



# Mothers and the academy

**Tracey Jensen**

University of East London, UK

*Feminist Theory*

2014, Vol. 15(3) 345–351

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/1464700114546452

[fty.sagepub.com](http://fty.sagepub.com)



**Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro** (eds), *Mothers in Academia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 288 pp. ISBN 978–0–231–16004–9 (hbk), £57.00; ISBN 978–0–231–16005–6 (pbk), £19.00

**D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein and Andrea O'Reilly** (eds), *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2012. 479 pp. ISBN 978–0–9866671–9–0 (pbk), \$39.95

**Andrew Parker**, *The Theorist's Mother*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 200 pp. ISBN 978–0–8223–5218–1 (hbk), \$79.95; ISBN 978–0–8223–5232–7 (pbk), \$22.95

The difficulty of combining motherhood with a professional career has long been known. Women and men may be equal in the eyes of the law, in equal pay legislation, in equalities documents, in the earnest intentions of recruitment, promotion and mentoring programmes throughout the world that aim to improve the representation of women in senior workplace positions. Despite all this, the fact remains that in the twenty-first century, the worst thing a woman can do for her career is get pregnant. The gender pay gap exists everywhere, but its precise size varies from one country to another: in the UK it is stubbornly stuck at around the 20 per cent mark (meaning that from mid-October onwards the average employed woman effectively works for free, when compared with her average male peer) and this can be accounted for mainly by maternity. Childless men and women earn comparable amounts: it is only if and when they start to create families that fathers' earnings begin to accelerate, while the salaries of mothers start to stagnate. In addition, in the UK, the Maternity Alliance estimates that up to thirty thousand women lose their jobs each year as a result of becoming pregnant. A tiny fraction of these pursue legal redress: such discrimination is considered acceptable.

In universities, mothers do not fare much better. Although becoming an academic might ostensibly seem to be a flexible career option in a progressive

---

## Corresponding author:

Tracey Jensen, School of Law and Social Sciences, University of East London, East Building 2.30, Docklands Campus, University Way, London E16 2RD, UK.

Email: [T.jensen@uel.ac.uk](mailto:T.jensen@uel.ac.uk)

institution, the workplace pressures in universities have multiplied and intensified as higher education has become thoroughly neo-liberalised. As the UK university system is increasingly marketised and the costs of education are transferred wholesale from taxpayer to individual student-customers in the form of an obscene debt-burden, academics have been under renewed and intensified pressure to demonstrate their ‘impacts’ and ‘outputs’ in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) in order for their departments to be able to secure access to potential research funding. Concerns have been raised regarding the troubling gender skew in terms of full-time academic staff whose research has been included in the REF exercise (see Jones, 2013). Academics were able to claim a reduction in their required ‘outputs’ (from the standard four publications to three) only if their personal circumstances reduced their research time by *at least* fourteen months. Even if one took the full thirty-nine weeks of paid maternity leave, or full twelve months of unpaid maternity leave – both options seriously reducing household income – this would not guarantee a reduction in required output. Incredibly, it is only by taking *two* periods of maternity leave that the minimum fourteen months could be reached.

These regulations matter because they form part of the broader university climate which disadvantages women, and specifically mothers. Academics who did not produce the required outputs for the REF may find their promotion prospects affected, may be moved to teaching-only contracts with no research component, or may even find their position at risk. The REF itself has undermined equal opportunities legislation, as many universities apparently bypassed the usual recruitment processes to headhunt and appoint illustrious celebrity ‘names’ who could contribute to the REF (Jones, 2013).

