



CHAPTER 1

Ambivalent Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering: From Normal and Natural to Not-at-all

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The chapters in this volume focus on contemporary (representations of) meanings of motherhood and mothering. Together, they demonstrate the significance of literary narratives for understanding, and critiquing, motherhood and mothering as social phenomena and subjective experiences.

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They all contextualize motherhood and mothering in terms of their particular national and cultural location, in analyses of texts by authors from Canada/Lebanon, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. They move between narratives about mothers who are firmly placed in one national context, and those who are in “in-between” positions due to migrant experiences. This opens for comparison and invites discussions about how representations of mothers, mothering, and motherhood are impacted by different national and cultural circumstances. Each chapter also explores how motherhood is textualized; that is, how tone, voice, literary style, language, structure, and genre contribute to building representations of maternal (in)experience and mothering practices. Hence, the studies in this book work in interdisciplinary fashion, to engage literary/humanities as well as social science perspectives.

These chapters also variously demonstrate that in literature as in life, motherhood is constructed intersectionally: gender, class, race, nationality, sexuality, and age all impact upon how motherhood can be done, as do migrant experiences. Offering a diversity of critical responses and theorizations of motherhood and mothering, and drawing upon literary studies of the construction of motherhood (Bassin et al. 1994), these original analyses address a range of representations, meanwhile raising crucial questions about how motherhood and mothering are marked by absence and/or presence and by profound ambivalences, about how maternal perspectives and voices gain space or mix with filial voices in the narratives, and about negotiating ideals and norms of motherhood. The contributions draw upon a variety of theorizations of motherhood, from literary theory, cultural studies, memory studies, social science theory, gender and queer theory, and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the chapters variously foreground and link together the themes central to this volume: embodied experience/maternal embodiment; notions of what is “normal” or natural (or not) about motherhood; maternal health and illness; mother-daughter relations; maternity and memory; and the (im)possibilities of giving voice to the mother. Hence, taken all together, the chapters in this volume offer a broad range of perspectives in terms of geopolitical places, thematic concerns, theoretical approaches, and interdisciplinary takes on investigating motherhood and mothering.

The twenty-first century is marked by often contradictory tendencies regarding mothers and mothering. Many countries in the global North—the place from which the contributors in this volume are speaking—have seen measures toward increased gender equality in terms of more equal expectations on men and women to provide childcare as well as hold jobs outside the home. This can be interpreted as a relatively lessened

differentiation between the worlds of fathers and mothers. Furthermore, assisted reproductive technologies have become increasingly accessible. Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) separate sexuality from procreation, gestational parents from genetic parents, and social from biological parents, a development which is liberating for some and contributes to expanding contemporary definitions of parenthood far beyond the genetic/biological. Yet, in the same time period, there also seems to have been an increased idealization of “natural” motherhood and maternal instincts, and there is a new conservatism in Northern Europe that formulates motherhood as a full-time job and asks women to turn away from paid employment.

The French historian Élisabeth Badinter (2011) captures this latter tendency and theorizes it as an ongoing process that is visible in several areas of the public and private spheres. “Over the last three decades, almost without our noticing, there has been a revolution in our idea of motherhood. This revolution was silent, prompting no outcry or debate, even though its goal was momentous: to put motherhood squarely back at the heart of women’s lives.” Badinter puts her finger on the “resurrection” of motherhood as determining women’s lives and formulates it as a form of backlash to feminist movements. Whether the idea that motherhood is “at the heart of women’s lives” was ever truly dead, is, however, a matter of contention.

While it is not the goal of this volume to determine the causes behind the (simultaneous) developments outlined above, as literary scholars and gender researchers we see the need for investigating these different pulls and tendencies, how they speak to or against one another, and how they find expression in texts. Therefore, investigating definitions and practices of motherhood and mothering, as well as their effects, is a central concern of this volume. As the following chapters variously demonstrate, motherhood can indeed be understood as a “contested terrain” (Glenn et al. 1994; see also O’Reilly 2004).

