

# Introduction

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 politics, 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., through 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.

## TOWARD A 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 childrearing 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 childrearing 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.

Feminist mothering refuses this patriarchal profile and script of 'good' mothers and 'good' mothering. And, in so doing, it challenges and changes the various ways patriarchal motherhood becomes oppressive to women, as noted previously in the eight themes. Thus, while feminist mothering functions as an oppositional discourse and thus defies definition, it is characterized by several themes that coalesce to form a specific theory of feminist mothering. A theory of feminist mothering begins with the recognition that mothers *and children* benefit when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering, from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy. Thus, a feminist standpoint on mothering affords a woman a life, a purpose and identity outside and beyond motherhood; it also does not limit childrearing to the biological mother. Likewise, from this standpoint, a woman's race, age, sexuality, or marital status do not determine her capacity to mother. A feminist theory on motherhood also foregrounds maternal power and confers value to mothering. Mothering, thus from a feminist perspective and practice, redefines motherwork as a social and political act. In contrast to patriarchal motherhood that limits mothering to privatized care undertaken in the domestic sphere, feminist mothering regards itself as explicitly and profoundly political and social.

The various features of feminist mothering noted here may be organized by way of four interrelated themes that I have termed: *motherhood*, *family*, *childrearing*, and *activism*. Central to each theme is a redefinition of motherhood from a feminist-maternal perspective. 'Good' mothers in patriarchal motherhood, for example, are defined as white, middle-class, married, stay-at-home moms; 'good' mothers from the feminist perspective are drawn from all maternal identities and include lesbian, poor, single, older, and 'working' mothers. Likewise, while patriarchal motherhood limits family to a patriarchal nuclear structure wherein the parents are married and are the biological parents of the children and the mother is the nurturer and the father is the provider, the formation of feminist families are many and varied to embrace single, blended, step, matrifocal, same-sex, and so forth. And as patriarchal motherhood characterizes childrearing as a private, nonpolitical undertaking, feminist mothers foreground the political-social dimension of motherwork. More specifically, they challenge traditional practices of gender socialization and perform antisexist childrearing practices so as to raise empowered daughters and empathetic sons. Finally, for many feminist mothers, their commitment to both feminism and to children becomes expressed as maternal activism. Mothers, by way of maternal activism, use their position as mothers to lobby for social and political change. Whether it is in the home or in the world at large, expressed as antisexist childrearing and maternal activism,

motherwork, for feminist mothers, is redefined as a social and political act through which social change is made possible.

The chapters in this collection are organized by way of these four themes. Part one looks at how feminist mothering challenges patriarchal motherhood by redefining the identity and role of mothers. Older, feminist, and working mothers are examined in this opening part. Family is the theme of part two. Here, the focus is on how feminist mothers transform the meaning of family to include lesbian and dual-earner households and matrifocal, communal, and extended families. Part three looks at feminist childrearing, and the final part considers maternal activism. Evidently, there is much overlap between the parts: lesbian motherhood results in the redefinition of both family and the mother role. Likewise, being a feminist mother means a new mother role and gives rise to antisexist childrearing. However, to allow for clarity and to highlight the different elements of feminist mothering, this volume has been organized into these four parts.

## MOTHERHOOD

Michele Y. Pridmore-Brown, in the opening chapter “Professional Women, Timing, and Reproductive Strategies,” explores how older motherhood challenges notions of passive self-sacrifice and thus of traditional gender roles in several ways. As writer and older mother Mona Simpson has put it, for the older woman, the choice to mother involves an extension of the self rather than its contraction. Increasingly, older women have children to realize themselves in an existential sense after having achieved professional goals. They create a child and subsequently mother that child from a position of privilege: one of power rather than of dependency—as embodied strategic actors who have actively chosen motherhood (often via technology and often via the purchase of gametes) rather than simply “letting nature takes its course.” The chapter explores how being an older mother affects strategies of mothering; it also examines how older motherhood affects the emotional bond between mother and child. To this end, the chapter examines how a group of older/single women define the politics of their mothering strategies; how they negotiate the divide between their expectations and the realities of an actual child; and how, as women who have themselves overturned traditional roles, not to mention the traditional life-course, they address their child’s future as a gendered individual in a still sexist society.

