Why the Maternal Now?

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> Some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up, over and over. (Adrienne Rich 1986, p.xviii).

Inequality

In 2003, the British political activist Lindsey German argued that 'women are more visible than they have ever been in history. They perform much of the paid labour of the world and the majority of the unpaid labour [...] But women's public profile has not led to equality or an end to oppression' (2003). Until very recently, mainstream social commentary would have dismissed this kind of strident statement about the persistence of sexual inequality in one of the richest nations in the world as a throwback to the 1970s. However, in 2008, in the face of overwhelming evidence that many of the political and social gains achieved by British women in the last three decades are being rapidly eroded, German's statement reads like a Government press release. In the US, journalist Katha Pollitt suggests that the current backlash against women's rights centres on the maternal body. A point she illustrates with reference to State legislation around abortion and the extension of pro-life politics to contraception:

> Oklahoma has just passed a law requiring not only that women seeking abortions be forced to view sonograms of their fetuses but that the picture be taken in the way most likely to reveal the clearest picture--often up their vaginas. [...] And mark June 7 on your calendar—it's Protest the Pill day, brought to you by the American Life League and other antichoice groups, which claim [...] that "the Pill kills babies" by preventing implantation of fertilized eggs. (2008)

Debates about reproductive rights have never been as polarized in Britain as in the US, yet it seems likely that here too that women's reproductive rights will be eroded under the next Conservative government (see Cochrane 2008). If we cast the net wider, it is apparent that the current noisy political and public debate which circulates around the maternal body is fraught and contradictory: For example, young working class mothers are still routinely demonised in political discourse and are stable television comic fodder, older mothers are censured and reviled for perverting 'nature', working mothers are routinely castigated for failing their children, mothers who don't work outside the home are rebuked for failing themselves, their families and economy. Meanwhile, the spectre of infertility has taken root within the

imaginary life of white middle-class girls and women and the 25% of women who now chose not to have children are pitied and feared. The visual backdrop to these terrorising maternal figurations is an unending parade of images of beautiful, young, white, tight pregnant and post-partum celebrity bodies. Indeed, the sexual objectification of the maternal body, a subject matter deeply taboo as recently as the 1990s, is now routine to the point of banality. In short, the maternal has never been so very public, so hyper-visible, but the wall of commentary which surrounds the maternal and the images which represent it, are deeply incoherent.

Women's relationship to the maternal, in particular their 'troubling talent for making other bodies' (Haraway 1991, p.253) has always been at the heart of sexual inequality. By inequality I mean the discrimination and accompanying material disadvantages which routinely shape women's everyday experiences; inequalities which often impact most acutely on pregnant women, mothers and carers. For example, a recent British Government Report, 'Fairness and Freedom: The Final Report of the Equalities Review' states, 'Our new research reveals clearly that there is one factor that above all leads to women's inequality in the labour market – becoming mothers' (2007, p.66). Despite a raft of equal opportunities legislation since the 1970s, 7% of all pregnant women in Britain lose their jobs each year as a consequence of becoming pregnant and woman with children under 11 are the most discriminated group in the British workforce (ibid.). Whilst a rhetoric of equality, opportunity, choice and flexibility predominates, the 'Fairness and Freedom' report reveals that maternal inequalities impact on all women of child-bearing age, because your likelihood of being employed at all is index-linked to your perceived capacity to give birth. As British journalist Kira Cochrane writes:

> Citing a survey of 122 recruitment agencies, the Equalities Review, found that more than 70% had been asked by clients to avoid hiring pregnant women or those of childbearing age. [Whilst] a survey by the Manchester-based Employment Law Advisory Services - carried out after the company recognised a marked increase in discrimination cases involving pregnancy – found that 68% of employers they questioned said they would like more rights to ask candidates about their plans for a family. (2008)

Whilst prospective employers want to know more about women's reproductive plans, professional women report that they feel compelled to actively conceal traces of their maternal lives in the workplace. They have what turns out to be a well-placed fear that any 'maternal leakage' will detrimentally impact on their career prospects. Ironically, the same women are still often expected to take on low status `maternal roles` within the institutions

and organisations in which they labour (see Gatrell 2005). Indeed, whilst having a mother and being the mother of another are the primary maternal relations, it is imperative that we broaden out the concept of the maternal to acknowledge the full range of maternal roles and identities that women take up, willingly or not, in a myriad of social interactions.

Discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, inadequate childcare provision and the erosion of reproductive rights are all pressing reasons why we need to (re)think the maternal now. However, governmental agendas are not driven by a desire for equal rights *per se*, but rather by market demand for a skilled and 'flexible' workforce. Hence, in Government publications inequality is increasingly formulated in terms of economic cost. 'The Freedom and Fairness report', for example, attempts to persuade employers to stop discriminating against women through appeals to the bottom line: 'removing barriers to women' it argues, could be 'worth between £15 billion and £23 billion: equivalent to 1.3 to 2.0 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)' (2007, p.20). In other words, the Government wants a 'better return' on decades of investment in the education and training of girls. Whilst this doesn't detract from the fact that the eradication of maternal inequalities is a worthy feminist political goal, it is worth noting that it is the political and economic imperatives of neo-liberalism that are setting the 'equality agenda'. Is the neo-liberal agenda that Lauren Berlant has eloquently described as 'the capitalist destruction of life in the project of making value' (2007, p.282) compatible with a feminist politics? This isn't to say that we should abandon our political attachments and retreat into cynicism, but rather that we need to approach maternal inequalities much more symptomatically, for only the realignment of our most fundamental social relationships will effect social change.

Relationality

At this juncture I want to introduce an old hypothesis, one most eloquently formulated by Luce Irigaray in the early 1970s: A sexual politics which can challenge the status quo and transform the psycho-social contract needs to discover, acknowledge, theorise and reinvent maternal subjectivity. Maternal subjectivity in this account is not a natural or biological relation, but is the primary psychological and social relation, a visceral relation that operates as the template for the very boundaries of the self/other and all that follows. For decades now feminist researchers and writers have been producing and collating accounts of the maternal: alongside a growing body of feminist philosophical and theoretical writing, feminist science

studies has critiqued biological, technological and more recently genetic accounts of 'life', whilst the creative exploration of the maternal in mediums such as fine art, film and literature has enabled new insights into maternal experience and a significant body of ethnographic and longitudal sociological data has been collated about contemporary motherhood. Drawing this work together might enable what Irigaray termed 'maternal genealogies': centres, hubs, and networks dedicated to maternal re-valuation and maternal knowledge. There have been few attempts to consolidate interdisciplinary research on the maternal and the Canadian based *Association for Research on Mothering* (ARM), founded in 1998, is the only international feminist organization dedicated to interdisciplinary maternal scholarship.

Theoretical and creative work on the maternal is central to the future of radical feminist politics: it is a site of knowledge which can really challenge predominant understandings of what a subject is and can be. For example, `maternal labour` has the potential to disrupt classic economic, political and sociological understandings of work, capital, reproduction and exchange. Indeed thinking with, and from, the maternal generates alternatives to neoliberal discourses of reflexive individualism which have stultified political resistance to global capitalism. The political and ethical potentiality of maternal subjectivity and relationality has been one of the central focuses of the MaMSie network from which this new journal *Studies in the Maternal* has emerged and my hope is that it will remain central to the maternal collations to come.

Coming Out

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution,* Adrienne Rich communicates many of the shames and secrets which (still) characterise maternal experience. In the following extract Rich offers her readers a window into the schizophrenic ambivalence which exemplifies the daily practice of mothering three young children.

> My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have had any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alteration between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness` (1986, p.21).

Whilst Rich speaks from a specific context of being a white middle-class American housewife and mother in the 1960s, *Of Woman Born* retains an incredible power and resonance because she narrates her account as a `coming out` story. The rhetorical practice of 'coming out' has long been central to the creation of counter-political communities and

remains a central strategy for those who desire to interrupt public debate and create alternative 'affective social networks' (Pollock 1999, p.25). Experiential accounts of maternal subjectivity are particularly poignant and important, not only because of the historical marginalisation of maternal experience, but because they 'embody in miniature [...] the body politics at the heart' of debates about gender inequality in the workplace, 'reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, abortion rights, welfare reform, and custody law' (Pollock 1999, p.1). Lisa Baraitser (2008) brilliantly theorises the role of experiential accounts of the maternal in terms of an 'ethics of interruption'. The challenge is to mobilise these 'interruptions' in ways that will transform the very terms of the debate. In other words, women need to communicate what they already know in ways that will make a difference. The weight of maternal knowledge and the emergence of 'maternal publics' might just reshape the psycho-social contract.

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