—of reaching out to the other, the ethical). (1986: 182).

Maternity, then, opens up the possibility of an ethical form of exchange with others (compare Willett, 1995: 8). My reference to Butler’s critique of Kristeva has already indicated the problems with the latter’s account of maternity, but let us hold on to her idea of maternal relationality as an ethical ideal.

The notion is echoed in Chandler’s essay “Queering Maternity”, which argues that “maternal [i.e. relational] forms of selfhood continue to be degraded, mocked and reviled,” while “monadic fraternity” remains as an ideal (1999: 21). Chandler draws interestingly on Chodorow’s ideas concerning mother-infant attachment, reworking them in the light of Butler’s queer

theorizing, and she proposes the following as “both invitations and appeals”:

1. Engagements in maternal practices as, in a sense, ‘queer’: as both the same as and other than the other, as in-relation with and separate from.
2. Desubjugations of maternal forms of subjectivity through engagements in maternal relations regardless of one’s categorical positionality.
3. Proliferations of maternal practices, forms of subjectivity, and ethics, into self-other relations of all kinds (1999: 31).

I find these suggestions extremely provocative and useful, but wish to express a small doubt concerning Chandler’s arguments. Following Chodorow, Chandler suggests that the foundation for maternal qualities “lies dormant in all of us who do not engage in maternal practices, ethics, relations and self-concepts” (1999: 30). The notion of an underlying maternity verges dangerously upon a kind of essentialism, or, at any rate, psychological determinism.

This issue leads us back to the idea of voluntarism, in a sense the opposite of such determinism. Butler’s deployment of the psychoanalytic concept of “identifications” offers suggestions as to how an ethics of care and responsibility might be theorized in terms that avoid simplistic forms both of voluntarism and of determinism. Butler argues that “identifications are never fully and finally made” (1993: 105). Such an idea of attachment allows us also to understand the maternal subject as engaged in a relational process which is never complete and which demands reiteration, that is, as performatively mothering a child or children. This mothering involves what might be termed “choice” or “effort,” what I would prefer to call “ethical constraint,” where that constraint is not to be understood as purely and simply constructed, but as constituted in and codified by discursive and material practices. This “maternal ethics,” then, is not fixed—changing ideas concerning “good enough mothering” (Winnicott, 1964) are enough to alert us to that—but rather contingent upon particular cultural contexts and their particular discursive operations.

Such an ethics would also have to be understood as a bodily one. But unlike Kristeva’s, this type of ethics relies not on the notion of a maternal body as origin, as existing “before” the law, but rather as existing within and through discourses that it can disrupt. In particular, the performative practice of bodily care for an infant involves a challenge to the ideas of individuality identified by Chandler as antithetical to the notion of maternal agency. This is not to suggest that ethical mothering stops when the child no longer needs bodily care; it is, rather, to focus on corporeality as the site where relations of care can and do take place between individual agents. Margrit Shildrick makes a similar point, with regard to medical ethics. She criticizes autonomy and rationality as bases for morality—these, she argues, have formed the lynchpins of the ethics of modernity—and she argues for a new emphasis on embodiment (Shildrick, 1997: 115–20). Shildrick proposes “a more fluid mutual responsibility and care as the distinguishing factors of human morality” (1997: 122).

To understand maternity as performativity is not to conceive of it purely in discursive terms, as I hope became clear through the earlier claim that maternal experience and its constructedness are indissoluble. The materiality of maternity is bound up with its discursive operations; as Butler notes, “language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different” (1993: 69). That is, the material practices of maternity, those actions performed by mothers that Ruddick and others have pointed out, cannot constitute the ground on which a theory of maternity is constructed. Materiality, according to Butler, is itself constructed, and it cannot be separated from signifying practices, since “language both is and refers to that which is material” (1993: 68). To argue for a maternal performativity is not, therefore, to ignore “the material”; it is, rather, to pave the way for a discursive (hopefully performative) reassessment of the material operations of motherhood and maternity. One way in which such a revision can be performed is through literature.

