feminist mothering

edited by Andrea O’Reilly
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FEMINIST MOTHERING
SUNY series in Feminist Criticism and Theory

Michelle A. Masse, editor
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A REVIEW of recent publications on motherhood in the mainstream media would suggest that the selfless and doting mother of yesteryear has, like the eighteen-hour bra, fallen out of fashion. These authors, particularly those who write in the self-help genre, call for a new style of mothering, one that advocates balance and admonishes guilt. Bria Simpson, for example, asserts in *The Balanced Mom: Raising Your Kids Without Losing Your Self* (2006): “We need to continue, rather than deny, the development of ourselves to be fulfilled” (2). She goes on to write: “As you try so fervently to help your children develop into their best selves, I encourage you to refocus some of that energy into living your best life” (3, emphasis in original). Likewise, Amy Tiemann, in her recent book *Mojo Mom: Nurturing Your Self While Raising a Family* (2006), claims that “all women need to continue to grow as individuals, not just as Moms” (xvi). Overcoming the guilt of motherhood is the focus of many recent books, as with the best-selling, appropriately titled *Mommy Guilt: Learn to Worry Less, Focus on What Matters Most, and Raise Happier Kids* (Bort, Pflock, Renner, 2005). Other writers challenge the excessive child-centeredness of contemporary parenting practices and call for a more “children should be seen and not heard” philosophy of childrearing. Christie Mellor in *The Three-Martini Playdate: A Practical Guide to Happy Parenting* (2004), for example, asserts:

You were here first. You are sharing your house with them, your food, your time, your books. Somewhere, in fairly recent memory, we have lost sight of that fact. Somehow a pint-sized velvet revolution was waged right under our very noses, and the grown-ups quietly handed over the reins. We have made concession after concession, until it appears that well-educated, otherwise intelligent adults have abdicated their rightful place in the world, and the littlest inmates have taken over the asylum. (12)
She goes on to say that “it is time to exert a little autonomy and encourage some in your child” (13). Other writers advocate shared parenting. In *How to Avoid the Mommy Trap: A Roadmap for Sharing Parenting and Making It Work* (2002), Julie Shields argues that “the best alternative to parenting by mother is parenting by father” (17, emphasis in original). She goes on to explain, “Since fathers can parent, too, we should not start from the assumption that mothers, and mothers alone, must choose whether to work, cut back, or hire a replacement caregiver. Instead, we can change our approach to seeking ways to provide babies the best start in life, at the same time, giving mothers and fathers the best opportunity for happiness, individually and together” (19).

Whether the emphasis is maternal autonomy or shared parenting, less guilt and more balance, these writers challenge traditional (or, in academic parlance, patriarchal) motherhood practices. Similar to Betty Friedan, who exposed “the problem that has no name” more than forty years ago, these writers insist that women must achieve and sustain a selfhood outside of and beyond motherhood. And similar to Adrienne Rich, who attributed mothers’ exhaustion and guilt to the isolation of patriarchal motherhood and its impossible standards of perfection, these writers likewise recognize that mothers require more support and less judgment if they are to obtain satisfaction in motherhood.

However, while these authors certainly challenge patriarchal motherhood, they do not use the word feminist in this critique, nor do they call their new mother-positive mode of mothering a feminist practice. Given this, can these new models of mothering be called feminist mothering? Does the mother have to identify as a feminist for her mothering to qualify as a feminist practice? Or, more pointedly, can we have a practice of feminist mothering without a politic of feminism? And who decides and determines this?

I open with these questions to underscore a central concern of this introduction; namely, the difficulty of defining a feminist practice and theory of mothering. Although a challenge to patriarchal motherhood has been a central concern of feminist scholarship since at least Rich’s classic book *Of Woman Born*, in 1976, there has been very little academic discourse on the subject of feminist mothering. As a result, there has been little sociology and no theory of feminist mothering in feminist scholarship. Likewise, while examples of empowered mothering are found in popular fiction, there is no theory of feminist mothering developed in this discourse. And, as noted above, the term feminist mothering is seldom used in popular writings on motherhood. The aim of this collection is to investigate various practices of feminist mothering across a wide range of maternal experience in order to
identify common themes, concerns, and issues of a feminist maternal practice. This, in turn, will enable us to develop a theory of feminist mothering.

