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Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory

Elisions and Intersections

The study of motherhood has had an uneasy and ambivalent relationship to feminism and feminist theory. Ranging from radical feminist rejection of motherhood on the perceived basis of its inherent oppression of women, and the view that “motherhood has everything to do with a history in which women remain powerless by reproducing the world of men” (Allen 316), to more moderate accounts of that ambivalence that caution against the “recent positive feminist focus on motherhood” that romanticizes motherhood by drawing heavily on sexist stereotypes (hooks 135), feminist thought continues to traverse with difficulty the complex terrain linking motherhood and maternal activity to feminist concerns. In this paper, I argue that there are complex intersections between feminist theory and motherhood studies that become particularly evident when motherhood is considered within a “third wave” context. By highlighting the development of motherhood studies within the context of third-wave feminism and its consistency with broad feminist ideals of female empowerment and social justice, I advocate for the systematic inclusion of the study of motherhood as a central aspect of women’s experience into established feminist, women, and gender studies agendas.

The study of motherhood has had an uneasy and ambivalent relationship to feminism and feminist theory. Ranging from radical feminist rejection of motherhood on the perceived basis of its inherent oppression of women, and the view that “motherhood has everything to do with a history in which women remain powerless by reproducing the world of men” (Allen 316), to more moderate accounts of that ambivalence that caution against the “recent positive feminist focus on motherhood” that romanticizes motherhood by drawing heavily on sexist stereotypes (hooks 135), feminist thought continues

to traverse with difficulty the complex terrain linking motherhood and maternal activity to feminist concerns.

In this paper, I argue that there are complex intersections between feminist theory and motherhood studies that become particularly evident when motherhood is considered within a “third wave” context. Tracing these trajectories is important because, as Samira Kawash observes, “motherhood studies needs the perspective and commitment of feminism as well as the institutional resources that feminism and women’s studies has accumulated over the past four decades. At the same time, feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities” (997). And although it is undeniable that motherhood studies—the scholarly study of motherhood in its contradictions and complexities—would benefit from the commitment of feminism in the terms Kawash outlines, growing evidence suggests that the field has been developing steadily even without this commitment. Over the last two and a half decades, a growing body of scholarship on motherhood and mothering, informed by a feminist theory and politic, has highlighted the complexity of mothering experiences and developed theories of motherhood that move beyond preexisting understandings of motherhood as a biological imperative.¹

At the same time, however, feminist scholarship in gender and women’s studies tends to exclude or sideline mothering as a viable feminist concern and motherhood studies as a theoretically diverse scholarly area. The varied practices of mothering and advances made in maternal theory over the last two decades are seldom, if ever, systematically explored with respect to the connections between motherhood as an institution and a theory, and feminist thought. Recent collections of essays in women and gender studies that purport to “ask challenging and provocative questions about how WGS [women’s and gender studies] has produced its own knowledges,” (Orr et al. 2)—such as the 2012 volume *Rethinking Women and Gender Studies*—do not acknowledge even in passing the presence of growing scholarship in motherhood and its methodologies. Another example is the 2013 volume *Gender and Women Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain*. The collection, intended for use as a textbook in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, is conceptualized as a comprehensive survey and an introduction to “a field that is at the forefront of critical thinking about inequalities and social justice” (Hobbs and Rice xvii). As such, its professed aim is to offer “a broad selection of writings from a range of authors and perspectives” (xvii). However, out of the sixty-nine chapters the collection contains, only one briefly addresses the topic of motherhood and only from the limited perspective of mother-blame in the context of psychoanalysis. In her recent book on matricentric feminism, Andrea O’Reilly documents “the disappearance of motherhood in twenty-first century academic feminism” by

providing statistical information about the vanishing percentage of scholarship on motherhood represented in the syllabi of introductory women's studies courses; articles and books on motherhood reviewed in feminist and women's studies journals; and papers presented at the National Women's Studies Association annual conference (*Matricentric*, 185-86).