As we, the editors, have undertaken this project, from our Scandinavian viewpoint, we have had reason to reflect upon differences between Swedish/Scandinavian research, and research from Europe and North America on motherhood. One reason why research on motherhood and mothering in the humanities and social sciences has not been strong in Sweden in the early twenty-first century may be the scholarly focus on masculinity and fatherhood, which has overshadowed questions about reproduction, subjectivity, and identity from the perspective of women. We contend that this is a consequence for the research of gender equality-oriented politics to strengthen the position and visibility of men as

parents. In gender studies scholarship in Scandinavia, unlike fatherhood (studies), motherhood (studies) has tended to raise concerns about “biologism” and essentialism, and feminist scholars have been wary of the faulty equalization of “women” and “mothers” to the point where studies of motherhood have seemingly been avoided. However, sophisticated gender theories of bodies and embodiment and post-constructionist theory allow for new kinds of approaches to women as mothers, and to maternal bodies as lived *and* culturally encoded. At present, we see a shift toward more studies on motherhood in this location. While we are a part of this shift, we are also wary that in the currently increasingly conservative political climate in which we write this introduction, women scholars focusing on motherhood may be taken as a sign of a “natural” interest, instead of a sorely needed addition to previous literary scholarship and to family studies generally.

MOTHERHOOD, MOTHERING, AND NARRATIVE

To say that motherhood is a gendered concept is a severe understatement. Notions of motherhood are still largely based upon the connection between woman–biology–body in relation to social functions: women, by giving birth and nursing, have supposedly natural ties with the child. The notion of the good mother is still a hegemonic discourse inherent in daily life as well as in institutional practice. This discursive construct is both explicit and implicit, creating expectations and demands that distinctively separate the situation of women as mothers from that of men as fathers.

Motherhood is a phenomenon that concerns women all around the world. This is not to say that all women mother, or are mothers, but it is to say that all women are affected in one way or another by motherhood, by its absence or presence. Furthermore, motherhood—which we take to mean the gendered situation of being a mother—and mothering—which we take to mean the gendered practice of parenting in terms of everyday care and sustenance—are ongoing day and night in all kinds of societies and environments.

As a phenomenon, motherhood is diverse and multifaceted. Already in 1997, Elaine Tuttle Hansen observed: “What is said by and about mothers—full-time mothers, surrogate mothers, teenage mothers, adoptive mothers, mothers who live in poverty, mothers with briefcases—is increasingly complicated and divisive. Language is stretched to describe the bewildering fragmentation of a time in which one child may have a genetic

mother, a gestational mother, and a custodial mother, each of whom is a different person” (Hansen 1997, 1). “Mother,” then, as Hansen observes, may mean many things. Motherhood is often marked by ambivalences, fraught with mixed and at times conflicted feelings, which may also change over a lifetime. All these diversities are further compounded by different power dimensions beyond gender, including class, race, nationality, sexuality, age, and ability. In the twenty-first century, debates about transgender people, and about who counts as a woman, also impact on ideas about motherhood and who can be (understood as) a mother.

But motherhood and mothering are not only defined by physical and material experiences. They also come to life through stories and recorded accounts. In narratives, in texts, motherhood gains meaning on existential and symbolic levels. On many occasions, it is these narratives, and the maternal experiences they express, whether the narratives are fictional(ized) or “documentary” that stir up debate, call attention to controversial issues and scrutinize conditions that clash with ideals and established perceptions. Among recent examples of such narratives and ensuing debates are the cases of women’s stories about regretting motherhood in Israel (Donath 2017; Heffernan and Stone 2021), the voicing of maternal discontent in the UK (Cusk 2001), and a reluctance to become a mother in Canada (Heti 2018). Other examples are the debate caused by a collection of essays about life as a divorced mother in Sweden titled *Happy, happy!* (Sveland 2011), or by women choosing to be “solo” mothers (Wahlström and Bergnehr 2021; cf. Hertz 2006). What these examples have in common is that they give space to the voice of the (would-be) mother herself. The presence and absence of such perspectives in the public debate, in literary representation as such, and in what continuously takes shape as “popular culture” or the literary canon bears some scrutiny. For, while motherhood is a global phenomenon, it has yet to become an integrated part of the themes and tropes that are regularly studied in university courses in comparative literature and other relevant subjects. We therefore see the present volume as a contribution to international literary scholarship in general, as well as to “motherhood scholarship” in particular.

