From the Personal to the Political

Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative

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Writing as a Practice of Resistance:  
Motherhood, Identity, and Representation

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One of the many ways in which forms of selfhood have been transmitted and appropriated is through the reading of literary selves.  
—Steedman

In this essay, I will define my theoretical understanding of the relationship between motherhood, identity and self-representation by discussing concepts and thinkers that have paved my approach to literary studies and hermeneutics. The theoretical framework that has led to the completion of this essay is based on a multilayered study (Probyn 1993) of the contemporary notion of maternal identities as self-representation of the historical, cultural, and epistemological complexity of the present moment, as well as on an autobiographical perception of the issue. My research, together with my teaching practice, adopts a strongly theoretical approach to the exploration of possible ontologies of the self. The autobiographical dimension has shaped the substance of my discourse, as well as an ongoing reflection as to why, how, and to whom I address as a university lecturer; how I locate myself within the other(s)' gaze as an adoptive parent in a multiracial family, and how these two spheres interact in the context of everyday life through a theoretical understanding of myself as a committed social subject.  

Feminist criticism has long demonstrated that the dominant cultural construction of motherhood is mainly based on three recurring ideas: the need to define maternal subjectivity always and only in relation to feminine identity (and eventually to the individual’s social class, race, and/or sexual orientation); the ethics of mothering, that is to say, the discursive paradigm about how a good mother must act and behave;
and, as a consequence, the need to establish the limits of maternal agency (Bordo, 1995). According to Lisa Ikemoto: “The mother in a wide variety of race and class specific forms . . . has served as a cultural reference point of framework for particular sets of norms. These norms operate on three overlapping levels. At each level, patriarchy . . . white nativism and middle class privilege interlock into a matrix of standards and presumptions that appear to be part of the ‘natural order’ . . . Motherhood at this level is about mothering. Biological essentialism has shaped those assumptions, expectations and standards” (1999, 160).

Maternal subjectivities represent a powerful focal point of departure to reconsider in more complex terms the necessity to question established boundaries and rewrite the very definition of mothers as social subjects. In order to critically face and question some of the contemporary debates that would appear to bring us to relocate motherhood and mothering in the private realm—while paradoxically constructing a “new” public image of what a good mother is or is supposed to be (Swigart 1991; Thurer 1994; Douglass and Michael 2004)—we must analyze the discursive practices that are at the origin of this conservative shift. In my theoretical approach, I consider an autobiographical perspective that does not emphasize the inner, emotional, and private narrativization of motherhood. On the contrary, I feel it is necessary to lay stress on a (testimonial) political perception of the historically determined experience(s) of mothering. In other words and as Sawicki puts it: “We must reject an ahistorical appeal to the theoretical category of mothering. It obscures cultural and historical specificity” (1991, 61). Once we apply this historical prism, we become aware of how the discursive representation of motherhood and/or mothering is roughly and mainly constructed first from a standpoint that narrates maternal experiences from the outside (the mother as object of discourse) (Greenfield and Barash 1999; Thurer 1994; Tubert 1996), then through the mother/daughter relationship and psychoanalysis (the rejected mother) (Hirsch 1989; Malin 2002), and finally from an autobiographical perspective that, as a final point, voices the experience of mothering in a wider sense (the mother as subject) (Chase and Rogers 2001; Kenison and Hirsch 1996; Reddy, Roth, and Sheldon 2002).

