

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

Reflecting on 10 years of Maternal Studies

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In this short piece, I reflect on a decade of maternal studies and consider where maternal studies are urgently needed in the next decade. Drawing on my entry into and experiences of maternal studies, I consider three areas of importance: the maternal and the psychosocial, the maternal and popular culture, and the maternal and social inequalities. Following reflections on how these areas have strengthened various lines of inquiry in my work, and expanded academic explorations more generally, I end by considering where now for maternal studies.

I am not a mother. But I do have a mother. Like many, I have an intense relationship with my mother. I tend to mother my mother. I am not a mother. But for as long as I can remember I have been called 'maternal'. I suppose I have willingly occupied such a position as I have looked after children (and others) that are not biologically my own. I am drawn to doing this in ways that I sometimes cannot make sense of. I am not a mother. But I do spend a lot of time engaging with maternal cultures, whether through television, film, social media or the many ways that the maternal occupies the cultural realm. I am not a mother. But I have paid acute attention to the devastating shifts and changes that have happened over the past ten years in the UK and elsewhere that have greatly impacted on the social, cultural, economic and political lives of maternal subjects.

When I was asked to contribute to this anniversary, the thoughts and feelings I had about writing the piece could not disconnect the personal, the cultural, the political and the structural. I realised that my experience of and approach to maternal studies has always been this way. In 2009, I was at Goldsmiths, University of London doing a masters, and it was here through the course and the friends I made that I began reading what would now be termed maternal scholarship. Texts by Imogen Tyler, Tracey Jensen, Lisa Baraitser, Tracey Reynolds and all the other sharp scholars in the inaugural issue of *Studies in the Maternal* started to intrigue me. As time went on, I became interested in how birth was being represented in the cultural sphere. I was drawn to the Channel 4 television programme *One Born Every Minute*,¹ as a unique (at the time) representation of birth. This was a show I watched with my mother. It was this intrigue and these experiences that became the basis of my doctoral thesis. A couple of years later, as I began my PhD, I heard that *MaMSIE/Studies in the Maternal* had paid interns, and I applied and was accepted. An intellectual home

¹ *One Born Every Minute* debuted in 2010 and aired its eleventh and final series in 2018. The show typically follows new mothers as they give birth (usually) in hospital, detailing various individualised personal, familial and/or health narratives shaping their birth journey.

was born to me that nurtured my interest in the maternal. This intellectual home still nurtures me as I continue to research and write about the maternal and now menstruation, reproductive politics and media.

The thoughts that I opened with, my entry into and experiences of maternal studies signify three areas of importance that I want to focus on in this piece: the maternal and the psychosocial, the maternal and popular culture, and the maternal and social inequalities. Following reflections on how these areas have strengthened various lines of inquiry in my work, and expanded academic explorations more generally, I would like to end by considering where I think maternal studies are urgently needed in the next decade.

The Maternal and The Psychosocial

One of the strengths of maternal studies is that it offers us a unique entry point into understanding subjectivity and the psychosocial. Many feminists have looked to disrupt, challenge and deconstruct dominant maternal discourses whereby the maternal is positioned as solely a biological relation between mother and child. Lisa Baraitser (2008), for example, stresses an 'ethics of interruption' when considering the maternal. Alison Stone (2012) details the maternal as a 'specific form of subjectivity that is continuous with the maternal body' (p. 3). Imogen Tyler (2011) notes the maternal 'as a relation *between* subjects, that troubles neoliberalism' (p. 31, original emphasis). And Rozsika Parker (2009) notes the maternal as 'a relationship of two different but mutually evolving and transforming subjectivities' (no pagination). For some, exploring the maternal lies in looking to lived experience of the maternal, articulating the messy relationality and ambivalence of the maternal, and emphasising the temporal and spatial elements of this relationship (Baraitser 2009). Baraitser (2009, p.11) argues that it is important to explore how a maternal disjuncture occurs 'from the perspective of the maternal', which as Tyler (2009) argues, following Luce Irigaray, may allow for a sexual politics from a maternal viewpoint. This is so maternal subjectivity becomes: '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' (Tyler 2009, p. 4). The maternal,

therefore, has been theorised in ways that stress the importance of thinking about the maternal as a psychosocial relation that shapes our psychic and material lives beyond occupying a mother-child position, which has very real material and socio-cultural effects. Stella Sandford (2011) notes, reflecting on maternal scholarship, 'the concept of "the maternal" such as it has been recently developed, refers to more than biological motherhood; that the idea of "the maternal" poses itself as a problem, rather than being taken for granted as talk of a natural phenomenon' (p. 2).