Outside of the academic context, according to recent census information, there are two billion mothers in the world, of whom 85.4 million live in the U.S., whereas 4.1 million live with children under the age of eighteen in Canada. The numbers themselves raise troubling questions about elisions of motherhood evidenced in recent feminist scholarship. For example, women and gender studies claims to be dedicated to "the practice of intersectionality, gendering and queering of women's studies, indigenizing and decolonizing women's studies" as well as to "globalizing, internationalizing and transnationalizing women's studies" (Hobbs and Rice xix). Yet the globally pervasive, historically persistent, and diverse experience of motherhood in relation to women's intersectional, queer, Indigenous, Third World, and transnational identities appear to exist largely outside dominant disciplinary trends. These omissions have serious intellectual and institutional implications. They call into question some of the fundamental premises of feminism and women and gender studies regarding issues of representation, inclusion, and social and gender justice; they raise further troubling questions, such as "whose feminism and whose women's studies is being called upon, or passed on, and where and by whom?" (Braithwaite et al 31).

Much of what we have come to accept as normative, liberal, or academic feminist scholarship in women and gender studies has a distinctly negative stance toward motherhood. Bypassing motherhood within larger, established feminist discourses reveals that feminist theory is still to a large extent determined by universalist and essentialist histories of motherhood that are the basis of much feminist theorising of gender, femininity, and motherhood. Many accounts still "equate the feminine and the maternal," thereby assuming the "naturalization of maternal identity in terms typical of patriarchal understandings of femininity" (DiQuinzio 10-11). According to this logic, the discourse of being a mother, and a good mother, is seen as implicated in the discourse of being a wife, and a good wife, with all of its concomitant oppression and lack of power typical of a patriarchal domestic and social context.

Dominant feminist theory and the imaginary boundaries established around the field of women and gender studies are still constructed upon the assumed link between women's oppression in relation to larger social and political structures—including the assumed normative presence of the nuclear family and the public-private dichotomy—and mothering. This essentialist form of thinking rests on the notion that gender-neutral individualism defines or

should define feminist subjectivity, which renders motherhood problematic, since discussion of the maternal by necessity “accentuate[s] the gendered and relational dimensions of maternal subjectivity” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric* 200). The growing body of work in motherhood studies has long since rejected this form of essentialism. Claims for and about mothers have been replaced with pluralist perspectives regarding maternal subject positions and mothering practices, continuing to foreground inclusive and intersectional methodologies aimed at allowing women as mothers the opportunity to describe and theorize their own experiences. Scholarship in motherhood studies and maternal theory unambiguously demonstrates that subjectivity, agency, and autonomy need to be understood as concepts that are actualized within a complex set of social, collective, and relational influences always constitutive of self-definition.

In this paper, I use as a conceptual framework the four themes pertaining to the discipline of motherhood studies in the new millennium—experience, identity, policy, and agency (O’Reilly, *21st Century Motherhood*)—and I trace some of the continuities, overlaps, and intersections between motherhood studies and third-wave feminism within a theoretical context informed by foundational feminist concepts, such as critique of patriarchy, social justice, and the empowerment of women. My contention is that when looked upon in this context, the traditional friction between motherhood and feminism recedes, and, in many cases, disappears altogether. In that sense, this essay critiques the exclusion and essentialism in dominant feminist theory when it comes to its unwillingness to engage adequately with the fact that scholarship in motherhood studies has rethought and reshaped “mother” as a subject position in various historically and culturally specific ways. By highlighting the development of motherhood studies within the context of third-wave feminism and its consistency with broad feminist ideals of female empowerment and social justice, I advocate for the systematic inclusion of the study of motherhood into women and gender studies programs and agendas.