Since the early 1990s, I have contextualized my understanding of the literary text as cultural production within the Foucauldian interpretation of the construction and questioning of normative identity. At the same time, I opened my field of research to the post-Marxist reading of the historical process1 and the Gramscian concept of cultural
hegemony, to explore—and problematize—the notion of writers as intellectuals and resilient agents within the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1973). I am conscious that my analysis focuses on literary discourse and that I do not examine these concepts from a perspective related to, let us say, political philosophy or social science. Anyway, I am also fully aware that, as Laclau and Mouffe state: "Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre" (2001, 112). I am also aware that I carry out my analysis in a cultural context that considers the use of textuality within a society that is heavily reliant on a globalized understanding of the cultural (visual) product, while weakening the meaning of the historical process in the formation of identity. As Scott Wilson reminds us: "History and criticism . . . are in practice processes of reading . . . the past, as an object of fascination, . . . the mirror in which 'recognition' is always also a 'misrecognition'" (1995, 12-13). Wilson's analysis of the possibilities of new historical readings stresses that reinterpreting the historical process that has forged the Real does not eliminate possibilities of change, but produces new tools for understanding the (Western) historical process differently. One of the other aspects that needs to be considered when analyzing the notion of (maternal) subject formation is, as Fredric Jameson among others points out, the pressing influence that a globalized and visual representation of society is playing on our understanding of ourselves as social subjects and how these hybrid discursive practices permeate the (self)narrative of (resistant) writers, artists and intellectuals. When writing becomes a site where conflict and/or contestation are represented, we might have a glimpse of the clash between the hegemonic ideological constructions of how maternal identities are projected onto the world and the struggling identities of "real" mothers that fight back to write their own true story. As Cossetti (1994) and Tuttle Hanson (1997) have shown, the discursive representations of motherhood(s) have slowly moved from the sphere of private writings to the sphere of public and political representation. These new forms of historical interpretation emphasize the importance of resistance in the definition of new ontologies of the self and the role that, eventually, writing can play in the process. Literary texts on motherhood range from the need to reappropriate one own's body in socially committed terms, defy the medical apparatus or, more ambiguously, to vindicate the private experience of the act of mothering. Nonetheless, as Tuttle points out, there exists a tendency to disregard the political meaning of
mothering and hide behind revisited idealized images of a private perception of motherhood, while ignoring the collective need to rethink the notion: "Feminists and feminist literary critics have in general assumed that if and when mothers could speak and write, in contradiction to their earlier silence, they could tell us a new and different story . . . In an important sense, many recent stories by or about mothers offer a mirror image of old stories" (1997, 14–15). A perusal of most of the (published) contemporary literature on motherhood reveals that on the one hand, the notion of mothering increasingly encompasses the role of grandmothers. Similarly, much has been written about mature (biological) motherhood, single motherhood and lesbian (biological) motherhood, as well as about the need to revise the notion of the homosexual family, the presence of Alzheimer’s disease and the consequent reversal of roles between mothers and daughters, and the ethics of care in the era of AIDS. On the other hand, while the issue of abortion appears to have waned, quite the opposite may be said regarding a notion of the maternal role that—dangerously—stresses the instinctive side, as social values become blurred. Since the beginning of the nineties, the common trend vis-à-vis the social meaning and construction of motherhood has been marked by a return to the celebration of the poetry of biological motherhood and to a notion that Douglas and Michael define as “the new momism”: “The fulcrum of the new momism is the rise of a really pernicious ideal in the late twentieth century that the sociologist Sharon Hays has perfectly labeled ‘intensive mothering’ ” (2004, 5). Douglas and Michael devote their analysis to the cultural representation of how an idealized new self-image of (famous) mothers and mothering takes shape within the collective imagery and tends to displace other more real and less attractive pictures of “dark” motherhoods. The media, they insist, play a basic role in the definition of these maternal cultural icons: “Paying lip service to a Botox-injected feminism, celebrity momism trivialized the struggle and hopes of real women, and kissed off sisterhood as hopelessly out of style. This kiss was especially lethal when blown toward other mothers not showcased in the glossy magazines, but displayed in mug shots on the nightly news” (2004, 139). Philosophers like Bordo and Debord point out, even though from different starting points, that the cultural shift toward a visual representation of the Real is producing an apparently “new” symbolic order whose ambiguous messages are contained in a trivialized and commoditised representation of the (autonomous) self:
Ours is an “infocombinental” culture in which the desire to sell products and stories continually tries to pass itself off as “helping” and “informing” the public, satisfying their “right to know.” We get our deepest philosophies of life from jingles and slogans. The fantasy—governed, pumped-up, individualistic rhetoric of commercial advertisements—like “Just Do It!” or “Know no Boundaries,” or “I’m Worth It!”—has become the ethics, political ideology, and existential philosophy of our time, constituting what is probably the only set of communally shared ideas we have, providing people with the one coherent (if reprehensible) set of standards they draw on justifying their own behaviour. The ethical code of Nike and Revlon! Talk about puppeteers being in charge of reality! (Bordo 1999, 12)