Any discussion on feminist mothering must begin with the distinction Adrienne Rich made in *Of Woman Born* (1976) between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children”; and “the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13, emphasis in original). The term *motherhood* refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word *mothering* refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power.

It has long been recognized among scholars of motherhood that Rich’s distinction between mothering and motherhood was what enabled feminists to recognize that motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive, a view held by some Second Wave feminists. Rather, mothering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change if, to use Rich’s words, women became “outlaws from the institution of motherhood.” However, as *Of Woman Born* interrupted the patriarchal narrative of motherhood and cleared a space for the development of counternarratives of mothering, it did not generate a discourse on feminist mothering. While much has been published on patriarchal motherhood since Rich’s inaugural text—documenting why and how patriarchal motherhood is harmful, indeed unnatural, to mothers and children alike—little has been written on the possibility or potentiality of feminist mothering. “Still largely missing from the increasing dialogue and publication around motherhood,” as Fiona Joy Green writes, “is a discussion of Rich’s monumental contention that even when restrained by patriarchy, motherhood can be a site of empowerment and political activism” (31).

A review of motherhood literature reveals that only three books look specifically at the topic of feminist mothering: *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering* (1994), *Feminist Mothers* (1990), and *Daughters of Feminists* (1993), books now fourteen plus years old. More recently, the journals *Off our backs* (2006) and *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* (2006) include articles on feminist mothering in their issues on “Mothering
and Feminism." Likewise, two of my recent edited volumes Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering (2004a) and From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born (2004b) incorporate sections on feminist mothering. However, even as these recent publications provide much needed insight and understanding into feminist mothering, the topic remains insufficiently developed, particularly compared to the scholarship on patriarchal motherhood. This dearth of research on mothering is indeed perplexing and troubling. Feminist scholarship on motherhood is now an established field. So why is the topic of feminist mothering not explored in scholarship that is explicitly about both feminism and motherhood? Feminist mothering is also an evident example of empowered mothering and so provides a promising alternative to the oppressive institution of patriarchal motherhood, first theorized by Rich and critiqued by subsequent motherhood scholars. In other words, feminist mothering bridges motherhood and feminism, makes motherhood doable for feminism, and feminism possible for motherhood.

This volume will look specifically at the topic of feminist mothering. In so doing, it is the first scholarly collection on this subject matter. The volume will identify the salient themes of this maternal practice and seek to develop a theory of feminist mothering. However, since the chapters illustrate various characteristics and concerns of feminist mothering to fashion a theory of it, the volume will work from a very open-ended definition of what it means to practice feminist mothering. There are several reasons for this and they will be discussed in some detail below. For the purpose of this volume, I use the term feminist mothering to refer to an oppositional discourse of motherhood, one that is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood. A feminist practice/theory of mothering, therefore, functions as a counternarrative of motherhood: it seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women. Feminist mothering is thus determined more by what it is not (i.e., patriarchal motherhood) rather than by what it is. Feminist mothering may refer to any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women. Rich uses the word courageous to define a nonpatriarchal practice of mothering, while Baba Cooper calls such a practice radical mothering. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, more recently in The Mommy Myth, use the word rebellious to describe outlaw mothering. Hip is Ariel Gore’s term for transgressive mothering. For this volume, the term feminist is used—though with a proviso as explained below—to signify maternal practices that resist and refuse patriarchal motherhood to create a mode of mothering that
is empowering to women. Or, to use Rich’s terminology, a feminist maternal practice marks a movement from motherhood to mothering, and makes possible a mothering against motherhood.