Ethics and aesthetics

Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy (1991) put forward a post-modernist aesthetic as central to an understanding of maternal writing, asserting that “since Oedipal narratives silence the voices of mothers, we must listen for maternal stories in postmodern plots where selfhood is constructed, or reconstructed, in more complex patterns” (1991: 12). Daly and Reddy cite Benjamin as important for an understanding of such “reconstructions” of maternal subjectivity as relational and in process. Such ideas have been linked to postmodernism by Patricia Waugh. Considering the question of a postmodern feminist literature, Waugh examines psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity, to relate them to recent women’s writing, much of which, according to her, has “explored modes of relational identity” (1996: 339). I find such ideas interesting, but, like Hirsch (1989), Daly and Reddy (1991), I am wary of relying upon an interpretative framework that has traditionally silenced mothers.

I would argue instead for a performative and ethical maternal aesthetics. Aesthetic practice involves relationality since it constitutes participation in a particular culture. The experiences of writing and reading also promote non-hierarchical, fluid sets of identifications. Butler notes: “what is called agency can never be understood as a controlling or original authorship over [a] signifying chain” (1993: 219). Traditional ideas of authorial autonomy and authority having been discredited, the way is open for an idea of aesthetic performativity:

Agency would then be the double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where ‘to be constituted’ means ‘to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime’ the signifier itself. Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its continuation on the future of that citational chain, agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity

through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity seeks insistently to foreclose (Butler, 1993: 220).

Such a performativity can produce new “identifications,” and may therefore be understood as a maternal, ethical act (see also Jeremiah, 2002). This act involves among other things a challenge to traditional masculinist notions of knowledge production, which have rested on a conception of the self as contained and rational, and on a hierarchical subject/object distinction; reading and writing, as empathic acts, expose subjectivity as relational and meaning as dialogic.

A recent book by the British academic John Carey (2005) asks *What Good Are The Arts?* Carey considers the work of Ellen Dissanayake, an American scholar who advocates the making of art as a solution to the feelings of disaffection and depression suffered by teenagers in the United States: problems she identifies as symptoms of a highly technologized, consumerist society. Dissanayake (2000) traces the origins of art to mother-and-baby interaction, to the sounds, play, expressions, and gestures that occur between mother (or: parent? caregiver?) and child. Carey observes:

Few will question Dissanayake’s belief in the importance of mother-infant mutuality, or doubt her claim that it influences the child’s and later the adult’s capacities for love, for belonging to a social group, for finding and making meaning, and for acquiring a sense of competence through handling and elaborating. True, its connection with art is hard to test. It would be interesting to know whether individuals who were deprived, in babyhood, of the mothering attentions [Dissanayake] specifies turn out to be artistically incompetent as well as limited in other ways (2005: 154).

It would be interesting indeed if other thinkers were to take up this line of enquiry, and explore further the links between mothering and artistic practice. Such a project would entail a reappraisal of the status of both mothering and art in contemporary culture: an urgent and compelling task.

Note: This article arises from and in part reproduces the author’s book Troubling Maternity: Mothering, Agency, and Ethics in Women’s Writing in German of the 1970s and 1980s.

¹“Essentialism” involves the belief that human beings are reducible to a single defining characteristic or set of characteristics, and is a frequent feature of what is known as liberal humanism. “Essentialism” is often set in opposition to “constructivism” or “constructionism” (see here Fuss, 1989: 1), which sees the subject as constructed by external forces. I refer here to “poststructuralism,”

which largely endorses such a constructivist view, understanding subjectivity as a process, shaped and supported by discourses (Weedon, 1987: 33).

²*From Motherhood to Mothering* is the title of a recent volume of essays edited by Andrea O'Reilly (2004).

³See also Patrice DiQuinzio's useful critique of Chodorow (1999: 177-79).

⁴Critics of constructivism point out a pitfall of the theory: the notion that the subject is entirely constructed from without, as it were, implies that "before" this process occurs, there exists a pure, untarnished subject. Thus constructivism involves essentialism, though as noted above, the two are often seen as opposites (see also Fuss, 1989: 6)

⁵According to Lacan, the Symbolic is rendered possible by means of the repression of primary libidinal drives, including the child's dependence on the maternal body. The Symbolic is the structuring of all signification under the paternal law.

⁶Patrice DiQuinzio points out that "mothering is an important site at which the individualist ideological formation is elaborated and imposed, but it is also the site at which this ideological formation can be contested and reworked" (1999: xv).

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