

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

The Fantasy of Maternal Autonomy and the Disabled Mother

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What does it mean to choose to become a mother who cannot parent independently? What is it like to grapple with motherhood when one has a disability, in a culture which increasingly valorises maternal autonomy and choice? In this brief essay, I want to emphasise some of the ways in which maternal scholarship has helped me to navigate and make sense of my lived experience of disabled motherhood.

In the ten years since *Studies in the Maternal* began, there has been an intensification of the neoliberal culture of individual choice, with its pressure to make ‘the right choice’ in relation to maternity (as if it were as simple as that). As a consequence, there may be a heightening of expectation around the experience of parenting: a need for it to be fulfilling when (and perhaps *because*) it is the thing that has been ‘chosen’. As Salecl (2010) observes, whilst choice is often figured as freedom under neoliberalism, it can also function as a kind of ‘tyranny’, placing an anxiety-provoking burden on the chooser. Sheila Heti’s recent novel *Motherhood* (2018), whose narrative centres around a woman’s dilemma about whether to have children, demonstrates this pressure. Heti’s novel highlights something under-explored (and still relatively taboo) in contemporary culture: the time, energy and anxiety that may be given over to the individualised activity of trying to determine which path to take. The book features interludes in which the narrator poses life-altering questions to herself and answers these by flipping a coin—episodes which, the author assures us, are all based on ‘the flipping of actual coins’ (2018, ‘A Further Note’, unpaginated front matter). These exchanges serve to deflate the intensity of the internal struggle over what motherhood means (and what the narrator feels it should mean to her).

In relation to the idea of maternity as chosen fulfilment, Angela McRobbie (2013) highlights the ‘professionalisation’ of middle-class motherhood as a key element in the hegemony of liberal post-feminism:

The professionalisation of domestic life forcefully reverses the older feminist denunciation of housework as drudgery, and childcare as monotonous and never-ending, by elevating domestic skills and the bringing up of children as worthwhile and enjoyable. (p. 130)

This renewed focus on enjoyment is interesting: Wilson and Chivers Yochim (2015) argue that social media platforms ‘actively incite mothers to participate in the affective structure of family happiness, to document, display and organize a “horizon of likes”’ (p. 243; quoting Ahmed 2010). Thus, even as family life has become more precarious under neoliberalism, there has been an explosion in the circulation of images

of seemingly happy families (Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2015). Yet, as McRobbie points out, this 'bombardment of images showing super-wealthy mothers enjoying their luxury lifestyles' has the effect of 'distracting attention away from what feminists in the past named as drudgery and as chores' (2013, p. 136).

McRobbie (2013) also notes that the valorisation of middle-class motherhood is often combined with the demonisation of the figure of the welfare-dependent, working-class mother. Jacqueline Rose (2018) reminds us that single mothers have 'often borne the brunt of a particular form of punitive social attention' (p. 28), observing that one of the Blair government's first proposals was to cut benefits for single mothers. Turning to the Catholic Church's role in the forcible removal of children from their single mothers, Rose writes: '[t]he irony is glaring. Mothers in the home are expected to manage more or less on their own – one of feminism's loudest, most persistent and fairest complaints – but the one thing a mother cannot possibly manage by herself is mothering' (p. 32). The mother is the paragon of capability and autonomy, and yet always at risk of being seen as profoundly incapable. Motherhood could thus be seen as a site of ideological double-binds that are always in danger of being unmasked (Rose, 2018; Quiney, 2007).

Maternal scholarship has a valuable role to play in debunking the ideal of, and the expectations surrounding, the post-feminist 'professional mother' that McRobbie identifies. Such scholarship also re-politicises motherhood: it is an indispensable resource for anyone seeking to foster a much-needed politics of disabled mothering in the academy. For me, two books in particular – which more or less bookend the ten year period during which *Studies in the Maternal* has flourished – are of significance: Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (2008) and Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018). In Rose's book, what is striking is her unswerving attention to the difficult feelings that motherhood constantly brings up. Where others may acknowledge the existence of such feelings before moving on to other, lighter topics, Rose (2018) interrogates them. She focuses on the impossible demands placed upon mothers to make the world habitable, as well as the psychic cost of this maternal labour. In Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters*

(2008), I cherish the attention given to those odd, discombobulating ‘nuggets’ of maternal experience that are rarely considered significant enough to document or dwell on. She encourages us to shift our focus away from grand narratives about the ‘meaning’ of motherhood. Recognising that the experience of being a mother is always invested with a longing for what might be or might have been, Baraitser continually checks her attempts to develop an overarching account of maternal subjectivity. She writes—with characteristic insight into how her own selfhood and desire enmesh with her subject matter—of her sense of a need to ‘undercut [her] own grandiose aims’ (p. 152). These complementary accounts from Rose and Baraitser are, I think, the perfect antidote to the highly psychologised, advice-hungry, choice-driven, image-based and instantly shareable middle-class parenting culture of the early twenty-first century. We live with the illusion that perfection and fulfilment are just around the corner, or just a few clicks away. In contrast, the work of Rose, Baraitser and others—including the many and varied open access essays published in *Studies in the Maternal*—offer ways of *staying with* the multivalent experience of the maternal. These works counteract the unrealistic and idealised notions of motherhood that circulate and are popularised in contemporary culture, media and society, which worry, shame and threaten to overwhelm real mothers.