Wendy Brown, on a similar cultural basis, underlines how disciplinary practices are defining “new” subjectivities in order to update the mechanisms that conform the order of things: “Even as the margins assert themselves as margins, the denaturalizing assault they perform on coherent collective identity in the centre turns back on them to trouble their own identities” (1995, 53). It is at this point that the centrality of the Foucauldian theorisation on power relations—and its applicability within feminist critical theory—fully comes to light. Foucault does not consider power as simply repressive but also as productive because power produces resistance: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are “free.” By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behaviour are available” (Foucault 1997, 342). This brings me to refer to the strategic centrality of the Gramscian theory of (cultural) hegemony and intellectuals as resistant (in Foucauldian terms), and in my case writing, agents. If Gramsci’s perspective considers not only the subject, but her capacity to act through and within society, Foucault adds a deeper and more structured study of the discursive practices that shape identity. On the other hand, the Gramscian perspective can be seen as complementary when we consider the relatively limited agency that the Foucauldian subject has within the dominant discourse. From this theoretical standpoint, the mother’s voice is capable of critically bringing to light a (her) “subjugated knowledge” while stressing that mothering is not a homogeneous/unitary phenomenon, as Moraga states: “But when I can imagine I can speak with the voice of others—that others can speak through me—how wide and hopeful the project of writing becomes again” (1997, 47). Up to a point, the Foucauldian idea of the in-
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tellectual can modernize Gramsci’s notion and help to situate the foci of power more clearly, and, as a consequence, to signal the targets to deconstruct within a determined social structure and its cultural coding; Nakano Glenn points out how mothering is not only historically constructed but that such construction is linked to the individual’s capacity to become a social agent (1994, 3). The Foucauldian and feminist perspective enables us to work on the fragmentation of the contemporary social context, a fragmentation that Gramsci had not wholly considered. Within this approach, the proposed analysis explores the need to break boundaries and, at the same time, analyzes how (some) women writers respond to this as resilient agents because, as Cherrie Moraga points out: “That is my sole purpose, arrogant as it may seem, to write those kind of stories, stories to agitate, stories to remind us what has been forgotten” (1997, 46–47).

The theoretical frame sketched above brings me to a research on textuality and representation that focuses mainly on literary voices. My critical analysis of women’s autobiographical writing takes shape in-between discourses and refers to Buci-Glucksmann’s statement: “Every new historical situation has to create a new culture for itself, which does not necessarily mean making ‘individual’ and ‘original’ discoveries” (1982, 113). The autobiographical discourse on mothering points out that the emphasis is on multiplicity and resistance as opposed to a homogeneous and ahistorical reading of motherhood as well as of body and/or sexual politics. Laura Marcus suggests how autobiography as a literary genre can be redefined and related to what she calls “memory work,” an ensemble of written and oral life stories of the self (1995, 13); autobiography can be approached not only as a literary genre but “as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation” (Eakin 2001, 114) as well as a tool of analysis to measure the impact of reproduction and reproductive rights and social politics, teenage pregnancy, welfare reforms, and social control on women’s lives.

In autobiographical and testimonial texts, as Suzette Henke suggests, the writing subject maintains a dual role in the textual process, as she is at the same time the subject and object of analysis. It is this discursive duplicity that reinstates the (fragmented) writing subject’s wholeness and agency by giving her the means to voice her life experience; Henke calls it “a discursive drama of self” (1998, xvi). This approach illustrates how women writers (especially in autobiographical writing) defy, for example, Walter Benjamin’s thesis on the impossibility of voicing the historical experience of the oppressed. As Carolyn
Barros points out in *Autobiographical Narratives of Transformation*: “The transformation of a self, central to autobiographical discourse in earlier times, changes to a textual transformation—from the self speaking language to language speaking the self” (1998, viii). A crucial example is represented by Margaret Sanger’s activist stance against medical and social censorship regarding birth control, as the lines quoted below from her autobiography demonstrate: “How were mothers to be saved? ... I talked incessantly to everybody who seemed to have social welfare at heart. Progressive women whom I consulted were thoroughly discouraging. ‘Wait until we get the vote. Then we’ll take care of that.’ ... I tried the Socialists. Here, there and everywhere the replay came, ‘Wait until women have more education. Wait until we secure equal distribution of wealth.’ Wait for this and wait for that. Wait! Wait! Wait!” (Sanger 1999, 93).

