Maternal Theory

Essential Readings

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Resisting, But Not Too Much

Interrogating the Paradox of Natural Mothering

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Recently, I invited a local breastfeeding advocate and La Leche League leader named Mary Beth to my "Gender and the Body" class. She framed her talk around "the many obstacles to making breastfeeding work in contemporary western society." Mary Beth promoted constant mother-baby togetherness and the rejection of the shiny new gadgets that new parents are expected to acquire whether they can afford them or not, and made a compelling feminist argument for keeping baby close. Women can and should trust their bodies to nourish their babies, she said. Say no to the male dominated medical establishment. Say no to patriarchal constructions of the sexualized breast. Take it back. And she was effective. As Mary Beth presented her argument, I watched my students process the information. One student caught my attention, angst evident on her face. During the lively Q & A she finally burst out with the following:

I'm really struggling with this... On the one hand, I am trying to fight oppression and claim my place in society, get recognized in the work force, you know get liberated. But now you are telling me that to be really free, I should go back home and take care of babies, breastfeeding them all the time. And it does sound really great. But I feel stuck. I don't know what I am supposed to do!

As she spoke, I nodded knowingly. This dilemma haunts many feminists as they struggle to define and shape their lives and is the knot at the center of feminist mothering scholarship. Mothering scholar and sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn pointed to the conflict between feminists who regard maternal-derived gender differences as oppressive and those who reclaim motherhood as a source of power and status when she wrote:

We are reluctant to give up the idea that motherhood is special. Pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding are such powerful bodily experiences, and the emotional attachment to the infant so intense, that it is difficult for women who have gone through these experiences and emotions to

think that they do not constitute unique female experiences that create an unbridgeable gap between men and women (22-23).

My aim in this chapter is to respond to this dilemma by looking closely at the kind of attached mothering practice that MaryBeth advocates as an expression of feminism.

Mary Beth is part of an emerging social movement of women I call "natural mothers." The natural mothers give birth to their babies at home; they homeschool; they grow much of their family's produce, and sew many of their clothes. The natural mothers seem, at first glance, an anarchonism, recalling a time when some women derived their identities from raising families and excelling at the domestic arts. While their contemporaries negotiate daycare, babysitters, and bottle-feeding, the natural mothers reject almost everything that facilitates mother-child separation. They believe that consumerism, technology, and detachment from nature are social ills that mothers can and should oppose.

The natural mothers constitute a counterculture that enacts a particular form of activism, a kind of "everyday activism," to use Baumgardner and Richards' term or what New Social Movements scholars increasingly find in contemporary social movements—a focus on the day to day content of personal lives, linked with issues of identity rather than economic grievances characteristic of, for example, working class movements (see Johnston, Larena, and Gusfield). Natural mothers, working at the level of the individual and the familial, seek to change culture one family at a time. But what is natural mothering's promise for social change? Does this particular kind of mothering trap or liberate women?

Getting to Know Natural Mothering

In the mid 1990s, I grew to know several small intersecting communities of natural mothers. I spent over two years in the field—participating in playgroups with my toddler and attending La Leche League meetings (the international breastfeeding support organization). I joined a food coop and "Creating Stronger Families (CSF)," an association of those who chose home-schooling, homebirth, and other parenting alternatives. CSF met for monthly potlucks and "working bees" in which members assisted the host family with a house project, and held an annual weekend conference that drew families throughout the Midwest. Later, I interviewed 32 natural mothers I met during the course of my fieldwork. Through these observations and interviews, I learned that Natural Mothering merges two lifestyle practices—Voluntary Simplicity and Attachment Parenting—while taking inspiration from Cultural Feminism.

Consciously anti-materialist and anti-consumerist, Voluntary Simplicity promotes a life freed from, as one of my informants put it, "biggering and bettering." Voluntary Simplicity, also called Simple Living, dictates a lifestyle that derives meaning from relative austerity, minimized consumption and the belief that in-
I feel that the women’s movement of the 1960s robbed me of something. It did get me more pay in the workplace, and I don’t mind that, but they also made me more in the workplace, and I mind that immensely.

