

**EDITORIAL**

## Editorial

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To celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Studies in the Maternal*, we began the process in 2019 of gathering together many contributors, collaborators, and supporters of the journal over the last decade. The journal was formed in 2009 in order to provide a vital, and at the time unique, forum for critical interdisciplinary research on motherhood, mothering, and what we termed 'the maternal' more broadly. Emerging from a series of discussions and events that took place within a new network of maternal scholars, writers, activists, artists, and practitioners called MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics), the journal aimed to provide a dedicated, though at the time academically unfashionable, site for discussion about motherhood, whilst simultaneously expanding and challenging the meaning of this term. We aimed to prompt debate about the gendering of the maternal subject, especially in relation to fathering and trans-motherhood, and prise open assumptions of its singularity, heteronormativity, and whiteness in relation to queer, community, Black, and 'other' mothering. We aimed to make visible motherhood's social locations in relation to migration and histories of displacement and trauma; its feminist ethics in relation to wider understandings of social, political and economic practices of care; and its ever-changing 'psychic life', tracking how mothering remains an ambivalently claimed, yet structuring element in human relations, ethics and politics – a practice that props up the 'capitalist everyday' whilst being constantly disavowed. Most importantly, perhaps, we aimed to give voice to motherhood's affective life – to its howls and cries, as well as its hoots of joy – and to theorise maternal affect as a force for social and political change.

The first issue of *Studies in the Maternal* coincided with the beginning of a devastating decade of austerity politics and the rolling back of public welfare in the UK, the rise of right-wing authoritarian populism in many parts of the world, the increasing fragility of relations between human and more-than-human worlds, and the continued violence towards, and occlusion of, Black life from the public sphere. This crystallised in 2020, with the concatenation of the inequalities of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the global Black Lives Matter protests that took on renewed momentum in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and Dion Johnson in the Spring of 2020. In the 2009 editorial we

noted a sense of urgency around growing inequalities for women who mother, and the pushing back on collectivist feminist politics in favour of a neoliberal individualised feminism that pitted women against one another in an increasingly competitive struggle for recognition and resources. From the perspective of 2020 it is clear that the sense of urgency was well placed. Things have become considerably harder for the majority of those who mother, though differentially so for mothers of colour, working class mothers, disabled mothers, migrant mothers, and queer and trans mothers. At the same time, representations of motherhood have continued to fall out along the split between abjection and idealisation, just as feminist, Black feminist, queer, and postcolonial/decolonial scholarship has continued to undo and complicate this polarisation.

During the decade, the journal has provided a space to try to negotiate the complex cross-currents of what was happening to those who identified as mothers, glimpsed through the refracted lenses of social science and humanities research and scholarship, and in artistic work, creative writing, poetry, activist politics, and the therapeutic consulting room. We have collaboratively produced 15 issues to date, including those made up of open submissions, and special issues hosted by invited Guest Editors, spanning *Motherhood, Psychoanalysis and Feminism*; *Motherhood, Servitude and the Delegation of Care*; *Austerity Parenting*; *Maternal Aesthetics and The Surprise of the Real*; *Non-reproduction: Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics*; and *Performing Everyday Maternal Practice*. We have also published clusters of papers on *Queer Milk, Feminism and Childcare*, and the inaugural issue itself, which drew together 15 commentaries on why a journal of this kind might be needed.

An anniversary is often a moment of looking back and looking forwards – a celebration of survival, for sure, but also a re-calibration, a time to look at what has and, importantly, what has failed to materialise. To help us in this reflexive work, we have asked a number of academics, writers, artists, activists and practitioners who contributed to the first issue to come back and offer us their reflections on the last 10 years and the changes they had noticed in the status, position, and meaning of motherhood. We have also invited all of the doctoral students who have worked with us as editorial assistants on the journal, and as editors of the student-led blog. Many

are now in academic posts, and continue to work with feminist, queer, post-colonial, psychoanalytic, and other critical frameworks to think through issues that relate to gender, sexuality, and reproduction. Others are working in the arts, in policy and activist domains, and we are delighted to hear that some have become mothers.

From our own perspective, we would like to offer two thoughts since we have turned 10. As we look back, and attempt to peer into an increasingly uncertain future, two elements of the 'now' come together. The first is the sudden prominence of care in social and political discourse in 2020 at precisely the same time as it is becoming clear that mothers will systemically bear the brunt of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst it appears that the world has woken up to the fact that we are interdependent and all need care throughout our lives, and that we live in what The Care Collective call a 'careless world' led by neoliberal markets that have enacted systematic and systemic violence on both our capacities to give and receive care (The Care Collective, 2020), the impact of such violence is paradoxically being felt disproportionately by mothers. A survey of 20,000 mothers undertaken by Pregnant Then Screwed found that in the UK 46% of women were made redundant during the pandemic because of lack of childcare, 72% have had to work fewer hours because of childcare problems, and calls to a legal helpline for working mothers rose by 450%. The results of these inequalities filter directly to children, with 2.5 million children now living in food insecure households in the UK and 1 in 3 children in poverty. In addition 60% of women using domestic violence services are mothers, and it is now clear that there was a surge in domestic violence worldwide during conditions of lockdown, with the UN reporting dramatic increases in calls to shelters and refuges in every part of the globe. Although, of course, motherhood is not the only form of social care, parental leave systems and other cultural and social structures nevertheless set women up as primary carers, placing the burden of care for both children and the failures of the social care system itself on mothers. Whilst Covid-19 has pushed our interconnected interdependencies into the light in an unprecedented way, this insight was always impossible to ignore if the maternal is used as a way to disrupt and decentre the fantasy of autonomy and individuality. As Judith Butler states in her recent work on the force of non-violence, 'No-one is born an individual: if someone becomes an individual over time, he or she does not escape the fundamental conditions of