Motherhood and Feminist Thought: Traversing the Blind Spot

The relationship between feminism and motherhood is complex. Some studies conceive of motherhood as “taken-for-granted dimension of women’s normal adult role” so that it becomes “one of the key sources of women’s oppression” (Gimenez 199). They criticize the mainstream U.S. women’s liberation movement for their “unqualified support of motherhood as one of the most important women’s rights,” which is seen as being “insufficiently critical of its oppressive dimensions” (199). Such criticism concludes that “women’s liberation from male dominance is inextricably linked to women’s and men’s liberation from compulsory parenthood” (Gimenez 289). The oppressive dimensions

of “compulsory parenthood” are being increasingly theorized by motherhood scholarship seeking to problematize and deconstruct “the patriarchal construct of a mother as a biological and essential category” (O’Reilly, *21st Century* 7). The deconstruction of “mother” as an essential and biological category that characterizes much recent scholarship in maternal theory exposes the second-wave liberal feminist ideology inherent in these views.

Second-wave feminism critiques sex and gender roles, marriage, and the nuclear family as a nexus of female oppression. It is concerned with women’s right to full control over reproduction, and its theoretical and activist efforts are often focused on the analysis of the exploitation of women not only sexually and psychologically but also as housewives and mothers. Jeffner Allen’s radical call for the rejection of motherhood because “motherhood is dangerous to women” through the development and enactment of what she calls a “philosophy of evacuation” makes explicit what is implicit about much second-wave writing on motherhood:

If woman, in patriarchy, is she who exists as the womb and wife of man, every woman is by definition a mother: she who produces for the sake of men. A mother is she whose body is used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men.... Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity. (Allen 315)

There is power and potency in Allen’s impassioned language, as it calls attention to the oppressive dimensions of the mother role as defined by Western patriarchy. At bottom, what this perspective argues for is the central tenet of feminism: the empowerment of women through breaking down current power relations and rebuilding them more equitably. Her approach also calls for women to exercise full agency over their reproduction. At the same time, however, Allen’s perspective is built upon problematic universalizing assumptions about motherhood, as well as subjectivity. Allen sees motherhood as being inimical to the establishment of female subjectivity. This neoliberal, individualist view is based on a conception of autonomy and agency developed “at some distance from those attributes of human subjects, such as emotional or relational interdependence” (Abrams 806). Subjecthood and the formation of subjectivity are conceived of as existing and unfolding through competition with the “other” (Man as representative of patriarchy), and are fully realized only through a disconnection from others—from their impinging judgments and entangling commitments. This viewpoint espouses a moral theory that understands people only from a liberal political and economic position, according to which human

beings are seen as self-interested, independent, and autonomous units who cooperate only when the conditions can increase the results of each party (Barry 166). By modelling itself on traditional moral theory, this feminist ideology inadvertently duplicates the hierarchical and masculinist bias inherent in this form of philosophical thought, which remains disconnected from most lived realities. This traditional view of subjectivity remains blind to the “pervasive, plural social construction of the subject in the context of intersecting power inequalities” as well as the extent to which “the development and exercise of autonomy is frequently a collective enterprise, rather than an individual one” (Abrams 806). Thus, the position from which these assumptions are articulated not only ignores intersectional differences that speak to race, class, and sexual orientation, but also the diverse and varied lived contexts in which most mothering activity unfolds. It also ignores the reality that personhood is always to varying degrees relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically. But the most glaring blind spot of this theoretical approach is that it disregards the love, pleasure and empowerment most mothers experience through their mothering—a blind spot upon which motherhood studies itself was founded.

Jeffner Allen, like Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson, belongs to radical second-wave feminism, and their views on motherhood do not speak for all feminists. However, in 1984, when Allen’s essay was first published, it had been almost a decade since the publication of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976), in which Rich makes the crucial distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, which is not inherently oppressive. Despite the publication of this important work, the elision of motherhood from subsequent academic feminist thought, especially over the last two decades, suggests that Allen’s arguments persist, instead of Rich’s—as well as those of other feminists who investigated the ways in which motherhood can be a source of power for women. Jeffner’s argument is a product of the second-wave liberal feminist orientation toward critiquing a particular brand of Western patriarchy—with its concomitant neoliberal emphasis on the regulation of the nuclear family. According to this perspective, men are always the enemy, and motherhood forever stands at odds with the demands for complete individual female freedom, a sense of control and personal agency, and autonomous power in the public sphere.