'Mother' is a distinct subject position that not all women take up, including myself and many of the women in my doctoral research, and yet the maternal was still fundamental in my research. When the participants in my thesis were discussing or reacting to *One Born* they would often do so through either their own maternal experiences,² intergenerationally through their mothers' experiences, or through their own imagined future maternal experiences, in dialogue with representations of birth and mothers in the show. My participants' reactions answered calls to understand further how the maternal affects women, not just mothers (Baraitser 2008, Curk 2009, Tyler 2009). If we consider the maternal to be relational, and if the participants in my research positioned themselves as maternal subjects through their reactions to televisual birth, then this is significant. Regardless of whether they had given birth, they positioned themselves as imagined maternal subjects. These participants took on mediated maternal subject positions, which broadens conceptions of the maternal. Most captivating has been to think through precisely how the maternal shapes us even if we are not biological mothers ourselves. Maternal studies have been invaluable for the realisation of these insights.

The Maternal and Popular Culture

This latter point about how the maternal can be explored through representation and reaction brings me to consider the second theme of maternal studies that has been significant over the past decade. In the late noughties, much of the literature that explored the maternal in visual cultures was from the perspective of 'high' art.

² To explore the participants' reactions to the show, I used Skeggs and Wood's (2012) text-in-action method.

Such scholarship underscored that, as Betterton (2009) notes, '[w]hile the maternal body has been continuously visible within visual culture, it has [...] been discursively produced in historically different modes and sites' (Betterton 2009, n.p.). While such literature was invaluable, there was a comparative absence of research on the maternal and popular culture, with exceptions (e.g. Tyler 2001, 2011, Longhurst 2009). The lack of scholarship focusing on popular culture within maternal studies during this time was problematic. The maternal was becoming increasingly significant in popular culture due to an upsurge of 'maternal publicity' (Tyler 2011, p. 22), which had consequences to how we negotiate the maternal in a mediated and everyday sense.

As the maternal has taken more of a centre stage visually and commercially, however, so too has explorations into the maternal and popular culture. Feminists have explored representations and/or negotiations of birth (e.g. Tyler and Baraitser 2013, O'Brien Hill 2014, Baraitser 2017, Das 2017, De Benedictis 2017, Roberts et al. 2017), motherhood (e.g. Feasey 2012, Garrett 2013, Allen et al. 2015, Littler 2019) and parenthood (e.g. Jensen 2018), in advertising, film, literature, television and online. Such scholarship, to my mind at least, has seen an academic niche develop whereby the maternal develops in ways that we might not have seen coming a decade ago. Such literature not only speaks to 'how the social or cultural "gets inside" and transforms and reshapes our relationships to ourselves and others' (Gill 2008, p. 433), but it also expands conceptions of the maternal. It highlights an important juncture between the maternal and everyday visual cultures, and it pays attention to how inequality can come into being through such relations.

The Maternal and Social Inequalities

This leads me to the last significant theme in maternal studies over the last decade. I believe that maternal studies is at its most productive and valuable when considering how social inequalities manifest and are felt through the maternal. There are two interesting and connected levels that we have seen maternal studies consider social inequalities. On one level, there have been a wealth of studies that foreground how notions of gender, race, class, disability and sexuality are (re)made through representations of the maternal (e.g. Lewis 2009, Tyler 2011, Leite 2013). Such scholarship often underscores how power and structural inequalities are ignited and

born through ideas of who can be a mother, who can birth, who can reproduce, who can care and who can do these things 'right'. On another level, the theoretical value of thinking with the maternal in and of itself has been conceptualised as a wilful challenge to breakdown current hegemonic strongholds that engineer and intensify social inequalities. Scholarship that sees, to quote Tyler again, the maternal 'as a relation *between* subjects, that *troubles* neoliberalism' (Tyler 2011, p. 31, original emphasis, my emphasis).

This leaves me thinking about where can and should maternal studies take us now? As the maternal has taken more of an overt prominence within the cultural realm, societal debates about reproductive and maternal subjects and bodies show no signs of slowing down. Within the context of governmental chaos, unrelenting Brexit uncertainty, climate crisis, and devastating social and economic inequality, there are a myriad of discussions about, for instance in the UK context, trans pregnancy, maternity unit closures, maternal homelessness, postnatal death and race or period poverty. These discussions at once happen in the mainstream, the margins and transnationally. As others have pointed out in the past decade (Baraitser and Tyler 2012), it is imperative to connect the psychosocial and political intervention of thinking with the maternal while broadening out conceptions of the maternal through analysing such debates. For me, this is how maternal studies will continue to flourish.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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