**DEFINING FEMINIST MOTHERING**

In her book *Feminist Mothers*, the first and still only book-length study of the subject matter, Tuula Gordon in her concluding chapter “What Is a Feminist Mother?” observes, “[I]t seems impossible to conclude by explaining what a feminist mother is, or to answer the underlying question of how people conduct their lives according to alternative ideologies, in this case feminism” (148). However, Gordon does say that her study of feminist mothers reveals some “particular factors”; they are:

The way in which [mothers] challenge and criticise myths of motherhood; the way in which they consider it their right to work; the anti-sexist (and anti-racist) way in which they try to bring up their children; the way in which they expect the fathers of the children to participate in joint everyday lives; and the way in which many of them are politically active. (149)

Gordon goes on to conclude:

Feminism emphasizes that women are strong, that women have rights as women, and they can support each other as women. Thus ‘feminist mothers’ have been able to develop critical orientations towards societal structures and cultures, stereotypical expectations and myths of motherhood. They do that in the context of exploring how the personal is political, and with the support of the networks of women which place them beyond ‘collective isolation.’ (150)

Rose L. Glickman in her book *Daughters of Feminists* (1993) likewise emphasizes that feminist mothering must be understood as lived resistance to the normative—stereotypical—expectations of both motherhood and womanhood. She writes: “[For these feminist mothers] there is no ‘apart from their feminism’ and no matter how ordinary their lives seem from the outside to the casual observer, their feminism was a profound defiance of convention. . . . Flying in the face of tradition, feminist mothers expected their daughters to do the same” (22, emphasis added). “The mothers’ struggle,” Glickman
continues, “to shake off the dust of tradition was the basic dynamic of the daughters’ formative years” (21).

Whether it manifested itself in combining motherhood with paid employment, performing antisexist childrearing, insisting that partners be involved in childcare, engaging in activism, or creating a life outside of motherhood, these studies reveal that feminist mothering developed in response to the mother’s dissatisfaction with, and dislike of, traditional motherhood. Gordon alerts us, as Erika Horwitz notes, to the possibility that “the process of resistance entails making different choices about how one wants to practice mothering” (2003: 58, emphasis added). Commenting on Gordon’s study, Erika Horwitz emphasizes that “her findings suggest that mothers can hold beliefs that are not in agreement with those promoted by the dominant discourses on motherhood” (2004: 58). Fiona Joy Green, likewise, as discussed in her chapter in this volume, emphasizes that central to feminist mothering is a “critique of the mythical standards of motherhood and the social neglect of the real isolation many mothers experience” (163). Moreover, as Green, continues, “for these women, feminist mothering is an essential strategy for contributing to positive political social change” (166).

Gordon, Green, and Glickman look specifically at mothers who identify as feminists, while Horwitz is interested in “the experiences of women who believe they were resisting the dominant discourse of mothering . . . [but] who may or may not see themselves as feminist” (2004: 44, 45). This volume likewise considers various nonpatriarchal modes of mothering and does not limit their meaning or practice exclusively to mothers who identify as feminist. Nonetheless, there are crucial differences between feminist mothering and empowered mothering that need to be identified to better understand the various ways nonpatriarchal mothering functions as a counterdiscourse. To this discussion I now turn.