In short, natural mothering is cultural feminist theory in practice. So how does Natural Mothering, the product of these practices and ideologies, make sense of itself? In short, I argue that Natural Mothering is ultimately worked out. While it resists both technology and capitalism, it stops short of resisting patriarchy. Natural mothers accept the category ‘woman’ as it is socially constructed and fail to acknowledge the privilege necessary to enact their lifestyle. Thus, natural mothering’s paradox as a project of recreating motherhood, and by extension, society at large, is compromised (Rober). Because it lacks a comprehensive and honest self-critique, its criticism of the institutions it resists is evaded and its message is left open to co-option.

Interrogating the Paradox

This paradox demands a closer look. I found it expressed in the form of two key contradictions that each create a distinctive theoretical tension. The first contradiction centers on choice. The natural mothers spoke of a conscious and intentional decision to mother naturally, consistent with their identities as feminists and everyday activists for social change. One informant, whom I call Michelle Grant-Jones, is a mother of three with a B.A. in Women’s Studies. Early in our interviews, she said that “If she might not look like much of a feminist living around with her kids with no goal really before her” but was careful to draw a stark distinction between “stay-at-home mothers” of an earlier generation and herself. Her life, she asserted, was freely chosen and consistent with her feminism which recognizes the essential experience of womanhood, and by extension, motherhood. The distortion of this particularly raced and classed history of women’s labor aside, her generational comment is interesting. Embedded in this discourse of choice lays a contradiction. Note, for example, the following exchange I had with Teresa Reyes, a biologist turned natural mother of four who shared how her plans shifted after the birth of her first baby. She originally planned to return to work and leave the baby with her husband, but something changed:

I just felt that I had no choice, I suppose I was a little surprised, because after she was born it was not an option for me to leave her.

Still other mothers responded to my query, why natural mother? with the response: “I just knew.” I heard repeatedly how, when the mothers were faced with a decision, they simply followed their instincts and intuition. When I pushed them to provide a rationale for their choices, they paused and looked away wistfully. ‘I don’t know. It just felt right to homebirth, to extend breastfeeding, to keep baby in bed with us’ they told me in various iterations. Their mothering practice
The second contradiction revealed in the discourse of natural mothering centers on control. The natural mothers believe they have wrested control of their personal lives from institutions and experts claiming to "know best." For example, natural mothers push birthing practices, patiently resisting the obstetrical medical establishment. Natural mothers were shopping local food coops, buying in bulk, and buying shares in Community Supported Agriculture before major "natural foods" chain stores brought such natural, local and whole foods into the trendy, overpriced current in the mainstream. This suggests that natural mothers do (or at least did) exist on the margins, trailblazing, pushing institutions, and as a result, raising awareness. Natural mothering is radical in the very real ways it questions the features of family life in an advanced capitalist society.

But if mainstream culture is rejected, does something else fill that void? The mothers spoke passionately of the importance of "taking mothering back" from institutions and "experts," and simultaneously waxed, with a blend of awe and resignation, on the fertility of resisting nature. Over and over again, I heard stories of the mothers' abiding faith in nature, which served as a model and resource to them. As Gregory McLeod and others have noted, pregnant women"s intertwining story of pregnancy with nature (in the words "mother earth") be seen as a metaphor forмат, a practice of letting nature run its course and she was much happier for it. Ingrid Kitzinger, a mother of three, referred to childbirth as something you don't really control, something "that just happens to you." Clearly, this is a narrative of respecting omnipotent nature. But when the mothers spoke of nature, they spoke of a monolithic and static concept, predating humankind, which remains pure and unabused. To them, nature is the perfect model for human behavior because it is separate from and unpolluted by human manipulation. This view, of course, is problematic; it denies the many ways in which nature is indeed culturally constructed and thus dynamic. But to these mothers, the "fact" of nature's separation from culture is what renders it so appealing and powerful. Furthermore, the mothers told me, listening to nature led them to tune into the powerful mother-child bond. This relationship, they maintain, fuses mothers and children virtually into a single entity, extending the relationship developed during pregnancy. In this view, maternal self-sacrifice is not at the root of contemporary mothers' difficulties; rather, a culture that casts mothers and children in opposition in direct affront to "nature," is the root of personal and social dysfunction.