It is one of our fundamental points of departure for this volume that disregarding meanings of motherhood and mothering is unhelpful for feminism, since it is a experience that affects all women, as well as all men. In taking this standpoint, we are thinking with Patrice DiQuinzio’s (1999) reflections on narrative and subjectivity. DiQuinzio argues that mothering is a site of contention not only in political culture but also in feminist

theory. She suggests that the goals of feminist theory itself need to be reconceptualized, and argues that feminism's resistance to "essential motherhood" has led to a general erasure of motherhood as a feminist concern. With Sara Ruddick (1990), DiQuinzio emphasizes *narrativity* as central for understanding the importance of motherhood.

While it is true that motherhood and mothering take shape in narratives across many textual genres, from fictional literature to spoken narratives, from political statements to policy documents, we focus here on two main genres: first, literary fiction and second, life writing, that is, auto/biography and memoirs. The twenty-first century has seen the publication of a broad variety of fictional narratives, autobiographical writing, and essays that explore the fundamental impact of motherhood on individuals, families, and society, and taken all together, these texts do seem to constitute a "wave" of writing about maternal experience.

With its focus on literary representations, the present volume offers insights into contemporary reflections on motherhood and mothering that sometimes are part of ongoing public debates, but at other times cannot be found in public discourses. Via its typically extended narratives, literature offers the possibility to dwell upon topics that are more hurriedly abandoned in public debate and media, or that are perhaps not commonly voiced in the "first person" because they are taboo. Literature therefore is a unique source of insight into human conditions and often envisions circumstances that are as yet concealed or marginalized in society at large. It has a unique ability to convey and combine emotional, linguistic, and artistic dimensions in "storying motherhood" (Wilson and Davidson 2014). Furthermore, literary representations of mothers and mothering foreground the ways that parenthood and parenting for women are imbricated with dimensions like class, race, age, and nationality, as well as how motherhood is connected to living a heterosexual, lesbian, queer, or trans everyday life. Literature complicates questions about motherhood and non-motherhood, about norms, inclusivity, and diversity.

RESEARCH ON LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

Literary scholarship on motherhood has been developing especially since the 1980s. Research on representations of motherhood in literature has focused on literatures of specific nations (Rye 2009; Jeremiah 2003) or

geopolitical areas, as in *Reading/Speaking/Writing the Mother Text: Essays on Caribbean Women's Writing* (Herrera and Sanmartín 2015), *Motherhood in African Literature and Culture* (Akujobi 2011), and *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe* (Rye et al. 2018). In the United States, leading African-American women writers like Toni Morrison have been intent on exploring the impact of slavery and its aftermath on motherhood and mothering, and research on their authorship, like *Toni Morrison and Mothers/Motherhood* (Baxter and Satz 2017), adds crucial dimensions to studies of motherhood in literature that also have relevance across disciplines and interdisciplines.

Feminist studies have long centered on women's writing about mothers, in fiction and in life writing. Twenty-first-century studies only rarely break this pattern, as most studies focus fictional narratives or autobiographical writing about becoming a mother from within an embodied maternal experience (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010). Motherhood memoirs also extend further across conventional boundaries for defining "mothering" to collaborative "mother-work," as demonstrated in Elizabeth Podnieks' study of nanny narratives as "matroethnographies" (Podnieks 2021).