Margaret Sanger also published *Motherhood in Bondage* (1928), a collection of letters she received during the 1920s from women all over the United States. The fragments of the auto/bio/graphical tragic experiences of many women are put together in this moving collection where the fragmentary presence of women’s voices, otherwise silenced because of their gender and social class, stresses their differences while at the same time unveiling their common experience: the dark side of pregnancy and motherhood from the viewpoint of poor, uneducated women. The text is divided into seventeen sections which draw the sombre picture of “enforced maternity,” as Sanger defined it (quoted by Feldt in Sanger 2000, v). It is not a coincidence, then, that the subtitle of the book is *Voices that gave Rise to the Planned Parenthood Movement* illustrates the link between writing, agency, and political action. Writing becomes a means of discovering not only social and cultural deprivation, but the living experience of trauma; in this case, it represents the dissemination of information and carries out—if not a revolutionary task—the autobiographical experience of voicing a traumatic experience (Probyn 1993, 98). Here are some fragments from the letters: “I am twenty-six years old. I have had five children, four living. (My husband is deaf and I know he is the biggest drunkard in this world) ... He gives us a little something to eat and that is all ... I want you to help me. If I was able I wouldn’t ask this of you ...” (In Sanger 2000, 15–16). Or, “Will you please listen to my plea? I am a mother of seven children, four living and three that are dead. My oldest living child is six years old, there are two dead which are older. My baby is six months old and I have been married
nine years . . . I have no health now. I have been to doctors and they tell me that I am having children too fast, but they will not tell me how to prevent it" (41). These testimonies are representative of the tension between life and death, between these women's maternal love and the physical and moral impossibility of enduring such a desperate situation. By publishing these letters as pieces of autobiographical writing, Sanger gives voice to the subaltern subject and, at the same time, constructs a community of voices throughout the text. As Jason Tougaw points out when referring to the "narrativization of trauma" (241), the chance to voice one's own suffering transforms the relation between the reading public and the writing subject, insofar the trauma as experience becomes, up to a point, a shared—as well as historically determined—experience within society. Testimonial writings, Tougaw insists, "help create a model of relational subjectivity" (241). The mother's voice (understood in a wider sense) may—through such testimonies—add political meaning to her personal life experience, in all its emotional intensity, both good and bad.

In 1994, for example, Maureen T. Reddy, Martha Roth, and Amy Sheldon edited *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering*; it is a text that, through the use of the discourses of theory, poetry, prose, or autobiography, puts together multiple kinds of narratives that are representative of different approaches to motherhood and mothering. The different sections of this collection ("Discovering Ourselves"; "Discovering through Our Children," "The Politics of Mothering," and "Continuity with our own Mothers") outline a feminist dialogue between the public and private realms of motherhood, mothering, and the mother-daughter relationship. Such a dialogue gives voice to a discourse on motherhood(s) that does not privilege an intimist approach, but rather, the political perception of the issue in contemporary culture and society. In the introduction to another collection, *The Voice of the Mother. Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies* (2000), Jo Malin, the editor, emphasizes two ideas that I regard as important: the first of these holds that the choice of texts and the critical stance toward them are in themselves autobiographical acts; the second contends that the mother's narrative frequently underpins hybrid forms of autobiographical writing, as may be seen, for example, in *Waiting in the Wings. Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (1997) by the Chicano dramatist Cherrie Moraga. Moraga's writing is here representative not only of literary hybridity, but of a need to recover and represent an/other way of being a family: "Growing up, the we of my
life was always defined by blood relations. We meant family. We were my mother's children, my abuela's grandchildren, my tios' nieces and nephews. To this day, most of my cousins still hold onto a similar understanding of we. Not I...So, the search for a we that could embrace all the parts of myself took me far beyond the confines of heterosexual family ties" (Moraga 1997, 17). Can this simply be considered as a trangressive political claim? Of course not. As Lisa Tatonetti suggests, Moraga's narrative delves into the inner discourses that conform our culture, while using motherhood both as a starting point for her research and as a "radical place of possibility for the future of Chicanas' culture" (2004, 229). But, in Waiting in the Wings, Moraga goes beyond the political and subversive potential of queer motherhood, as she analyses, at the same time, the inner mechanisms of the process of her becoming a mother, as well as the new dimension of her family relations and herself as a subject-in-progress.

Waiting in the Wings merges the author's diaries of her pregnancy and her son's early years of life, and a more public perception of the need and will to negotiate her identity as a lesbian Chicana, a writer, a mother, and a daughter. This is what she writes in the introduction: "The pages that follow are my own queer story of pregnancy, birth, and the first years of mothering. It is a story of one small human being's—my son's—struggle for survival/for life in the age of death/the age of AIDS" (1997, 22).