Contestation and Revisioning

Motherhood studies has since addressed this blind spot. As a discipline, it is based upon the premise that mothering, namely the lived experience of being a mother, “is not a singular practice” and that the verb “to mother” cannot be understood as a monolithic category of practice, since “even among similar

mothers practices vary significantly” (Chandler 273). This premise has significant implications for how to understand identity, experience, and agency within not only motherhood studies but feminism as well. If mothering practices vary significantly even among mothers who are in some sense similar, and if practices do give rise to and shape the experience of mothering, then the experiences of mothering do vary significantly and result in different forms of identity and levels of agency that negotiate, critique, and resist patriarchal constraints in different ways. Just as the category of woman is not universal—a stance for which academic feminism has fought long and hard to establish—the practice and experience of motherhood is not universal either, nor are the ways mothers may acquiesce to or may resist oppressive structures.

Recent scholarship in motherhood studies has further challenged essentialism by beginning to differentiate between culturally specific forms of mothering and their implications for what constitutes empowerment for each group of mothers. Examples of such scholarship include: *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politic of Empowerment* (Collins 2002); *An Anthropology of Mothering* (Walks and McPherson 2011); *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood* (Gonsalves and Sangha 2013); *Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences* (O’Reilly 2014); *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Anderson 2016); and *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth* (Tait Neufeld and Cidro 2017). These works continue to refine the discussion through their intersectional investigation of the conditions that make motherhood an oppressive patriarchal structure in the dominant culture—such as mothering in the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for child rearing, frequently assumed economic dependence on men and strict sex-role segregation. Yet, they also point out that these conditions are not constitutive of many different forms of mothering outside the dominant culture, especially African American or Indigenous mothering.

For example, African American mothering can be contrasted with motherhood as it is practised by the dominant white culture. Writing in 1990, bell hooks notes, “had Black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education ... would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood” (133). Revealing the white, middle-class, liberal and essentialist bias of much of second-wave academic feminism, hooks points out that “early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated” (134-35).

Along similar lines, Patricia Hill Collins has identified the “antifamily” and

by implication, “antimotherhood” bias within mainstream academic feminism as a significant impediment to the theorizing of black motherhood. For Collins, feminist writing on motherhood reflects white, middle-class “angles of vision” dedicated to “demystifying the traditional family ideal and focused on the experience of White, middle-class women’s experience of motherhood, and lacking an “an adequate race and class analysis” (*Black Feminist Thought*, 175). Black motherhood as an institution, Collins asserts, is “both dynamic and dialectical” through which black women “express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 176). Within black families, mothering “was not a privatized nurturing ‘occupation’ reserved for biological mothers” (Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood” 277). African American communities have recognized that “vesting one person with the full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible,” which has resulted in othermothers—“women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities”—being central to the institution of black motherhood. (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 178; Troester). Furthermore, motherhood in the African American context is not linked to economic dependency on men, as black women are structurally central to their families in terms of economic support; mothers and motherhood are accorded a culturally high status, and childcare is seen as a collective rather than individual responsibility (Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood” 277). Nor is the centrality of women and motherhood in African American extended families, Collins contends, “predicated on male powerlessness” (*Black Feminist Thought* 178). These insights show that female subjectivity and mothering practice are seen as compatible and complementary in black feminist theory. They also reveal that empowerment is not incompatible with caregiving as an attribute or practice and that agency and autonomy function as multifaceted competencies developed within the context of other forms of lived experience, which in the case of African-American women is deeply intertwined with issues of race and class.

