

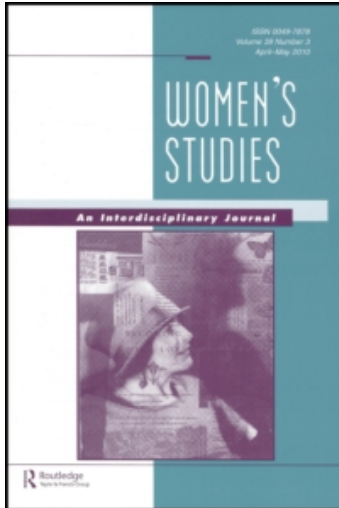
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Andrea O'Reilly and Silvia Caporale Bizzini (eds.). *From the Personal to the Political: Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Andrea O'Reilly and Silvia Caporale Bizzini (eds.). *From the Personal to the Political: Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 2009.

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“Where are the other ‘mothers’? And the concept of ‘mothering’? Are all mothers biological? Are they all women?” ask O'Reilly and Bizzini in the introduction to their edited collection, *From the Personal to the Political: Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narratives* (13). The essays in this volume seek answers to these questions, bringing breadth and multiplicity to the voices of maternal experience and undermining the marginalizing power of the normative maternal narrative. Divided into two distinct parts, the essays share a matrifocal lens and develop a multifaceted theoretical framework for considering maternal narratives. While by no means comprehensive, the collection foregrounds marginalized narratives of motherhood from several international perspectives, including those of the lone mother, adoptive mothers, mothers of older children, lesbian mothers, as well as multiple theoretical approaches to texts representing enslaved mothering, transracial mothering, queer mothering, and mothering in the age of “new momism,” among others. Reaching across boundaries of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationalism, and time, *From the Personal to the Political* “shows how motherhood functions as an intellectual practice and social/political site across these differences” (15).

The collection is framed by the editors' own essays, beginning with Bizzini's “Writing as a Practice of Resistance: Motherhood, Identity, and Representation,” which lays the theoretical framework for the volume. Here, Bizzini forges the link between mothering, selfhood, and representation and introduces the premise for part I, which explores maternal self-narratives “as it is lived”

(16, emphasis hers). Drawing from a range of theoretical material, including the work on gender and the maternal by Lisa Ikemoto, Susan Bordo, and Jana Sawicki, as well as cultural critiques by Wendy Brown, Elspeth Probyn, Michel Foucault, and Antonio Gramsci, Bizzini claims, “autobiographical discourse on mothering points out that the emphasis is on multiplicity and resistance as opposed to a homogenous and ahistorical reading of motherhood as well as of body and/or sexual politics” (42). Part I manifests this vision of maternal autobiographical discourse, as it is comprised of self-narratives representing motherhood “as it is lived” and in opposition to dominant discourse on motherhood.

Thus, the essays in part I develop Sara Ruddick’s claims that “the experience of motherhood must be understood as an intellectual, self-reflective, and philosophical process” (O’Reilly and Bizzini 11). Essays such as Lesley Patterson’s “Narrating the (Lone) Maternal Subjects: The Validation Stories of ‘Ordinary Women in Extraordinary Circumstances,’” which examines the narratives of New Zealand lone mothers, and Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Lynn Gidluck’s “White Mothers of Chinese Daughters: Real Mothers of Real Children” give voice to marginalized mothers, in particular such mothers who are not only silenced but “spoken for” by the dominant culture. While the essays in part I are not representative of all kinds of mothers—something impossible for any text—their collection here in this volume exemplifies what Beth Osnes claims in her essay “The Maternal Autobiography in Performance,” where she writes about performing of her own narrative of mothering:

In the performance of autobiographical stories, I do not wish to inadvertently assert that my stories are necessarily superior. I just know that by telling my stories, the only ones I know to be true, I simultaneously convey my belief in the worth of each mother’s stories as a source from which she can distill her own insight and wisdom. (135)

The cumulative effect of part I’s diverse maternal narratives is similar: through several distinct stories of mothering, the contributors likewise assert that their collective multiplicity affirms the “worth of each mother’s stories.”

Part II explores maternal narratives as representative texts. Here, a range of theoretical approaches are applied to several very

different autobiographical works, such as Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings*, and Anne Enright's *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, among others. Celia Shiffer, for example, draws parallels between Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* and several works by Julia Kristeva, pointing out: "Cusk argues that 'becoming a mother' is excruciatingly difficult precisely because the language by which to do so—because the stories available to mothers—is the language of the institutional, the patriarchal, the symbolic" (212).

Shiffer captures the true intention of the collection: to confront the limits of the normative maternal narrative and to create a new theory—or theories, to be precise—for the multiplicity of maternal narratives. O'Reilly reaffirms this purpose in her concluding essay, "The Motherhood Memoir and the 'New Momism': Biting the Hand that Feeds You," which calls for resistance and activism in response to current, popular motherhood practices that appear to be progressive but in fact fortify the status quo of normative motherhood. O'Reilly focuses on recent memoirs that appear to "tell [motherhood] like it is," but that also appear to shape a literary genre "born from a new ideology of motherhood," or to use Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels's words, the "new momism" (240). Such an ideology, as it manifests in recent memoirs (such as Wendy Le Blanc's *Naked Motherhood: Shattering Illusions and Sharing Truths* and Andrea Buchanan's *Mother Shock*) fails to successfully critique normative maternal narratives of the "good" mother because, O'Reilly asserts, they are "ultimately contained and constrained by the discourse of the new momism that creates and informs [them]" (245). The collection concludes with O'Reilly's call for substantive change, for a rewriting of the maternal narrative. Thus, this collection appears to indeed move from the personal to the political, using self-narratives to compel activism.