The following chapter “No, I’m Not Catholic, and Yes, They’re All Mine” by Kecia Driver McBride examines the author’s experience of being a

feminist mother of four children, about to come up for tenure at a state university. Her central argument is that the real challenge of feminist mothering should not be about choosing toys and books that are nongender specific or talking to sons about the problematic representation of women on MTV, but about modeling a mothering style that is fully engaged and confident, both “at work” and “at home.” We must, the author argues, reach beyond our own children. It is not enough to develop complicated personal solutions to problems like quality childcare, or to experience individually the rush and the fear when the boundaries between personal and professional work are blurred. Feminist mothering requires that we build stronger networks between ourselves as parents, in order to reeducate the communities in which we live, work, and raise our children.

Shelley Martin, in the chapter that concludes this part, “Feminism, Motherhood, and Possibilities in the Writing of Bronwen Wallace,” argues that, for Wallace, writing about motherhood is a political statement because not only was she doing it while raising a son as a single mother, she was using it to convey the complex realities of women’s maternal experiences—the conflicts and stresses as well as the pleasures. The honesty of her account, Martin argues, is a refusal of the idealized maternal portraits found in much traditional literature. The chapter explores the intersections of Wallace’s expressed political beliefs, her writing, and her life, as they are represented in her writing. Wallace’s goal in telling these stories, Martin emphasizes, is to effect political change by revising the social and cultural attitudes that devalue both the stories and the women who live them. In this, Wallace’s writing gives rise to a redefinition of the maternal role.

## FAMILY

In the opening chapter of this part, “Planned Parenthood: The Construction of Motherhood in Lesbian Mother Advice Books,” Kristin G. Esterberg examines how lesbian advice books, published between 1981 and 2001, both challenge and conform to existing ideals for childcare. Unlike traditional advice books, lesbian mother advice books provide a critique of heterosexist models of parenting, encouraging an egalitarian model. Yet by focusing on issues of choice, this advice literature encourages women to see their mothering in terms of consumer choice. This model is only partly liberating, Esterberg argues. While lesbian mothers may offer a more egalitarian alternative, they may not consider how class and race inflect choices about parenting. Nor do they challenge a privatized and commercialized model of parenthood in

which individual women (and occasionally men) are seen as responsible for children's care. In this regard, lesbian mothers are little different from other mothers. Because lesbians are seen as making an *individual* choice, they do not challenge the privatized arrangements by which parents are expected to care for 'their' children. At the same time, lesbian mothers are encouraged to detach maternity from biology and thus have the potential to challenge essentialist beliefs about the nature of the mother-child relationship.

Aimee E. Berger, in "The Voice of the Maternal in Louise Erdrich's Fiction and Memoirs," argues that the centrality of mother figures in works by Native American author Louise Erdrich has been noted in all her writing. However, Berger argues that *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* (1995) is a watershed text that signals and perhaps even brings about a significant shift in Erdrich's fictional portrayal of maternal subjectivity and representations of mothers in her later novels. Through writing this memoir, Berger writes, Erdrich not only claims her own maternal subjectivity, but also comes to terms with a central paradox of mothering, power/powerlessness, which structured representations of maternal experience in her earlier texts and led to generally ambivalent portrayals. Addressing this paradox frees Erdrich's later writing from the discomforts of ambivalence and allows maternal experience to emerge as a central focus. Central to this mother-centered writing and explored in this chapter is Erdrich's emphasis on Ojibwe language and storytelling. Her stories become vessels for holding and transmitting cultural values. In this way, *Erdrich can be seen to mother the culture itself*. After *The Blue Jay's Dance*, Berger concludes, Erdrich's writing becomes, in multiple and distinct ways, an act of feminist mothering.

Shirley A. Hill's chapter, "African American Mothers: Victimized, Vili-fied, and Valorized," examines how African American scholars have broadened and enriched feminist debate on motherhood by showing how it is shaped by both race and class. The chapter begins with an overview of the historic construction of motherhood and family and how it differed for African American and white women. In agricultural America, black and white women were expected to produce as many children as possible; neither had much control over their sexuality or reproductive activities, but enslaved black women were especially victimized because they gave birth to 'property' owned by white slaveholders. With modernization, images of mothers diverged sharply, Hill argues, with white women seen as angelic, self-sacrificing mothers and black women vilified as reckless breeders and welfare mothers. The civil rights era, however, ushered in a spate of revisionist research that rejected narrow, ethnocentric, and class-biased notions of families that,

Hill emphasizes, revalued the survival of black families in a harshly racist environment. It redefined African American families as functional units, but also valorized motherhood. The chapter analyzes the consequences of this image in the context of postindustrialized America, and looks at new possibilities of supporting today's mothers and their families.