Many academics have already engaged in critical self-examination of the twin industries of teaching and learning, including the textures of relational and institutional power in universities (Gillies and Lucey, 2007) and the new equality regimes of ‘diversity’ in higher education (Taylor, 2012). To this body of work we can add *Mothers in Academia*, edited by Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro, a collection of reflective and often damning essays that explore the costs and obstacles of trying to balance the work of mothering with the work of academia. As well as foregrounding the ways that parenting is powerfully and persistently gendered – and that it is the mothers, rather than the fathers, working in universities who experience the frustrations of trying to consolidate these rival roles – this collection highlights the interlocking systems of oppression that are made in and through the machinery of the academy. Sexism, but also colonialism, racism, ethnocentrism and ageism come under the scrutiny of the contributors, who, across nineteen chapters, expose the structural disparities that are produced in a world that continues to presume that learning, teaching and research unfold on a flat landscape unmarked by difference.

Drawing on practices of oral history and auto-ethnography and driven by the histories of *testimonios* of Latina feminism, this collection aims to ‘bear witness and inscribe into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the

history of erasure' (p. 9). The intersectional paradigm that underpins this book is geared towards forging solidarities, community-making, opening up dialogue and developing an ethic of care towards colleagues, in spaces of work that are too often isolating, competitive and unwelcoming. In sharing such *testimonios*, this book beautifully dismantles the unspoken assumptions about who can or might be a scholar, a researcher, a teacher, an administrator, or a student. It celebrates how far the fractures of the ivory tower entrance have widened but also insists that there is yet much to be done. What is particularly affecting – and affirming, even joyous – are the revelations, across so many of the chapters, of the commonalities and solidarities that these mothers in academia come to feel with their colleagues, showing women who had already gone through the process of 'balancing the unbalanceable' extending care to their younger co-workers. The relationships between mothers in academia take the form of a whole range of loving maternal forms (sisters, aunts, grandmothers and, of course, mothers) and these particularly resonate in the collaboratively written chapters. As the entrepreneurial university solidifies its preference for its 'ideal worker' – one who is mobile, unencumbered by caring responsibilities, and endlessly exploitable – the ways that mothers support and advocate for one another become all the more crucial if we are to resist this hardening. The final section of the book includes several essays about how to press for policy change across the sector and how to implement strategies within our institutions, in light of the restructuring of education in a global marketplace. While many of the book's essays are haunted by the rhetoric of choice – did I make the right choice, was there a better choice I could have made – this final section reminds us of the failure of choice rhetoric, and that 'choice' often disguises a series of poor alternatives and double-binds. There is no 'right time' to have children when the most important career-building years overlap with childbearing years. Perhaps, for now, the best that mothers in academia can do is refuse to acquiesce to institutional denial, build networks of support, be loving allies to one another, and bear witness to the struggles and triumphs of *testimonios* such as this.

An equally powerful collection of writing about reconciling motherwork with academic labour has been published in *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context*, edited by D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein and Andrea O'Reilly. Both editors are established voices in the emerging field of maternal studies, publishing research on topics ranging from celebrity motherhood, the paralysis of maternal 'choice', to cultural matrophobia. O'Reilly's capacity to galvanise and organise critical research on motherhood is undeniable. She established the Association for Research on Motherhood and founded the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*<sup>1</sup> as well as Demeter Press, an independent feminist press publishing academic and creative work on mothers and mothering. *Academic Motherhood* is very much a product of this broader vision orientated towards disrupting contemporary ideologies of motherhood. In the United States (where the majority of this book's contributors are based) this has become known as 'new momism', though in other places and contexts it has been termed 'intensive motherhood' or more unfavourably 'smother mothering' and 'helicopter parenting'. The ideology of intensive

mothering, as documented in Sharon Hays' influential *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1998) demands that mothers devote themselves entirely and devotedly to the lives of their children and *at the same time* develop their own committed and enriching careers. This ideology insists that childrearing should be expert-guided, emotionally exhausting, demanding and expensive, and that the only person who has the capacity to fully engage in it is the mother.