Similarly, recent work on traditional Indigenous mothering reveals its differences from white, middle-class oppressive ideals of the good mother. Along with African American mothering, Indigenous motherwork is culturally valued, understood as a collective responsibility, and seen as equivalent to any other work structurally important to the community. Kim Anderson points out that “Indigenous ideologies of motherhood are distinct from patriarchal western models of motherhood, and this means that strategies for empowered mothering are also distinct” (Anderson, “Giving Life” 775). Understanding this ideology, Anderson asserts speaking to Indigenous mothers “means having to unlearn what Western society has taught ... about motherhood

... away from the Western ideology that condemns the mother to the role of family servant without any decision-making power” (Anderson, *Recognition* 147). In Indigenous worldviews, “producing life and raising children are understood as the creation of a people, a nation and a future”—a sacred and highly valued social responsibility that Indigenous mothers are given the authority to exercise (*Recognition* 148). Far from being seen as the embodiment of women’s individual annihilation, motherhood here is seen as the assertion of leadership and authority for women, which is linked to life giving and community building and not dependent on whether the women biologically produce children. Childcare is understood as both an individual and a social responsibility for Indigenous communities; sometimes, women “choose not to have biological children so they can better fulfill their roles of aunties or grannies or serve the community” (*Recognition*, 150). The auntie and granny roles are also maternal in the sense that they “teach, nurture, and heal all people, not just their own” (149). In contrast to Western ones, Indigenous understanding of gender roles are fluid and complimentary, and all responsibilities are valued as “contributing to restoring and maintaining the balance of the universe” (154).

Moreover, Indigenous motherhood involves understanding the reciprocal relationship existing between mothers and children, which honours the subjectivity of both mother and child and contrasts with patriarchal and oppressive ideologies of mothering. A reciprocal relationship leaves enough psychic space for both mother and child to find their own unique place in the relationship, thus rendering less likely the conditions under which maternal and child interests may be seen as existing in conflict (Takševa 158).

Emerging scholarship on South Asian motherhood also provides a more nuanced understanding of motherhood by showing how it is a source of empowerment for women in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and surrounding areas, despite being entrenched in patriarchal understandings of motherhood, which place excessive demands, expectations, and responsibilities on mothers in these areas. For example, in her work on South Asian motherhood, Jasjit K. Sangha points out that South Asian experiences of mothering are informed not just by gender but by “other systems of oppression that intersect with gender such as race, caste, class, sexuality and ability” as well as the conditions of migration (415). Within these intersecting matrices of oppression, power, and decision-making ability operate differently for different South Asian mothers, since “a mother may have access to power because of her caste, class and social status and yet succumb to restrictions on her mobility and sexuality in order to maintain her *izzat* (honour)” (Sangha 415). Similarly, “a mother may have privileges due to her geographic location after migration, yet face a severe decrease in her standard of living due to barriers obtaining paid work” (415).

Situating South Asian motherhood within a more complex understanding of its varied contexts, Sangha demonstrates that “expressions of agency by South Asian mothers can take many forms”—such as “finding appropriate services for their disabled child after facing stigma in the South Asian community, or growing their child’s *kesb* (hair) as a visible marker of their Sikh religion while living in the diaspora” (416). In many cases, as Sangha and Gonsalves point out, agency is encoded in the resistance that South Asian mothers in the diaspora develop in response to the dominant culture’s attempts to subordinate them via negative perceptions attached to them as Muslim mothers, queer mothers, or mothers whose children have a rare health condition. In all of these cases, the agency exercised has significant meaning for the mothers themselves, since resistance and activism inform their daily lived experience.

The deconstruction of motherhood as a monolithic identity exclusively linked to female oppression has also been addressed by a new area of feminism—feminist love studies. The love governing the parent-child relationship is being increasingly theorized as a prototype for the best kind of love, based on not only declarations but committed and active work (Gilligan; Noddings; Ruddick; Tronto; Bryson; Lowe; Overall). Recent feminist studies on love urge a more serious and sustained study of love; they recognize its importance as a significant creative, social, and biomaterial power capable of changing and shaping social and political forces, and a key element in ethics and epistemology (Ferguson and Jónasdóttir 2). In this sense, rather than conceiving of personal identity as fixed, unitary and inviolable in rigid, individualist neoliberal terms, it is the relational aspects of being that are stressed as making up the fabric of the self. This relational understanding of identity and experience in the context of love and care is, of course, central to voluntary motherwork. Beyond the self, feminist scholarship in the area of care ethics, spearheaded by the work of Virginia Held, understands this relationally understood identity to be foundational for profound social and political change based on a radically humane vision of social justice. Since one of the principal goals of feminist analyses of power is to rebuild relationships in more equitable ways, it is essential to attend to the carework mothering entails and to acknowledge the personal and collective implications of re-conceptualizing identity as a relational category.