Autobiographical writings make the mother the subject of her own discourse. It is through these texts that subjugated identities (that also exist within feminism) are revealed and discordant voices are heard. The main challenge faced by feminist criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that of recovering the voices of all mothers and questioning their ontological position in a sociocultural panorama that exploits ideological ambiguity in order to advocate obsolete values which hinder both the development of the ethics of care and the role of the public sphere in defending the rights of those who provide and those who require care.

Notes

1. This essay has been mainly inspired by the European Project entitled "Travelling Concepts in Feminist Pedagogy" (Athena2) and the discussions that our research group held between 2004 and 2007 in Trento, Helsinki, London, Thessaloniki, and
Alicante. Part of the research leading to the completion of this essay was made possible by a Research Project (BSO2002-02999) financed by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología.

2. This is how Laclau and Mouffe broadly define “post-Marxism” in the introduction to the first edition of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: “Only if we renounce any epistemological prerogative based upon the ontologically privileged position of a ‘universal class,’ will it be possible seriously to discuss the present degree of validity of the Marxist categories. At this point we should state quite plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain” (2001, 4). In the preface to the second edition they insist on the idea: “To reread Marxist theory in the light of contemporary problems necessarily involves deconstructing the central categories of that theory. This is what has been called our ‘post-Marxism.’ We did not invent this label . . . But since it has become generalized in characterizing our work, we can say that we do not oppose it insofar as it is properly understood: as the process of reappropriation of an intellectual tradition, as well as the process of going beyond it” (2001, ix).

3. “Increasingly, we are witnessing a world without memory where, to use Guy Debord’s metaphor, mere images of reality flow and merge randomly like reflections on water . . . Rather than concretizing history in narrative and popular memory, culture, in its degraded commodified form, serves to induce amnesia and thwart collective action” (Best 1995, xi-xii).

4. The nodal point in his reinterpretation of the “history of ‘history’” (122) is the notion of subjectivity: the history of the “discourse of the master” (122) before the Enlightenment becomes the history of the discourse of knowledge (a discourse of university, 122) during the Enlightenment, only to be transformed into the history of the discourse of the hysteric (122) within Cultural Materialism: “hysteresis/history is more than a trivial word game—hysteresis is the subject’s way of resisting the prevailing, historically specified form of interpellation or symbolic identification” (Zizeck quoted in Wilson 1995, 122).

5. If Gramsci works with the idea of “subalternity” in mind, Foucault’s steady interest in identity formation manages to introduce the theoretical tools that allow us to recognize, analyze, question and accept difference within the collective (normative or nonnormative) process of identity formation in more contemporary terms. Buci-Glucksmann points out that: “there can be no ahistorical, abstract approach to consensus in general: hegemony is differentiated according to classes and historical phases.” Here is where, I believe, Gramsci and Foucault seems to converge and enrich our understanding of the construction of dominant discursive practices as well as the appearance of strategies of resistance within the cultural apparatus. I also find interesting points of contact between Gramsci’s and Foucault’s concepts of intellectuals as specific and/or organic agents of change. Some hints of Gramsci’s ideas can be found in Foucault’s “specific intellectual” (intellectual that can eventually move on to the political arena or to the public sphere) (Said).

6. She also stresses that “current work in the field of autobiography is pushing towards an interdisciplinary synthesis, turning away from generic history towards a more conceptual approach to the history of culture, marked by recent works on, for example, self-fashioning subjectivities, collective memory, confessions and the social construction of childhood” (1995, 16).
7. Beth Widmaier Capo points out how “until 1936, the Comstock Act criminalized the distribution of ‘lewd and lascivious’ material through the US postal system, including medical information on birth control, pornography, and fiction that touched on the subject” (111). She also reminds us that: “By 1933, Sanger’s American Birth Control League was opening birth control clinics across the nation” (112).

8. Claire M. Roche, in “Reproducing the Working Class: Tillie Olsen, Margaret Sanger, and American Eugenics,” gives an altogether different reading of Sanger’s activism. Roche problematizes Margaret Sanger’s ideological bases of her activism and illustrates how: “Margaret Sanger’s Birth Control Review . . . presents often troubling and ideologically informed representations of the working class, particularly as they pertain to human reproduction and the American eugenics movement” (2003, 259).

**Works Cited**