Feminist literary studies on motherhood in the 1980s and 1990s frequently drew upon, developed, and expanded psychoanalytic theories. E. Ann Kaplan's study of melodrama in literature and film *Motherhood and Representation* (1992/2013) is a classic in the field, which, like other crucial studies from the 1980s and 1990s such as Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother-Daughter Plot* (1989) and Elaine Tuttle Hansen's *Mother Without Child* (1997), continues to be a key reference in motherhood scholarship. Hirsch argued in the 1980s that the fundamental absence of "the maternal voice" in literature can be explained at least in part by the iteration of a general cultural disparaging of motherhood, which is also echoed by fictional protagonists. Her own focus on the mother-daughter plot and its dependence on choices regarding narrative perspective was a central contribution to motherhood studies, and a continuous focus in the research has indeed been the mother-daughter relationship. Although there are some studies of men's auto/biographical narratives about their mothers' lives as seen through the eyes of the (grown) child (Wahlström Henriksson 2021), and on male authors' fictional renditions of motherhood (Martinez 2018), these are rare exceptions to the rule. In the 2010 essay collection *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's*

Literatures, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly trace a development in female-authored texts about motherhood from “daughter-centric” to “matrilineal” and “matrifocal” narratives, arguing that the absent maternal voice explored by Hirsch has slowly gained ground in literature after the 1990s. They also make claims for criticism that links maternal literature closely to lived experiences, for, as they observe, “mothering and being a mother are personal, political, and creative narratives unfolding within both the pages of a book and the spaces of a life” (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010, 2). With Podnieks and O'Reilly, the chapters in this volume show that maternal voices have entered into literary representation, full force, and that they are complicated and diverse.¹

The research to date demonstrates that stories about motherhood are variously shaped by absences and presences, by distance and closeness. Hansen argues in *Mother Without Child* (1997) that it is above all in fiction that features “bad mothers” and mothers who lose their children that motherhood as such is questioned and scrutinized in new and potentially subversive ways. This idea is taken up in a recent study of contemporary Swedish fiction that analyzes the significance of plots where mothers leave their children, in the context of gender-equal family policy and parenting norms (Björklund 2021).

The contributions in this volume engage in dialogue with and add further dimensions to these strands of previous research: on maternal voices, the relational aspects of motherhood and mothering, and the (recent) histories of writing motherhood in literature. To speak, again, with Elaine Tuttle Hansen, we see that decades after her crucial study, “the multifaceted story of feminist thinking about motherhood is still emerging” (Hansen 1997, 10), and is likely to continue to do so as long as there are mothers, and literature that engages with motherhood and mothering.

¹Symbolic meanings of motherhood, and the ways that certain tropes of motherhood circulate in a given national culture, have also been fruitfully explored in scholarship on popular culture, especially television, film, and social media. Edited volumes like *Mediating Moms* (Podnieks 2012) and *Mediated Moms* (Hundley and Hayden 2015) explore non-normative or transgressive motherhood. Film studies scholarship has scrutinized the common trope of the dead/absent mother in Anglo-American culture (Åström 2017; Devers 1998), as well as representations of both bad mothers, and struggling, heroic mothers in genre film (Arnold 2013; see also Fisher 1996; Feasey 2012). Representations of single mothers have generated separate studies (Åström and Bergnehr 2021).

