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). 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).
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 “Perfil 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
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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 feminine* 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 (Cosset 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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