In her chapter, “Resistance as a Site of Empowerment,” Erika Horwitz argues that while resistant, empowered mothering is characterized by many themes, they all center on a challenge to patriarchal motherhood. These themes include: the importance of mothers meeting their own needs; being a mother does not fulfill all of women’s needs; involving others in their children’s upbringing; actively questioning the expectations that are placed on mothers by society; challenging mainstream parenting practices; not believing that mothers are solely responsible for how children turn out; and challenging the idea that the only emotion mothers ever feel toward their children is love. In an earlier collection Mother Outlaws (2004a), I explored how empowered mothering begins with the recognition that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of
agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy. This perspective, in emphasizing maternal authority and ascribing agency to mothers and value to motherwork, defines motherhood as a political site wherein mothers can affect social change through the socialization of children and the world at large through political-social activism. Empowered mothering thus calls into question the dictates of patriarchal motherhood. Empowered mothers do not regard childcare as the sole responsibility of the biological mother nor do they regard 24/7 mothering as necessary for children. They look to friends, family, and their partners to assist with childcare and often raise their children with an involved community of what may be termed co-mothers or othermothers. In most instances, these mothers combine mothering with paid employment or activism, and so the full-time intensive mothering demanded in patriarchal motherhood is not practiced by these mothers. In addition, many of these mothers call into question the belief that mothering requires excessive time, money, and energy, and thus they practice a mode of mothering that is more compatible with paid employment. Also, they see the development of a mother's selfhood as beneficial to mothering and not antithetical to it as assumed in patriarchal motherhood. Consequently, empowered mothers do not always put their children's needs before their own nor do they only look to motherhood to define and realize their identity. Rather, their selfhood is fulfilled and expressed in various ways: work, activism, friendships, relationships, hobbies, and motherhood. These mothers insist on their own authority as mothers and refuse the relinquishment of their power as mandated in the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Finally, as noted earlier, empowered mothers regard motherhood as a site of power wherein mothers can affect social change, both in the home through feminist childrearing and outside the home through maternal activism. Motherhood, in the dominant patriarchal ideology, is seen simply as a private, and, more specifically, an apolitical enterprise. In contrast, mothering for feminist mothers is understood to have cultural significance and political purpose. Building on the work of Sara Ruddick, these mothers redefine motherwork as a socially engaged enterprise that seeks to effect cultural change through new feminist modes of gender socialization and interactions with daughters and sons.

Feminist mothering differs from empowered mothering insofar as the mother identifies as a feminist and practices mothering from a feminist perspective or consciousness. A feminist mother, in other words, is a woman whose mothering, in theory and practice, is shaped and influenced by feminism. Thus, while there is much overlap between empowered and feminist mothering, the latter is informed by a particular philosophy and politic, namely, feminism. The women's demands that their husbands be more
involved or that they need time off from motherhood in the Horwitz study did not derive from a larger challenge to gender inequity. For example, one woman in the study remarked that “if I was going to love that baby, have any quality of time with that baby, I had to get away from that baby. I had to meet my own needs” (2004: 48); and another mother “chose to paint her nails while her baby cried in her crib because ‘she has needs and wants’” (2004: 47). These women resisted patriarchal motherhood, in one woman’s words, “to have a higher quality of life,” or in the words of another, “to make me a better mother for my children” (2004: 52). The reasons for their resistance are more personal than political and as a consequence are not developed from an awareness of how motherhood functions as a cultural/ideological institution to oppress women in patriarchal society. These mothers resist patriarchal motherhood simply to make the experience of mothering more rewarding for themselves and their children. Insofar as this aim challenges the patriarchal mandate of maternal selflessness, sacrifice, and martyrdom, these mothers are resistant in their insistence on more time for themselves and support from others. However, these demands do not originate from a feminist desire to dismantle a patriarchal institution. In contrast, feminist mothers resist because they recognize that gender inequity, in particular male privilege and power, is produced, maintained, and perpetuated (i.e., though sexist childrearing) in patriarchal motherhood. As feminists, feminist mothers reject an institution founded on gender inequity, and, as mothers, they refuse to raise children in such a sexist environment. Thus, while in practice the two seem similar—demanding more involvement from fathers, insisting on a life outside of motherhood—only with feminist mothering does this involve a larger awareness of, and challenge to, the gender (among other) inequities of patriarchal culture.

While this discussion helps to distinguish between empowered and feminist mothering, it begs the larger question of how to define feminism itself. Feminism, as scholars of women’s studies are well aware, is composed of many perspectives and positions: socialist, liberal, radical, womanist, third wave, to name but a few. For the purpose of this collection, I rely on a very open-ended definition of feminism: the recognition that most (all?) cultures are patriarchal and that such cultures give prominence, power, and privilege to men and the masculine and depend on the oppression, if not disparagement, of women and the feminine. Feminists are committed to challenging and transforming this gender inequity in all of its manifestations: cultural, economic, political, philosophical, social, ideological, sexual, and so forth. Also, most feminisms (including my own) seek to dismantle other hierarchical binary systems such as race (racism), sexuality (heterosexism), economics (classism), and ability (ableism). A feminist mother, therefore, in the context
of this definition of feminism, challenges male privilege and power in her own life and that of her children. In her own life, this would mean the mother insisting on gender equality in the home and a life and identity outside of motherhood. It would also mean that the important work of mothering would be culturally valued and supported and that mothers, likewise, would perform this motherwork from a place of agency and authority. In the context of children, feminist mothering means dismantling traditional gender socialization practices that privilege boys as preferable and superior to girls and in which boys are socialized to be masculine and girls feminine. Feminist mothering thus seeks to transform both the patriarchal role of motherhood and that of childrearing.