Such an ideology, as this book illuminates, is also peculiar to a post-second wave context in which gender equality is assumed to have been reached in the workplace even as women and men revert to powerful gendered roles at home if and when they become parents. Academic women (like women working across many professions) enjoy the gains of second wave feminism and may experience the university workplace as progressive *until* they have children, at which point they experience a 'maternal wall'. Once they are encumbered by family demands, academic mothers are penalised by the norms of academia in a way that academic fathers are not. The essays collected here highlight that post-second wave (or 'postfeminist', see Gill and Rosalind, 2007) women are caught in a 'split subjectivity', caught between the expectations of career success (after all, haven't the feminist battles been won?) and the resurgent tyranny of gendered responsibilities if/when they become mothers. The sensibilities of postfeminism – which insist that feminism is something from the past that has now succeeded in its aims – make it difficult to articulate the continued experience of maternal discrimination, matrophobia, or just plain old sexism, especially when it is happening in the university, a workplace that many like to think of as liberal and liberated. The demands of intensive motherhood are potentially limitless – a mother's work is never done. When twinned with the demands of academic work – itself becoming increasingly precarious, competitive, anxiety-producing, also potentially limitless – it is not surprising that so many of the contributors write of feelings of guilt, failure and being 'found out' as imposters. Caught between two powerful fields of identity – mother/academic, academic/mother – each with insatiable appetites for time and energy, both saturated with toxic fantasies of effortless perfection, the senses of failure in the classroom and failure in the nursery are palpable across all the chapters.

The *Academic Motherhood* and *Mothers in Academia* collections should be read concurrently: both aim to give voice to the often silent struggles of academics who do not fit the profile of the ideal worker. Both collections have wider purchase in terms of reflecting on other academic subjects who challenge images of the ideal worker and struggle to fit into place, often leaving the academy or moving into less prestigious tiers of work. Both echo the consciousness-raising strategies of second wave feminism, aiming to bring personal narratives into dialogue in the face of the chilly climate of institutions that fail to create circumstances in which academic mothers can flourish. *Mothers in Academia* is certainly the more intersectional of the two books, and the essays in this book highlight the multiple binds and obstacles created by the corporatised academy for academic mothers whose professional careers are also marked by other axes of difference. While there are significant moments of critical intersectional reflection in the essays of *Academic*

*Motherhood* – contributors examine, variously, how marital status, social class, heterosexism and mental health might complicate the axes of gender and maternity, and indeed editor Hallstein's own essay argues for taking an intersectional approach to these issues – these discussions are less developed. The book seems haunted by the burdens and requirements of intensive mothering and, rather than dismantling this very ideology, many of the insights become diffused by this attachment.

A quite different book is offered by Andrew Parker in *The Theorist's Mother*, which also explores the presence/absence of mothers in the academy but via the figure of the philosopher and his mother. Ranging across critical theory, and focussing specifically on the 'fathers of discursivity', Marx and Freud, Parker examines the 'unmasterable questions' of philosophy: who or what is a mother, can a philosopher be a mother and can a mother be a philosopher? At first glance, this book might seem to proffer the same frustrating binaries of nature/culture, repetition/innovation, immanence/transcendence which pin mothers to the reproduction of material beings only, while leaving the production of ideas to men. However, as the 'mother trouble' of the first chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that Parker not only understands the history of the refusal and discounting of the mother across theory, he is also interested in creatively engaging with such refusals, and, indeed, in re-reading these refusals as foundational to critical theory itself. And in re-reading the refusal of the mother in philosophy, Parker finds her everywhere. In addition to Marx and Freud, Parker's examination of the maternal in philosophy takes in Lacan, Derrida, Heidegger, Barthes, Nietzsche and the list goes on. Exploring the key debates across psychoanalysis and Marxism via the figure of the mother who never behaves quite as Theory expects, Parker offers a stimulating review – signposting the further debates for more ambitious and demanding readers familiar with the Western theoretical canon, but making the principal ideas accessible to a broader readership.