THE CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

The chapters in this volume are sequenced on the basis of some major thematic concerns, although the reader will discover that there are also other overlaps between chapters and sections. The first set of studies deal with reproductive choices, sexualities, and breaking/complying with norms. A discussion of motherhood also necessitates a discussion of reproductive choices; the first study in this volume therefore raises issues around abortion as well as motherhood. Access to safe abortions continues to be a relevant issue for women all over the world, a fact that has been newly underscored by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the year when we are writing this Introduction (2022). This subject is central to Lisa Grahn's chapter, "One Hand Clapping: The Loneliness of Motherhood in Lucia Berlin's 'Tiger Bites'." In Berlin's short story, a young woman travels across the Texas border into Mexico to have an abortion. Grahn shows how the depiction of the protagonist's experiences in a Mexican abortion clinic interweaves perspectives of class, language barriers, national borders, and family relationships. She argues that abortion in the short story serves to highlight the life-changing choices that surround motherhood and seems to speak for accessible safe abortions even as the protagonist herself ultimately rejects abortion. But she also links the intergenerational theme in the story to the intergenerational relevance of the story itself, across the decades from publication to present-day reading.

The concept of motherhood changes when meanings of male and female become more permeable and open-ended, as is the case in transgender lives. In "'their mothers, and their fathers, and everyone in between': Queering Motherhood in Trans Parent Memoirs by Jennifer Finney Boylan and Trystan Reese," Elizabeth Podnieks discusses the queering of motherhood in two autobiographical books from the US, Jennifer Finney Boylan's *Stuck in the Middle With You: A Memoir of Parenting in Three Genders* (2013) and Trystan Reese's *How We Do Family: From Adoption to Trans Pregnancy, What We Learned About Love and LGBTQ Parenthood* (2021). Boylan is a transgender woman, and a parent of two children, who is living in a long-term marriage. Reese is a transgender man who together with his husband adopted two children and who also gave birth to their biological child. Boylan's and Reese's accounts of their lives foreground how "mother" and "father" are concepts that are varied and mutable, while also narrated from the "conventional" framework of married life. Podnieks shows how their narratives

normalize trans parenthood while queering normativity. These positions affect how they write, and Podnieks shows how their personal narratives are punctuated with community perspectives and calls for social justice.

In her contribution “Struggling to Become a Mother: Literary Representations of Involuntary Childlessness,” Jenny Björklund takes her point of departure in a Swedish context. Sweden is a country with progressive family politics that encourage reproduction, and the chapter focuses on three contemporary novels that deal with women who struggle to become mothers in a political and social environment of pronatalism. In depicting an often painful and existentially challenging process, the novels serve as pertinent examples of how deeply non-motherhood is intertwined with normative femininity, heteronormativity, and traditional family ideals. The chapter examines to what extent the novels adhere to, or contest, feminine ideals of motherhood, as well as discursive Swedish gender norms and nuclear family ideals. It furthermore touches on the complex and theoretically vital question of what about motherhood is (perceived as) natural versus constructed.

From this first set of chapters that variously put pressure on definitions of motherhood and mothering, and question motherhood, we move on to the next set of chapters, which offers three studies concentrating on mother-daughter relationships, and the matter of the “mother’s voice.” In her chapter “Orality/Aurality and Voice of the Voiceless Mother in Abla Farhoud’s *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail*,” Eglė Kačkutė analyzes the 1998 novel by Lebanese-Canadian author Farhoud. Kačkutė reminds us that narratives of migrant monolingual mothers told from their own perspective are still rare in literature. The novel highlights questions of mothering in a language perceived as foreign by the children (Arabic), and being a mother in a country whose language (French) the mother does not speak. Written by the daughter but from the mother’s point of view, the novel stages the mother/daughter plot by introducing the daughter as narrator—a fictionalized version of the author—in an imagined dialogue between the two where they share their Arabic mother tongue. Thus, Kačkutė argues, the novel features a double voice, a mother/daughter duet which allows for the unique specificity of each voice in their respective languages. Such narrative technique establishes a new ethics of representing other marginalized and silenced voices.

