

Ángeles de la Concha y Raquel Osborne 2004: *Las mujeres y los niños primero: discursos de la maternidad*. Barcelona: Icaria. 287 pp.

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Since the 90s, most theorists have focused their attention on the different aspects which make up a new way of approaching a wider notion of mothering and its political relationship with a different—and necessary—perception of the notions of family and citizenship (Greenfield and Barash 1999; Hannisberg and Ruddick 1999; O’Reilly and Abbey 2000; Stanworth 1987; Umanski 1996; Wallbank 2001).¹ Feminist research in the field of Motherhood Theory and the different practices of mothering have gone a long way since the early 60s both in North America and Europe. From sociology or psychoanalysis to literary studies, the crucial theoretical insights of writers and intellectuals such as Juliet Mitchell, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Patricia Hill-Collins, Mary O’Brien, Gena Corea, Julia Kristeva or Hélène Cixous have demonstrated at the same time the richness of this field of study and the difficulty of carrying out an homogenous and straightforward analysis. As Elaine Tuttle points out, “the story of feminist thinking about motherhood since the early 1960s is told as a drama in three acts: repudiation, recuperation, and, in the latest and most difficult stage to conceptualize, an emerging critique of recuperation that coexists with ongoing efforts to deploy recuperative strategies” (1997: 5). She also stresses how feminism has been able to draw attention to the public side of mothering and the ontology of the maternal self, but has not been able to find a consensus on how to collectively re/think the notion (1997: 6). In this sense, Hannisberg and Ruddick insist on the need to investigate more disturbing cases of motherhood such as drug using by pregnant women or pregnant teens, and to question in a more daring way preconceived ideas of what “normal” mothering is, in what social circumstances it occurs and what a “normal” child is. The darker side of mothering is finally brought to light not to judge or control, but to demonstrate, for example, that in the case of mothers who fail to protect their children from violence: “not only courts ignore the context of family violence, but they judge mothers *in relation to based expectations*” (Roberts 1999: 41; my emphasis). Here, we go far beyond the controlled and agreeable realm of “the good enough mother” and step into what Contratto and Chodorow define as “the fantasy of the perfect mother.” In spite of the diverse approaches which exist within feminism to move towards a deeper understanding of maternal practices and their relationship with contemporary society, they all share a common goal: to make the connection between mothers and women while showing that women and motherhood as well as mothering are distinct—and not always interrelated—concepts. As Marianne Hirsch points out, “by distinguishing between female positions—childless woman and mother, mother and daughter—it challenges the notion of woman as a singular, unified, transparent category” (1989: 12).

1. Ruddick’s theory on mothering—together with the pioneering work of Judith Mitchell and Nancy Chodorow—being the starting point for a critical and ethical perspective, which represents—within Anglo-Saxon theory—a common ground for most theorisation on the ontology of motherhood.

The essays published in the collection edited by Ángeles de la Concha and Raquel Osborne, *Las mujeres y los niños primero: discursos de la maternidad*, are inscribed within this theoretical cultural context. At first sight, this text seems to lack homogeneity and its discursive structure can appear somewhat confused, but, on second thoughts, the reader realizes that this is not the case; an idea which is clearly stated in the “Prólogo,” where de la Concha sketches the theoretical frame that operates as the conceptual backbone of the whole project: “Se ha buscado una orientación del libro eminentemente interdisciplinaria . . . Nos interesaba igualmente la problemática real de las mujeres-madres . . . [y] la constitución de su subjetividad” (8). Since the 80s, the critical work on the cultural construction of motherhood has demonstrated that interdisciplinarity is essential. Nakano, Chang and Rennie-Forcey clearly express this idea in *Mothering Ideology, Experience, and Agency*: “FIRST we need to decompose mothering into constituent elements that are fused within the master definition of mother” (1994: 13). We have to assume that the notions of motherhood and mothering are not only historically constructed but are also subject to—in Foucauldian terms—a discontinuous historical process, a contemporary understanding and emphasis on diversity, and to different objective cultural practices: the key term then is complexity. As Chantal Mouffe brilliantly summarizes: “A total, or totalising, history tends to draw all phenomena to a single centre; whereas what Foucault calls ‘general’ history deploys the space of dispersion” (1991: 131).