Third-Wave Feminist Discursive Spaces: The Emergence of Motherhood Studies

These insights pertaining to motherhood emanate from a standpoint that has moved away from second-wave liberal feminist politics of identity. The new politics of feminist identity ushered in through diverse third-wave feminist

voices has paved the way for the emergence and development of motherhood studies. No rigid boundaries can be put in place between second- and third-wave feminism; second-wave liberal feminism still exists, and still represents the ideological core around which much academic feminism is structured. So, to “speak about a ‘third wave’ of feminism is to name a moment in feminist theory and practice” (Gillis et al. 1)—a temporality from within which issues relating to women and their empowerment can be considered. Postcolonial feminists of colour have called for feminism to reinterrogate its Eurocentric agenda, and have critiqued the implication that the third wave feminism trope seems to imply some sort of evolution in the progressive narrative of feminist history. Instead, they have stressed the need to develop a “differential consciousness” through the ideology of opposition (Chackaborty 205). And as a recent study shows, “a woman’s understanding of what feminism means has more to do with where and when she entered the discourse than it does with the year of her birth” (Snyder 178; Aikau et al.). Third-wave feminism recognizes that “feminists are differently situated in relation to what the feminist movement has (and has not) accomplished.” (Hogeland 107). Thus, third-wave feminism is a reaction to and a critique of the ingrained social definitions of what it means to be a feminist evident in much second-wave feminism (Whelehan 2007). The diverse and often discordant feminist voices over the last two decades make it clear that third-wave feminism is less of a label related to age than a particular approach to feminism as well as to issues of inclusion, multivocality, equity, and equality.

Although the seeds of motherhood studies are to be found within second-wave feminist thought (primarily in the work of Adrienne Rich and her 1976 book *Of Woman Born*), its formal beginnings and subsequent development are the result of a third-wave feminist approach and orientation, in which maternal subjectivity and experience are being increasingly theorized and positioned as one of the voluntary identity categories different people choose to occupy.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich makes the crucial and hitherto unacknowledged distinction between the two meanings of motherhood. The first refers to the daily practice of mothering, which she defines as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children.” The second refers to motherhood as an oppressive patriarchal institution whose aim to ensure that that potential and all women remain under male control (Rich 13). Andrea O’Reilly will later adopt the two terms—motherhood as institution and mothering as experience—and further develop them into a theoretical basis for a meaningful and systematic interrogation of the maternal.

Rich’s separation between the institution and the experience of motherhood created the theoretical space from which motherhood studies could emerge; it created the possibility to achieve the following two discursive objectives:

- To theorize mothering and maternal subjectivity by providing the theoretical space in which individual as well as collective maternal subjectivities can be examined as separate from critiques of the patriarchal institution of motherhood
- To give voice to mothering in all of its diverse complexity and to open the possibility of empowering mothers in their carework by outlining the possible terms of maternal empowerment within a broad feminist context.

Since the broad aim of all types of feminism is the emancipation and empowerment of women in their private and public lives, both of these objectives are consistent with those aims. Sara Ruddick's 1989 *Maternal Thinking* is the first feminist study of mothering as experience. It starts from the philosophical premise that all practice and experience—including daily acts of care performed by mothers—gives rise to particular and distinct ways of thinking. The book aims to articulate a philosophy of mothering, with its distinct ways of thinking about the world. In her study, Ruddick theorizes issues relating to maternal control, maternal and child vulnerability, the concept of “nature” and instinct with respect to motherhood, as well as a model of active maternal care she defines as attentive love (Ruddick 12). Ruddick systematically links maternal thinking as an “engaged and visionary standpoint” with a larger social dimension and a politics of peace and with the central feminist goal: to make the personal (the private) political. Ruddick's work paves the way for further developments.