In 2020 the Jewish Swedish journalist Margit Silberstein published her autobiography *Förintelsens barn (Children of the Holocaust)*. Liz Kella’s chapter, “From Survivor to Im/migrant Motherhood and Beyond: Margit

Silberstein's Postmemorial Autobiography, *Förintelsens Barn*" which continues the strand of exploring mothers and daughters begun in the previous chapter, focuses on how Silberstein represents her relationship with her mother and her strong sense of identification with the mother's past experiences. The relationship between the survivor mother and the daughter is complex and a part of the testimony of the Holocaust, and Silberstein's memoir is part of an international sub-genre of life writing by children of survivors. Questions regarding the (im)possibility of inheriting maternal memory and embodied experiences are raised in the novel, as the daughter's eating disorders are understood as a mode of identifying with and alleviating the mother's sufferings. Kella shows that the daughter's attempts to understand her mother also create an emotional ambivalence toward the female body.

A strong generation of women writers have emerged in the German-speaking countries in recent decades, offering yet other intriguing explorations of the relationship between mother and daughter. In the chapter "The (M)other's Voice: Representations of Motherhood in Contemporary Swiss Writing by Women," Valerie Heffernan observes how new and challenging perspectives on this established theme in women's literature emerged in two Swiss novels in the 1990s, Zoë Jenny's *The Pollen Room* (1998, orig. 1997) and Ruth Schweikert's *Augen zu* (1998). Heffernan demonstrates that, in different ways, the novels respond to Marianne Hirsch's call for a "double voice" in literature that makes room for the maternal perspective. By focusing on narrative form, Heffernan discerns interesting differences in the approach to the textual status of the mother's voice. In *The Pollen Room*, the daughter's anger does not make room for the mother's voice but places the narrative authority with the daughter. Schweikert's *Augen zu*, however, opens up for the double voice in letting both protagonists speak.

After these explorations of maternal voices and mother-daughter plots, we come in the final set of chapters to two studies that point to ambivalent attitudes to motherhood—in literature and in life. Meanwhile, they also variously foreground the tensions between writing and mothering, whether this is thematized in complex narratives of contemporary motherhood or evidenced by critical "misrecognition" on the part of the literary/critical establishment. During the last decade, literature about choosing not to be a mother or regretting motherhood has provoked intense discussions. In "Contested Motherhood in Autobiographical Writing: Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti," Margaretha Fahlgren and Anna Williams discuss

two contemporary autobiographical novels, which investigate women's feelings and thoughts about motherhood, Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* (2001) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018). These narratives have been important in presenting alternative discourses on motherhood that have previously been rather taboo, and thereby broadening the concept as such. Both writers endeavor to understand the existential dilemma concerning motherhood by exploring their everyday experiences, and they variously reflect upon the tensions between motherhood and authorship.

The final chapter offers a perspective from Norway. In the year 2018, literary works about motherhood were published by four well established Norwegian novelists. Although very different, they all chose the novel as the literary form for exploring experiences of mothering. By close narratological analysis, Christine Hamm demonstrates in the chapter "A Plea for Motherhood: Mothering and Writing in Contemporary Norwegian Literature" how these novels address maternal experience in narratives that center on the felt need to defend the choice to be a mother. They foreground maternal experience while navigating feminist discourses as well as Norwegian family politics. The critical reception deemed these novels uninteresting and of low aesthetic quality, partly because of their subject matter and their (supposedly) auto-fictional dimensions. Hamm challenges this critical judgment, arguing that by merging fragments, essayistic pieces, memories, and reflections, the novels point to a new way of delineating the multi-layered experience of motherhood.

What these chapters taken together demonstrate is that there is diversity in the maternal voices that are emerging in fiction and life writing across national contexts in the twenty-first century. Above all, they point to the complexities and profound ambivalences of motherhood and mothering. In the words of Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "[m]otherhood offers women a site of both power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement" (Hansen 1997, 3). And, we would add, motherhood and mothering offer not just these extremes, but also the states in-between, states marked by much uncertainty and tension. These chapters also show that texts from previous decades resonate with urgent issues in our time, and that re-reading and re-thinking narratives of motherhood (and non-motherhood) "across generations" can provide inroads to understanding how representations and narration function as social critique as well as aesthetic pleasure.

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