The essays in de la Concha and Osborne’s collection are a clear example of this cultural analysis whose aims are twofold: on the one hand, the necessity to deconstruct the notion of motherhood tied to an essentialist understanding of the ontology of the figure of the mother. On the other hand, the consciousness that such a critique belongs to a discourse that reshapes the study of motherhood within *wider* intellectual cultural and sociological contexts—in this sense, it is unfortunate that there are no legal studies in this collection. This plural approach is a must in our understanding of the cultural location of the mother as subject of her own discourse in contemporary society: for this reason, and among other things, one of our ongoing political tasks and intellectual responsibilities is to continue to fight against the objectification of the maternal figure and the transformation of the foetus into a powerful subject of discourse (Bordo 1995).

According to Kristi Siegel, narratives of the mother and about the mother in Western culture are difficult to locate as they exist in between literary and cultural borders; she stresses that to fully approach the mother’s story we need to consider “how motherhood remains an uneasy site both in text and culture” (1999: 1). The essays included in *Las mujeres y los niños primero* are representative of this objective difficulty; like a mosaic in-progress, they give life to a kind of complex textual prism in which the voiced as well as the unsaid by feminist criticism take everchanging, ambiguous shapes in poetry and cinema where the voice of the mother, as subject of her discourse, seems to be lost or hidden (Mercedes Bengoechea’s “Mi madre es . . . un hueco en el espacio: discursos poéticos y maternos sobre la insignificancia materna” and Pilar Aguilar’s “Madres de cine: entre la ausencia y la caricatura”). At the same time, the notion of motherhood is critically inscribed within the historical process of Western epistemology (Alicia Puleo’s “Perfiles filosóficos de la maternidad”) and I personally believe that one of the most pressing intellectual tasks that we need to face—among the many that Puleo points out—is to continue to insist that maternal subjectivities are inscribed within History. This is how Alicia Puleo puts it: “La realidad de hoy es el producto de la realidad de ayer, una realidad

que se configuró con numerosos elementos entre los que se encuentran las narrativas de interpretación de la maternidad” (39). In this same line of thought, the Foucauldian philosopher Jana Sawicki asks her readers: “When did the idea of the mother as an emotional nurturer emerge? When did the idea of women’s status as reproducer prevail? . . . We must reject an ahistorical appeal to the theoretical category of mothering. It obscures cultural and historical specificity” (1991: 60–61). Essays such as Cristina Molina’s “Madre inmaculada, virgen dolorosa: modelos e imágenes de la madre en la tradición católica,” Cristina Brullet’s “La maternidad en occidente y sus condiciones de posibilidad en el siglo XXI,” or Sara Barron’s “Ruptura de la conyugalidad e individuación materna” deconstruct and reconstruct this theoretical path; their texts problematize the origins of Western thought while questioning, at the same time, the new possible answers and contemporary political debates on the new understanding of motherhood.

Motherhood is a social construct. This means that its role in the Real varies depending on history and the needs imposed on individuals by the hegemonic groups. In this sense, if we want to reconstruct the archaeology of the discourses on motherhood in Western thought and then question this “maternal order of things,” we cannot leave aside the discourse of Psychoanalysis, the legal discourse and the historical construction of sexuality. In a short essay entitled “Motherhood: Reclaiming the Demon Texts,” Ann Snitow² reinterprets the early 70s classical texts on motherhood—among them Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Dinnerstein’s *Mermaid and the Minotaur*, and Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution*—and gives them new life. When Snitow refers to Sara Ruddick’s celebrated work, she underlines how her reading of the notion of “mothering” englobes an innovative ethical perspective: “Ruddick argues—with much reason—that hers is an anti-Reagan text: it includes men as mothers; it includes lesbians as mothers; it demands public support for women’s work” (1991: 36). As we know, Sara Ruddick understands the concept of mothering not as a heterosexual biological inherited skill, but as something related to the socially constructed process of learning to take care of other people, a process that gets inscribed into a relational context; an idea that we have come to know as “ethics of care” and that has been at the origin of so many productive discussions within feminist critical theory while quickly expanding into Peace Studies (Bordo 1995).