dependency in the course of that process. That condition cannot be escaped by way of time. We were all, regardless of our political viewpoints in the present, born into a condition of radical dependency' (Butler, 2020: 41). As we were reminded so keenly during the pandemic, we are literally propped up by others, given over to a web of institutions and social and material structures in order to survive. Just as disability studies has shown how a social structure must provide dependable support in order to enable everyone to live a full life, so maternal studies, we would argue, has shown that what Butler calls radical dependency cannot be completely cut free from the material histories of social reproduction, the ethics and politics of care, and the affectively charged figure of the mother. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa tells us in *Matters of Care*, (2017) in her work on the maintenance of life systems such as soil, care plays out along three axes: labour/work; ethics/politics and affect/affectations. These domains do not sit comfortably together, but must be held in tension if we are to keep close to the ambivalent terrains of care. Dependency is structural to the human subject, and it calls for social structures that care. But we forget the particular ambivalent tie between care and the maternal at our peril, for both the social structure, and for those who identify as mothers themselves.

This becomes even clearer with the second thought born of the 'now' that we wish to offer. It involves a reflexive turn to the politics of Afrofuturism, which brings a revolutionary political potential bound up in the maternal, or more precisely in what Joy James' calls the 'captive maternal' that is highly instructive for the future of the journal, and for a much-needed critical turn in maternal studies itself (James, 2016). James calls for a reappraisal of the politics of Western white feminist theory, theory that she names as 'Womb Theory', calling for those using it – and we include ourselves here – to notice within it what she calls the 'Black Matrix' (James, 2016: 256; James 2013). The Black Matrix is 'a fulcrum' (257), according to James, that, if used in a non-exploitative way, can unseat Womb Theory and utterly change our notions of the maternal, justice, empowerment, and social change. Although there is a feminist tradition of maternal politics that would perhaps include a politics of peace or witness in the work, for instance, of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, or what Julie Stephens calls a 'post-maternal' politics of dependency in the public sphere (Stephens, 2011), James' Black Matrix is less

about the inclusion or recognition of Black slave mothers, than what she calls 'a leverage of power against captor and captivity' (James, 2016: 257). Captive Maternals are those whom James describes as 'those most vulnerable to violence, war, poverty, police, and captivity; those whose very existence enables the possessive empire that claims and dispossesses them' (255). The Captive Maternal is therefore produced by anti-Black racism in all parts of the world. Womb theory, the white Western theory that is prominent in the journal to date, is produced through an exploitation of the generative properties of mothers held captive. It relies, James argues, on a kind of freedom of thought, a freedom to think one's own thoughts, and this freedom is not available to everyone. In fact, Womb theory emerges as the 'anti-soulmate of freedom' (260) – as the freedom to theorize that comes directly from the exploitation of black captive females. Womb theory therefore fails to adequately theorize violence against the reproductive labour of Captive Maternals – labour that produces wealth and stabilizes culture. And although there is a long tradition within Womb theory of theorizing social reproduction, James points us towards another level of exclusion, violence, and insecurity that allows womb theory to reproduce itself. If, however, we can heed the Maternal Captive, a new form of maternal ethics may emerge. This would entail turning Womb theory back on itself, contesting its claims to universality, and breaking the link between notions of freedom and democracy and the stakes they have in 'theory as possession predicated on the Captive Maternal' (285). The ultimate aim would be to allow the Captive Maternal to be freed from its position as fulcrum altogether.

This call from Joy James is one that shifts us from maternal ethics to maternal politics where by the ethical question becomes one of thinking through the suppression of the Black Matrix and making space, without co-optation, for the disruptive rebellions that, as she puts it, 'offer new theories as leverage for freedom' (286). This, as we see it, is the challenge for the next decade.

We are proud and honoured to have been part of this journal, and grateful to all the co-editors, contributors, peer reviewers, students, editorial assistants, steering group members, and those who have provided technical support over the years. It has been maternal labour. There would be no journal without this collective effort, and we have learnt much, and benefitted from a wealth of advice, help, support,

comfort, and good will. Most of all, we are grateful to our readership, and the members of Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics, who are the main interlocutors for the intellectual debate, artistic, and activist output that has been so vibrant in the pages of the journal.

Thank you.

Lisa Baraitser and Sigal Spigel

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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