The discussion moves between arguments and disputes that we might be at least casually acquainted with, and extraordinary moments and materials that Parker has unearthed which are newly illuminating and provocative. These include: rare interviews, unpublished lectures, conference discussions or other pieces of writing that have remained untranslated or otherwise been of interest only to theory aficionados. Thus we are treated to a fascinating interview exchange in which Derrida struggles to imagine his mother as a philosopher since 'a philosopher is a father not a mother'. He eventually settles on a postdeconstructive mother, which would be Derrida himself, his son or perhaps his granddaughter (p. 5). We hear of Marx's private letters in which he complains that while his mother lives, he has no right to his inheritance (p. 65). And Heidegger, who famously placed his author's copy of *Being and Time* on his mother's deathbed, is reappraised as a theorist whose fundamental ideas about language and translation required the figure of the mother (p. 24). Those aspects of language that resist translation are, Parker argues, those parts that are 'local, sexual, accented [...] a maternal bulwark against universalized, deracinated Language of exchange' (p. 90).

Parker considers his own turn to psychoanalysis, trying to make sense of his mother's psychosomatic illnesses. While some may feel uncomfortable with the way that he, like so many of the thinkers explored in this book, transforms his mother's psyche, in this case her attachment to illness – '[she] was never happier than when in the throes of a medical crisis' (p. 34) – into a lesson for himself (this criticism was apparently levelled at him when he presented at a conference), I found these passages genuinely touching. They served as an important puncture to the fantasy of the philosopher as emerging from nowhere – a thinker, unencumbered by the maternal body that has nourished him.

*The Theorist's Mother* is a rich and fascinating book. It returns to key questions in maternal philosophy: when we talk about women, are we talking about mothers, and vice versa? What does feminism gain (and lose) with the expansion and contraction of the category of 'mother'? When is the mother literal and when is she figural? In a time of reproductive technology and innovation, in what ways is the category of mother multiplying and how might the consequent eroding certainties of maternity disrupt what we think we know about mothers? These questions open the reader to broader and longer discussions between the maternal philosophers to whom Parker is indebted – Kristeva, Ruddick, Rich, Irigaray, Baraitser. But the project of *The Theorist's Mother* is not to sidestep this rich lineage – it is rather to ask how and why the male canon of philosophy has found the mother to be such an impossible figure – and what might be gained from excavating her and re-centring her at the very heart of Theory.

All three of these books extend an urgent debate about the place of mothers and mothering in the academy. They consider pressing questions for anyone who has seen the eye-roll of colleagues when an academic announces her pregnancy; encountered with disbelief the refusal of institutions to renew teaching contracts of staff on maternity leave; met with a student struggling to balance inflexible study hours with childcare; received news that the university nursery has been deemed 'a luxury' or 'not cost effective' and will be reduced or closed. The UK Equality Challenge Unit, which in 2008 examined the gender factors influencing which academic staff were put forward for the Research Assessment Framework, suggested that possible reasons for the gender skew might include 'gender occupational segregation [...] work-life balance issues; a tendency for women to have greater teaching, pastoral care and administrative working loads [...] and lower application rates for research funding' (cited by Graziosi, 2014). The institutional failure to engage with the place of mothers in the academy is compounding a situation where the 'ideal academic' will and must remain childless.

## Note

1. This remains one of *only two* maternal studies networks with a connected academic journal. The Association was founded in 1998 at York University, Toronto and in 2010 was renamed the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI). The other network and journal is Mapping Maternal

Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics (MaMSIE), based in Birkbeck, University of London, which founded *Studies in the Maternal* in 2009.

## References

- Gill and Rosalind (2007) 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2): 147–166.
- Gillies, Val and Helen Lucey (eds) (2007) *Power, Knowledge and the Academy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graziosi, Barbara (2014) 'Sex and the REF'. *Times Higher Education*, 20 March. Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/sex-and-the-ref/2012076>. article (accessed 10 August 2014).
- Hays and Sharon (1998) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Jones, Sandra (2013) 'The "Star" Academics are so Often White and Male'. *Guardian*, 22 April.
- Taylor and Yvette (ed.) (2012) *Educational Diversity: The Subject of Difference and Different Subjects*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