To develop a cultural critique of such order means that we have to re/define a net of discursive practices that do not exist nor develop around a fixed centre, but that help to de/centre the meaning of discourse while creating focal points of active resistance. An example of this complex kind of intellectual quest is Silvia Tubert’s brilliant essay “La maternidad en el discurso de las nuevas tecnologías reproductivas.” Tubert points out that “el deseo de hijo no es natural sino histórico, se ha generado en el marco de las relaciones con los otros” (113). Silvia Tubert’s insights on reproductive technologies seem to meet with Ann Snitow’s discomfort when, in “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading,” she asks herself (as a woman going through IVF and as a feminist intellectual): “Why does the pronatalism of our period flourish with so little argument from us, the feminists?” (1992: 34). Silences must also be questioned, tensions within feminism must

2. Ann Snitow’s production in the field of Anglo-Saxon theory on motherhood and discursive practices is extremely interesting. Among others, I strongly recommend her 1992 and 1994 essays.

come to light, be analyzed and discussed; this is of basic importance in contemporary cultural theory on motherhood and they are actually given voice in Beatriz Suárez Briones's "El cuerpo a cuerpo con la madre en la teoría feminista contemporánea" and in María Jesús Fariña Busto's "¿Qué hacer con las madres?: disidencias y contradicciones en escritoras hispanoamericanas." Brione's essays relies on psychoanalytic feminist theory and its revision of the Freudian maternal tale; she then opens up to a poststructuralist understanding of the real and advocates for a stronger relation between the necessity to deconstruct the Freudian logos and Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* in an attempt to give the maternal voice a site of (self-)representation. This is a standpoint I personally find intellectually captivating but, at the same time, I do not completely share, as I consider that it leaves aside a more material questioning of the social and political notion of motherhood(s) in contemporary cultural theory; it is, nonetheless, representative of the wide range of theoretical approaches and differing intellectual standpoints within Feminism.

Within this complex net of discursive practices, we cannot forget that the definition of motherhood and its representation in fiction within a changing social context—and I mainly refer to 19th- and 20th-century literary landscapes—seems to be marked by an ever stronger, ongoing need to voice and narrate it in between cultures (Ángeles de la Concha's "La figura materna, un problema transcultural: reflexiones sobre su representación en la novela de autoría femenina"). Starting from the 19th century onwards, literature has become a fertile field of maternal representations for a large number of women writers: diaries, private correspondence, autobiographies, novels, didactic books (Cosslet 1994; Tuttle Hansen 1997; Derer 1998). These texts, which for the last two hundred years have either celebrated traditional motherhood or refused it, and have either identified with Freud's theories or questioned them, represent, nonetheless, the need to write as a "knowing" subject, to narrate the maternal *I* and differentiate it from the concept of womanhood. I personally believe that this cultural heritage and its narrativization is present all over the collection. Life stories and personal narratives permeate all the essays, from Bengoechea's reflections on the role of language in silencing maternal experience to Tubert's psychoanalytic reading of the impact of new reproductive technologies in women's lives. Once again, the personal is *also* political and, most importantly, critical space is given to complexity. The editors as well as the authors have been able to focus on some of the *conflicts* that forge the materiality of the discourse on motherhood(s). This is not a celebratory collection of mothers and mothering (something that I myself honour), but a project that aims at stressing the sometimes forgotten (and sombre) spaces in mothering theory and the ongoing contemporary reflection on the ontology of motherhood.³

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3. The research leading to the publication of this review was made possible by a Research Project (BSO2002–02999) financed by the Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología.

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