In the final chapter, "Mothering as Relational Consciousness," Amber E. Kinser explores some of the irresolvable "messiness" of feminist living and advances an understanding of mothering as relational consciousness. In an effort to pay more pointed attention to what mothering is like from the mother's point of view, she examines some of the ways that its work is informed and complicated by the blurred boundaries delineating one's multiple selves and relationships. Drawing from her own childrearing experiences, she first examines how her mothering practices "rub against" her relationship with her own mother, as well as her relationships with her partners. Second, she examines the erotic dimensions of motherhood by confirming its location on a sexuality continuum. She discusses the necessity and messy complexities of a maternal erotic and evokes the intense and sometimes "grim" connection between mothers and their children. Kinser argues that a view of mothering as relational consciousness requires a recognition of the emergent tensions not as oppositional and in need of resolution, but as interdependent parts of a larger whole and mutually necessary.

## CHILDREARING

This part opens with Colleen Mack-Canty and Sue Marie Wright's chapter "Feminist Family Values: Parenting in Third Wave Feminism and Empowering All Family Members." The chapter explores how Second Wave feminism enabled people to become more aware of, and to act on, gender-constructed inequality. Today, as a result, some parents, including some men, work especially hard to ensure gender equality within their families, for both parents and children. In the meantime, feminism generally has become increasingly concerned with the intersectionality of various "isms," such as racism, classism, heterosexism with sexism, and works against the notion of hierarchy itself. Many feminists view this broadened emphasis in feminism as a Third Wave of feminism. This chapter explores the effects of these changes through the perspectives of feminist parents and their children. These families all challenge some hierarchal systems, such as sexism, racism, heterosexism, unnecessary adult authority, and universal family form. The parents, in their

study, consciously practice nonsexist parenting. They also parent in ways that seem to enable their children to become conscious of and to challenge oppression generally. They suggest that these practices are empowering to all members of these families and coincide with Third Wave feminism.

The following chapter, “Feminist Motherline: Embodied Knowledge/s of Feminist Mothering” by Fiona Joy Green, attempts to enrich and enhance our understanding of feminism and feminist mothering by investigating the ways in which feminism is central to the personal identity and mothering strategies of ten self-identified feminist mothers living in Winnipeg, Canada, in 2005. Drawing on a decade-long study into the realities of conscious feminist parenting, she reveals some of the challenges these women face, aspects of their feminist mothering they view as successful, and elements of their mothering they may have done differently. Green concludes with a call for more research into feminist mothering that attends to a feminist motherline that carries the many embodied experience/s and knowledge/s of feminist mothering. Such a feminist motherline may be useful in assisting mothers in re/claiming their feminist mothering authority and providing a foundation for their ongoing political activism as feminist mothers.

“(Un)usual Suspects: Mothers, Masculinities, Monstrosities,” the next chapter by Sarah Trimble, employs a spatialized theoretical framework to explore possibilities for transformative encounters between feminist mothering practices and masculinities. Invoking Adrienne Rich’s notion of the mother outlaw, Trimble suggests that feminist mothers raise their sons on the frontiers of patriarchal cultures—and that the overlapping marginalities of mother and son have the potential to productively destabilize the son’s masculinity via his alliance with his mother and her community. Through a reading of John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, the chapter argues that Garp is able to (re)imagine himself as an outlaw from hegemonic masculinity only when he abandons his illusions of self-sufficiency and begins to participate in the healing practices associated with his mother’s maternal activism. Trimble’s chapter infuses contemporary theorizations of feminist mothering with concepts articulated by Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari to draw out the implications of the outlaw, the spaces she or he moves through, and the disruptive becomings in which the outlaw engages.