In the last few years, I have become personally interested in the question of how imagined motherhood measures up against the real thing. Since my work as an intern for *Studies in the Maternal* in 2011, I have become a mother. I’ve become a disabled mother. I use the term ‘become’ advisedly here: I have had a physical impairment (hemiplegia – a mild form of cerebral palsy) since birth. However, I have never required assistance to live independently as an adult—never, that is, until the arrival of my daughter. My experience of becoming a mother has been deeply bound up with the experience of *becoming disabled* in new ways. I struggle with the physical acts of caring for a child, such as changing nappies and clothing my daughter, to name a few. I *literally struggle*—in that sometimes I can just about do some of these things by myself, and sometimes not. The embodied work of parenting brings my disability into the foreground for me. Frustration has come to be part of this experience in a new way.

Within the context of a discussion about disabled motherhood, it is intriguing that Baraitser invokes the figure of the 'dis-abled mother' in the closing passages of *Maternal Encounters* (p. 153). Here, Baraitser conceptualises motherhood as an encumbrance; it disrupts autonomy in the sense that having a child is—as Baraitser puts it—like having an 'extra unpredictable limb' over which one has no control. As a disability theorist, I find it especially interesting that Baraitser utilises a lexicon of impairment as she develops her phenomenology of the maternal: the mother is 'limping', 'encumbered', 'impeded', weighed down with 'stuff' (p. 152; p. 154; p. 11). As Qualmann (2016) notes about the experience of pushing a baby's pram: '[l]osing the freedom of easy mobility – a freedom that I hadn't been aware of before – connects me to a massive group of people (predominantly women) in the same position, encumbered by wheels' (p. 3). We might think of the connection here with wheelchair users, who also must navigate urban space differently from those who travel without wheels. The maternal is about a battle with kerbs and wheelie bins, among other obstructions; it foregrounds a frustrating negotiation with the physical world.

I identify with the 'dis-abled mother' that Baraitser describes. Yet, as a mother with hemiplegia, I am also, somehow, marked out as different. For me, the unpredictability of the child-as-extra-limb spells heightened risk. Childcare puts me in a liminal space in which my autonomy is not guaranteed. Sometimes I can manage it independently, and at other times it presents unmanageable moments. The question of whether I can 'manage by myself' as a mother has hovered around since the early part of my pregnancy, never far away in my encounters with health and social care professionals. This focus implicitly frames 'the mother' as the embodiment of liberal individualist autonomy. Here the concept of 'independent living', coined by the disabled people's movement as a rallying cry for self-determination and an end to institutionalisation, bumps uncomfortably up against the figure of the capable 'professional mother'. Who would choose motherhood as a disabled person? Who would use their freedom-to-choose to choose to restrict their freedom? But then, if this is the question, who, exactly, would choose *motherhood*? This is perhaps the most unspeakable question of all. It is the one that the discourse of the 'professional mother' is supposed to banish, but which Baraitser's burdened 'dis-abled' mother

brings into view. We don't expect a mother to be a disabled person, still less a disabled person to be a mother (to draw a subtle distinction). But perhaps the struggles of each intersect in more ways than we would like to think. Both figures are caught up in and marked by the hegemony of autonomy and freedom-to-choose. Deciding to become a mother without being able to guarantee one's autonomy problematically reveals that the autonomous, independently-coping mother is a fantasy.

As I draw my reflections to a close, I want to turn these last questions back on themselves. Why must we be 'free' and 'autonomous'—or at least, how have we allowed these terms to be co-opted in the service of neoliberal post-feminism? How have we come to accept this atomised mode of existence, these non-collectivised child-care arrangements, the nuclear family as the fundamental building block of social life? If, as McRobbie (2013) argues, the very 'cultural intelligibility' of young women has now been 'tilted towards the achievement of "affluent, middle-class maternity"' (p. 131), then we need to keep on drawing attention to the ordinary interdependent mother as the *norm*. Given that value and status are continuously injected into a depoliticised, intensive, 'independently coping' form of motherhood, which is widely internalised, we need to highlight how toxic it can be in the expectations it creates. Here I could speak of my feelings of shame about not always being fully independent when out and about with my daughter, for example. I could highlight the way in which my feelings of awkwardness impact on the extent to which I feel able to form relationships with other parents in child-oriented settings. But I want to make a broader point about how disabled motherhood teaches us to see what is going on for *all* mothers who are restricted by 'coercive individualism' (Quiney, 2007, p. 32; on the notion of disability as teacher, see Titchkosky, 2003). This includes calling attention to the unevenly distributed effects of late capitalism.

Quiney (2007) characterises the transition to motherhood in contemporary Anglo-American culture in terms of trauma and loss. She highlights the affective work entailed in reconciling the 'mythography of the selfless Good Mother with the clashing capitalist discourses of individual achievement and productivity' (p. 33). I suggest that the figure of the disabled mother embodies and gives a new emphasis to the fundamental contradictions between these discourses. Further exploration of this figure could

make a significant contribution to maternal scholarship as it seeks to expose myths, deflate unrealistic cultural imaginaries and re-politicise maternal labour. Indeed, the importance of such scholarship, and of maternal scholarship more widely, should not be underestimated: its potential to make motherhood habitable for *mothers*—to think in Rose's (2018) terms—gives such scholarship a role which can, and should, elevate it within the academy. But it should also make an impression beyond academia. Disabled mothers are virtually invisible in society, but they exist, and their stories—like those of other ordinary 'dis-abled' mothers—pose a challenge to the highly constrained and constraining images of maternity-as-attainable-perfection. The maternal keeps on re-appearing as a site of able-bodiedness and of normativity. We need to keep on re-writing it as that which challenges fantasies of autonomy and self-sufficiency.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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