However, the word feminism remains troubled. In her book on feminist daughters Glickman wrote: “I ruled out daughters whose mothers’ lives can surely be described as feminist, but who reject the label. Once, in my search for Latina daughters, I spoke with the head of a Latino women’s health collective. She said she couldn’t help me because ‘although we have the consciousness, in our culture we don’t use the word’. The consciousness without the word is not what I’m looking for” (xv–xvi). However, in insisting on the word feminist, you will inevitably, as the previous incident demonstrates, exclude the mothering experiences of women of color. The term feminism, as African American scholars Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks among others have argued, is understood to be a white term for many black women. As one daughter, a woman of color, in Glickman’s study commented: “[Feminism] has overwhelmingly, statistically, benefited white women disproportionately to women of colour” (168). And another daughter remarked: “Here you are reading all these feminist writers who are telling you to bust out of the kitchen and get into the work force. What does that have to do with the majority of women of colour who have always been in the kitchen and the work force at the same time?” (169, emphasis in original). Indeed, as the mothers of color in Gordon’s study emphasized, “black women are critical of feminism dominated by white women for ideological, political and strategic reasons” (140). The question thus remains: how do you develop a specific study of feminist mothering without excluding the many women—women of color and working-class women—who eschew or disavow the word feminism?

In this collection, I include chapters on mothers who may not call themselves feminist but who do, nonetheless, challenge patriarchal motherhood in their practice of empowered mothering. The aim of this volume is to examine feminist mothering across a wide range of perspectives, themes, and disciplines; to do so we need to begin with an inclusive definition of it. Only then are we able to develop a comprehensive theory of feminist mothering.
Feminist mothering functions as a counterpractice that seeks to challenge and change the many ways that patriarchal motherhood is oppressive to women. Numerous feminist scholars have detailed the various ways that patriarchal motherhood constrains, regulates, and dominates women and their mothering. In an earlier volume, *Mother Outlaws* (2004a), I organized these themes under eight interrelated ‘rules’ of ‘good’ motherhood as dictated by contemporary patriarchal ideology. They are: (1) children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; (2) this mothering must be provided 24/7; (3) the mother must always put children’s needs before her own; (4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; (5) the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; (6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children; (7) the mother has full responsibility, but no power from which to mother; (8) motherwork, and childcare more specifically, are regarded as personal, private undertakings with no political import. The patriarchal ideology of motherhood makes mothering deeply oppressive to women because it requires the repression or denial of the mother’s own selfhood; it also assigns mothers all the responsibility for mothering, but gives them no real power from which to mother. Such “powerless responsibility,” to use Rich’s term, denies a mother the authority and agency to determine her own experiences of mothering. Moreover, in defining mothering as private and nonpolitical work, patriarchal motherhood restricts the way mothers can and do effect social change through feminist childcare and maternal activism.

The dominant ideology also reserves the definition of good motherhood to a select group of women. I open my women’s studies course on “Mothering—Motherhood” asking students to define a ‘good’ mother in contemporary culture: what does a good mother look like; who is she? Students commented that good mothers, as portrayed in the media or popular culture more generally, are white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, married, thirty-something, in a nuclear family with usually one to two children, and ideally are full-time mothers. Words such as altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful were frequently mentioned to describe the personality of this ideal patriarchal mother. Mothers who, by choice or circumstance, do not fulfill the profile of the good mother—they are too young or old, or are poor or lesbian—are deemed ‘bad’ mothers. Likewise, women who do not follow the script of good mothering—they work outside the home or engage in maternal activism—are seen as ‘fallen’ mothers in need of societal regulation and correction.