Ruddick's philosophy of maternal thinking makes two essential contributions for the subsequent and ongoing development of the theory of motherhood, especially as it intersects with broad feminist principles. First, maternal thinking critiques the notion that motherhood, the work of mothering, and mother love are instinctive, and that women are primarily driven by emotion, not rationality. Second, Ruddick separates the biological acts of giving birth from the activity of mothering, which allows for a new definition of motherhood and mothering to emerge—an activity grounded in the conscious commitment to providing daily care to those who require care, nurture, and training. This definition frees considerations of motherhood from gender essentialism as well as biological determinism by allowing for maternal care activities to be well performed by anyone, such as othermothers, adoptive mothers, and fathers.

Along with Rich's and Ruddick's work, Lauri Umansky's *Motherhood Re-conceived* and Sharon Hays's *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* have also enlarged the theoretical framework concerning the study of motherhood. The formal beginnings of the discipline, however, are marked by the establishment of the Association for Research in Mothering by Andrea O'Reilly in 1997 at

York University—later to become the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement. Building on Rich's and Ruddick's work, O'Reilly has been formulating a theory of feminist and empowered mothering since the late 1990s. In 2016, O'Reilly published *Matricentric Feminism*, in which she argues that the identity of mother is distinct from the identity of women and calls for a particular kind of feminism positioning mothers' concerns as the starting point for a theory and politic of empowerment.

In 2005, The Association for Research on Mothering launched a publishing division, Demeter Press, with the publication of Andrea O'Reilly's book, *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering*. As the first feminist press to publish books on and about motherhood, reproduction, sexuality, and family, it has actively encouraged and facilitated the growth of motherhood studies as a scholarly discipline. In November 2017, Demeter Press published its one hundredth title in the field of motherhood—a testament of success to O'Reilly's continued efforts to create an autonomous academic field of motherhood studies. The association and the publishing press were founded in response to a developing awareness that “motherhood scholars needed and wanted a space of their own, in which their research would be supported and respected” (*Matricentric* 190). The work published by MIRCI and Demeter Press not only reveals the diversity of approaches to motherhood and the richness of its interdisciplinary base but also highlights the “network of supportive scholars who are intentionally and self-consciously engaged in building a field of study and a network of collegial support” (Kawash 995). Most importantly, MIRCI and Demeter's existence ensures a platform for the publication of scholarship based on the experience and empowerment of mothers, and to engage within broader issues of politics, policy, and power.

These developments in motherhood studies do not unfold within a theoretical vacuum, but take place within wider social and cultural changes regarding feminism. The third feminist wave was reportedly kicked off by Rebecca Walker, when in a 1992 *Ms. Magazine* article, she famously proclaims, “I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the third wave.” And although Walker herself does not say anything about motherhood, she speaks from a strong intersectional perspective and against the ideological constraints imposed by second-wave feminist identities. In the decade following Walker's statement, a number of popular as well as scholarly books have been published presenting third wave feminism as a perspective that embraces a multiplicity of identities and accepts the messiness of lived contradiction. Some of these include *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Findlen 1995); *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (Baumgardner and Richard 2000); *Catching the Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Dicker and Piepmeier

2003); and *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2004).

Although third-wave feminism includes diverse perspectives, the movement can be conceptualized on the basis of what Claire Snyder identifies as its “tactical approach ... to some of the impasses that develop[ed] within feminist theory in the 1980s” (Snyder 175):

First, in response to the collapse of the category of “women,” the third wave foregrounds the personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival vision of feminism. Second, as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism, third wavers embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification. Finally, in response to the divisiveness of the sex wars, third wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political. In other words, third wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition. (176)

Third wave, thus, addresses the categories of experience, identity, policy, and agency in a way that rejects the perceived ideological rigidity of second-wave liberal feminism, according to which motherhood and female empowerment are incompatible. As such it has multiple implications for those same categories as they function within motherhood studies. The collapse of the category “women” as standing in perpetual ideological opposition to the category of “men” and a general category of “patriarchy” by default means that the identity of feminist and that of mother are no longer seen in opposition. As Leslie Haywood points out, third-wave feminism “respects not only differences between women based on race, ethnicity, religion and economic standing, but also makes allowance for different identities within a single person,” which also means that “it allows for identities that previously may have been seen to clash with feminism”(xx). One of these identities is the maternal one.