In my chapter that concludes the part, “‘That Is What Feminism Is—The Acting and Living And Not Just the Told’: Modeling and Mentoring Feminism,” I argue that feminist mothering must first and primarily be concerned with the empowerment of mothers. In contrast, much of current literature on feminist mothering involves antisexist childrearing, or, more

specifically, raising empowered daughters and relational sons with little attention paid to the mother herself or the conditions under which she mothers. A challenge to traditional gender socialization is, of course, integral to any theory and practice of feminist mothering. However, I argue that the empowerment of mothers must be the primary aim of feminist mothering if it is to function as a truly transformative theory and practice. To fully and completely liberate children from traditional childrearing, mothers must first seek to liberate themselves from traditional motherhood; they must, to use Rich's terminology, mother against motherhood. By way of a conversation with my two daughters—Erin (eighteen) and Casey (sixteen)—this chapter will explore the interface between the empowerment of mothers and antisexist childrearing and the argument that the latter depends on the former. More specifically, I will argue that, for mothers to mentor feminism for their daughters, they must model it in themselves.

## ACTIVISM

The opening chapter of the final part, Judith Stadtman Tucker's "Rocking the Boat: Feminism and the Ideological Grounding of the Twenty-First Century Mothers' Movement," considers what has been termed the "motherhood problem"—the combination of cultural factors, social trends, and policy shortfalls that make mothers and other caregivers disproportionately vulnerable to financial insecurity and the daily work of mothering harder than it has to be. The chapter examines how the growing cultural awareness of this problem presents an important opportunity for organizations and grassroots activists intent on mobilizing mothers for social change. However, there is no clear consensus among leaders of the emerging mothers' movement about the best way to describe mothers' contributions to society or how to define and defend their rights. According to Stadtman Tucker, there is a shared conviction among movement activists that the present generation of mothers is indifferent or antagonistic to traditional feminist analyses of gender, power, and systems of oppression. In public statements, mothers' advocates blend and weave compatible and incompatible political theories and ideological frameworks to validate their agenda for change, with liberal feminism, maternalism, and feminist care theory among the predominant influences. The results of this exercise are often inconsistent and unpersuasive, and this strategy, she argues, may ultimately impede the movements' growth and visibility. The chapter discusses some of the underlying challenges to articulating a

coherent politics of motherhood in today's cultural context and suggests that the future success of the mothers' movement will depend on leaders' ability to develop and communicate an effective change narrative.

In the following chapter, "Women Staging Coups through Mothering: Depictions in Hispanic Contemporary Literature," Gisela Norat argues that in the Hispanic world we find a variety of ways in which women stage coups (in the sense of brave and unexpected or uncommon acts that effect changes) against patriarchal systems that oppress them. While most female rebellions go unnoticed and undocumented because they lack political impact, the ones orchestrated by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in then-dictatorial Argentina of the 1970s and 1980s, Norat argues, made news around the world, politicized the institution of motherhood, and challenged a repressive military regime. Their story sets the parameters for Norat's analysis of other manifestations of feminist mothering recorded in contemporary Latina and Latin American literature. The chapter looks at several mother-centered "coup" narratives by Hispanic women, including the Chilean Isabel Allende who writes as a mother grieving her dying daughter, and Mexican American Cherri Moraga who writes as a lesbian mother; it also examines various daughter-centered fiction by Latina writers who, as daughters, turn the tables on tradition by socializing their mothers in feminist ways.

Janice Nathanson, in "Maternal Activism: How Feminist Is It?" argues that a growing number of feminists and activists are seeing motherhood as a starting point for social change as women increasingly join forces, as mothers, to address the issues that affect their families most: health, education, crime, housing, safety, drunk driving, and drugs, to name a few. While maternal activism is not new, it now has a feminist focus. Paradoxically, feminism is rarely its motivation. This chapter explores whether maternal activism, in fact, promotes a feminist agenda and argues that it does so on three counts. It exemplifies the very core of feminist ideology—that the personal is political. It helps negate essentialist notions of motherhood by transforming views of it from a private experience to a catalyst for visible and widespread change. And it enables women (often unintentionally) to upset gender roles and power relations simply by virtue of their activism. Not surprisingly, feminists fall on both sides of the debate. Some decry maternal activism as an essentializing force that returns women to the destiny of anatomy. Others believe it reframes motherhood in terms of its power and breadth. Wherever one falls on the continuum, this chapter aims to stimulate dialogue and advance thinking around a growing phenomenon.