Among the serious repercussions of the merged mother-child identity at the heart of natural mothering is the way it marginalizes fathers. When I pressed the mothers to say why they, as women, were the designated stay at home caregivers, practicing what Sharon Hays calls "intensive motherhood," explanations based on biological difference surfaced. Primarily due to the importance placed on breastfeeding, mothers seldom shared infant feeding with fathers or other potential caregivers. Over time, these feeding norms established caring patterns that persisted throughout mothers' and fathers' parenting careers. When the mother is positioned as the singular food source and furthermore, when nursing becomes the primary means of comfort for baby, mothers are quickly constructed as irreplaceable. Based on a deeper understanding of the paradoxes of natural mothering, I turn to a brief discussion of this particular style of parenting's potential for social change.

Can Natural Mothering Fulfill Its Promise?

Most of the natural mothers viewed their lives as strategic missions to effect social change. For example, Grace Burton claimed passionately: "I've decided that absolutely everything I do is political." But the expression of this politicalization varies among the mothers. While some natural mothers participate in public actions, such as "nurse ins" or most strive to effect social change through their daily practice of mothering outside the mainstream. But, I ask, can natural mothering fulfill society, one family at a time, or is it simply a form of narcissistic retreat devoid of impact beyond the empire of the individual family?

Sociologist and mothering theorist Barbara Katz Rothman conceptualizes American motherhood as "resting on three deeply rooted ideologies—capitalism, technology and patriarchy (26)." Katz Rothman argues that the effect of the three ideologies has been to split motherhood apart, forcing it into a series of dysfunctional dualisms such as mind and body, public and private, personal and political, work and home, production and reproduction and masculine and feminine, and I add to this list: nature and culture. Natural mothering, I argue, ably resists two of these three institutions: capitalism and technology, challenging the bifurcations that these institutions forge. But at the same time, its discourses of choice and control, deeply paradoxical as their core, fail to resist the third institution: patriarchy. The mothers' surrender of agency to so-called instinct and a romanticized view of nature reifies an essentialist construction of womanhood. Theirs is a politics of accommodation. Like maternalists of earlier eras who used their femininity to pressure men to take them seriously as moral role models and to exercise some authority, at least in the domestic sphere (see Cast; Epstein; Ryan), the natural mothers push boundaries of their role while embracing specific features of it; they "bargain with patriarchy" (Kandyot). Denise Kandyot uses this term to convey the complex set of "rules and scripts regulating gender relations to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated" (286). That is, women, given their context-bound existence, strategize within their particular constraints, enabling them to resist
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But it is not only the necessity of some social measure that underlines the nature of the movement itself. The absence of an analytical approach to the movement as an entity, the tendency to describe it as a "typical" movement, is an obstacle to understanding why it fails. The "typical" movement is one that lacks the internal strength to implement its own goals. It is not clear how such a movement can succeed in the face of an array of obstacles and challenges.

As we see it, the natural movement, like other social movements, is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single factor or phenomenon. It is a product of the interaction of various forces, including social, economic, and political factors. The nature of the movement is not simply a matter of the movement's goals or the strategies it adopt, but also the context in which it operates.

The natural movement is a movement that is characterized by its internal dynamics, its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and its capacity to maintain its coherence and identity. It is a movement that is not simply a response to external pressures, but also a product of its own internal processes.

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