Challenges and Possibilities

The ideological space opened by these developments—embracing the maternal identity as compatible with feminism—has, in fact, created a curious feminist backlash when it comes to mainstream dominant conceptions of motherhood, not unlike the backlash against feminism itself. The rhetoric of choice, multiplicity and multivocality has resulted in contemporary ideologies

of motherhood—such as intensive mothering and new momism—that recreate the old, oppressive, prefeminist dimensions of motherhood by promoting unrealistic and impossible to achieve ideals about the good mother. These ideologies combine the post-second-wave gains and freedom achieved by and for women with oppressive traditional family-life gender patterns and expectations so that through them, women are now encouraged to choose to mother traditionally and intensively while working outside the home. Thus, although third-wave feminism has widened the conception about feminism and its compatibility with a variety of identity positions and categories—mother included—it has also created the conditions through which older, oppressive, prefeminist forms of motherhood have been promoted and instituted in mainstream culture.

The maternal theory articulated over the last two decades—in large measure thanks to the writing and maternal activism of Andrea O’Reilly—has put forward an alternative vision of mothering whose governing principles and aims align squarely with progressive forms of feminism, which celebrate maternal subjectivity and empowerment regarding all four categories: experience, identity, policy, and agency. In her most recent book, O’Reilly puts forward the concept of matricentric feminism and its basic governing principles, and argues for its further development as an emergent form of multidisciplinary and multi-theoretical feminism. The principles informing matricentric feminism are rooted in O’Reilly’s theory of empowered mothering, which is “essential to maternal well-being” and “it allows mothers to effect real and lasting change in their lives, in the lives of their children, and in the larger society” (O’Reilly, 67-6). Matricentric feminism and empowered mothering are a response to patriarchal mothering and are achieved through the development of critical consciousness allowing those who mother to achieve greater degrees of autonomy, agency, and authenticity in their motherwork. In this sense, matricentric feminism and feminist maternal theory are at the forefront of a new feminist worldview—initially made possible by third-wave feminist perspectives. Not only is matricentric feminism matrifocal and committed to social justice, equity, and gender equality, it is also multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and increasingly intersectional. It is consistently and unflinchingly feminist in orientation, as it actively “contests, challenges and counters the patriarchal oppressive institution of motherhood and seeks to imagine and implement a maternal identity and practice that is empowering” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric* 7) to all those who choose that identity. And finally, since it engages systematically with a subject, motherhood, which is central to the lives of billions of women worldwide but shunned traditionally by feminist scholarship, matricentric feminism represents a radical form of feminist inquiry whose content and methodologies stand at the forefront of new developments in women’s and gender studies.

In this sense, dominant feminist theory and established women and gender studies programs have much to gain from the inclusion of motherhood studies. From its very inception, feminism has fought for the empowerment and equality of women; it has challenged the private-public divide by making visible the political, moral, and social relevance of all work traditionally coded as domestic and feminine—and, therefore, largely invisible, unpaid, and unvalued. Integrating maternal theory into the study of feminism would not only make visible the ways in which mothering is compatible with paid work and women's empowerment, but it would acknowledge feminist success in deconstructing the public-private binary. Teaching and learning maternal theory in the context of academic feminism would reposition maternal carework as valuable privately and publicly, and provide a better understanding of identity as embedded and relational, and consistent with feminist ethics. Women and others who choose to engage in maternal work can be seen as shaping their own lives, institutions, and society over time, which helps toward building a better, more socially just and equitable society. Given the continued centrality of motherhood in the lives of majority of women across the globe—as well as rapid developments in reproductive technologies facilitating a variety of parental configurations for both men and women of different sexes and gender orientations—women and gender studies programs must include the varied experiences of mothering across gender, class, race, and location as well as the growing body of scholarship speaking to the maternal experience.

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