In "Balancing Act: Discourses of Feminism, Motherhood, and Activism," the final chapter, Pegeen Reichert Powell looks at how, in the popular media,

the dominant metaphor employed to describe the experience of working mothers is “balance.” Balancing work and family is the elusive goal of motherhood that dominates advice columns, news reports about businesses’ attempts to help women achieve it, and scathing articles about the negative effects on children when we fail to do so. Balance, however, Powell argues, is a static condition; one has achieved balance when one is not being pulled, or pushing oneself, in one direction over another. Indeed, one of the markers of balance, women are told, is enough time for rest. In this chapter, the author develops a sociolinguistic analysis of the discourse of “balance” in popular media and then juxtaposes this to a study of an activist organization that works toward improved climate and policies (such as paid leave, flextime, etc.) for employees at a prominent university in the United States. The chapter concludes that feminist mothering should question and challenge the notion of *balance* and instead forward a more dynamic understanding of motherhood, an understanding focused on activist *movement*. But, as the study demonstrates, the discourse of balance and attempts at activism are not always mutually exclusive, and together they construct a complicated backdrop against which feminist mothers work.

## CONCLUSION

I opened this introduction with the speculation that the dearth of popular literature and academic discourse on feminist mothering may be attributable to our inability to define what we mean or more specifically, what we want or expect to achieve from and in feminist mothering. The following chapters, while they do not lead to a definition of feminist mothering, do provide us with the stories and theories necessary to realize what Adrienne Rich defined as the potentiality of mothering and thus allow for a theory of feminist mothering. In each of its four themes, *motherhood*, *family*, *childrearing*, and *activism*, the practice of feminist mothering may be envisioned metaphorically as a cartwheel or somersault, insofar as its aim is to invert and subvert patriarchal motherhood: to turn patriarchal motherhood on its head. As patriarchal motherhood confines mothers to the home and limits childrearing to private care, feminist mothering positions mothers in the public realm by way of activism and views childrearing as a social-political act. Moreover, as patriarchal motherhood reduces a woman’s purpose and identity to her maternal function, feminist mothering accords a woman a selfhood outside and beyond motherhood; it also expands childrearing beyond the care of the biological mother. Finally, as the dominant ideology of motherhood limits ‘good’

mothering to a patriarchal nuclear family, feminist mothering champions various and diverse family formations.

These themes of feminist mothering are found in the chapters that follow. However, not every feminist mother practices each theme of feminist mothering. The overall aim of feminist mothering is the redefinition of patriarchal motherhood to make mothering less oppressive and more empowering for mothers. Or, more specifically, feminist mothers seek to fashion a mode of mothering that affords and affirms maternal agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity and confers and confirms power to and for mothers. However, such mothering, it must be emphasized, is practiced in a culture wherein patriarchal motherhood is the norm. In other words, feminist mothering, as it seeks to challenge patriarchal motherhood, remains defined by it. Consequently, while themes of feminist mothering, in theory, may be fully and clearly catalogued, feminist mothering, in practice, is far more contested and elusive, achieved and expressed in negotiation with the institution of patriarchal motherhood that it resists. Many of the chapters in the collection examine this theme of negotiation.

Feminist mothering, as it creates new nonpatriarchal families, challenges traditional gender socialization, critiques gender (and other) equities at home and in the world at large, champions motherwork, and calls for the empowerment of women through maternal activism and an identity outside of motherhood that enables, nay empowers, women to both live apart from and in resistance to patriarchy. Feminist mothering thus functions as both a sanctuary (however tenuous and fragile) from patriarchy *and* a stronghold against it. Or, put another way, feminist mothering both shelters us from patriarchy and makes possible our resistance to it. In this, feminist mothering does more than redefine patriarchal motherhood; it undermines and transforms the larger patriarchal culture in which we live. This is a cause for hope, and a place to begin.

#### NOTES

1. Several books have examined the relationship between feminism and motherhood, but very little has been published on feminist mothering. For two important works on feminism and motherhood, see Laura Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacy of the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) and Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers, *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analysis and Personal Narratives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).