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## **Talkin' Bout a Revolution**

### ***Building a Mothers' Movement in the Third Wave***

*This article examines how activists, advocacy groups, and writers are positioning the emerging mothers' movement vis-à-vis feminism. I explore the negotiations and self-naming strategies of various mothers' advocacy groups and how they reveal both ambivalence and allegiance toward feminism, arguing that we should understand the mothers' movement within the broader frame of feminism, and specifically within the context of the third wave and the ongoing project of redefining and expanding feminism. Moreover, I argue that it may benefit mothers' advocates to engage more fully with feminist theories and practice. Feminist frameworks can help to suggest possibilities for increased interchange and alliance-building across the boundaries of difference—work that, I believe, remains fundamental to the formation of a truly inclusive mothers' and caregivers' movement.*

Is a mothers' movement emerging in the U.S. and Canada? Over the past several years, the question has increasingly come up on panel discussions, in journalism articles, and on the Internet. Those who discuss the possibility of a mothers' movement—a broad-based social movement based on a platform of mothers' rights, family-friendly policies, and guidelines for truly valuing the work of caregiving—tend to point to an increase in, and a heightened visibility of, public and private discussions about the many issues facing mothers, fathers, and caregivers. They also point to an increase in the numbers of mothers' advocacy groups and political activism surrounding motherhood. Unlike mothers who have organized around single issues in the past, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Million Mom March, the wave of recent political activity is characterized by a wide-ranging agenda put forth by a variety of grassroots and national organizations in both the U.S. and Canada that focuses on the well-being and empowerment of mothers and their families.

Finally, they point to an increase in cultural productions and literary output by mothers, which encompasses a growing number of local, national, and cyber communities based on the various issues surrounding motherhood and parenting; an explosion of autobiographical writing about motherhood, in print and on the Internet; the emergence in the publishing world of the category of “mommy lit”; and finally, a series of nonfiction books about motherhood that have both attracted a fair amount of media attention and informed public discussions about motherhood to varying degrees.

Of course, the question of whether all this activity will translate into an organized, broad-based movement with the power to agitate for political change is something we can't answer definitively. Furthermore, while some individuals and advocacy groups have articulated agendas, we don't yet know what visions a broader movement would proffer. Multiple questions remain unanswered. Journalists Judith Stadtman Tucker (of the Mothers Movement Online) and Stephanie Wilkinson (of *Brain, Child* magazine) have asked many of them: What would the goals of a mothers' movement be—to improve the situation of mothers, of all caregivers, and/or of children? To advocate for mothers' equality, or mothers' empowerment? Would it build on the various agendas of existing grassroots, national, and transnational groups, and if so, how? How would it negotiate differences in priorities and agendas? Would divergent philosophies threaten to tear it apart? Who would be its leaders (see Tucker, 2006; Wilkinson, 2005)?

Furthermore, we don't yet know to what extent a mothers' movement will claim itself as an heir to feminism or even consider itself part of the feminist movement. Indeed, several advocates and organizations seem to have distanced themselves from feminism. Some of the reasons may stem from feminism's image problem within mainstream culture. Critiques of feminism lobbied by cultural and religious conservatives as well as those who position themselves as “postfeminist” often contribute to the perception that feminism is hostile to “family values,” and that feminism somehow is to blame for the exhausted state many mothers find themselves in from having to do it all—paid work *and* mothering *and* the second shift.<sup>1</sup> Thus organizations wishing to attract mothers who might not necessarily identify themselves as feminist may attempt to distance themselves from feminism and feminist groups. Moreover, as Ann Crittenden points out, the concerns of mothers and families have not always been a priority on the agendas of feminist organizations (2001: 253-5).

Historically, the reasons are complex; and in any attempt to understand them, however cursory, we should heed Patrice DiQuinzio's reminder, who observes that U.S. feminism “has never been characterized by a monolithic position on mothering” (1999: ix). Nonetheless, as DiQuinzio adds, mothering has frequently presented itself as a “contentious issue” within U.S. feminism (ix). Certainly the different threads comprising feminism—namely, equal rights feminism (with its focus on justice and women's individual rights) and maternalism (with its focus on women's different and unique ability to provide

care and nurture) have at times been in conflict.<sup>2</sup> Lauri Umansky furthermore suggests that in the emerging feminist movement of the late 1960s, negative critiques of motherhood “achieved an exaggerated reputation,” despite the fact that quite a few feminists (many of whom were mothers themselves) worked to support the work of mothering and articulated a vision of social responsibility for child rearing while they critiqued the institution of motherhood (1996: 16).<sup>3</sup> Much of the history of feminist mothering has largely been forgotten or misunderstood, and as a consequence “feminist” has come to signify a woman who seeks individual liberation and self-determination through equality in the workplace, and not through caregiving—a definition that simplifies and distorts feminism, but which has unfortunately alienated many women, including some mothers. This troubled and complex history presents a challenging terrain for the emerging mothers’ movement.

As a scholar of literary and cultural narratives, I’m interested in how activists, advocacy groups, and writers are positioning the mothers’ movement vis-à-vis feminism. Building on Tucker’s cogent examination of the political frameworks underlying the rhetoric of four of the major mothers’ organizations, I explore the negotiations and self-naming strategies of various mothers’ advocacy groups and how they reveal both ambivalence and allegiance toward feminism (see Tucker, 2006).<sup>4</sup> Although I fully support their attempts to develop agendas that place caregiving at the center of a vision for social and political change, I argue that we should understand the mothers’ movement within the broader frame of feminism, and specifically within the context of the third wave and the ongoing project of redefining and expanding feminism. Moreover, I argue that it may benefit mothers’ advocates to engage more fully with feminist theories and practice. Feminist frameworks can help to suggest possibilities for increased interchange and alliance-building across the boundaries that separate mothers and other caregivers—work that, I believe, remains fundamental to the formation of a truly inclusive mothers’ and caregivers’ movement.

### **What’s in a name? The labeling of a mothers’ movement**

When journalist Ann Crittenden published *The Price of Motherhood* in 2001, she reinvigorated a public conversation about the economics of motherhood and motherwork. While many researchers had been studying the issues surrounding work and family for years, and excellent books by feminist scholars such as Nancy Folbre and Joan Williams were published around the same time as Crittenden’s, *The Price of Motherhood* was particularly successful in framing the issues in an accessible, provocative, and compelling manner for a large audience.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the work of many social scientists and using a language of equal rights feminism and economic justice, Crittenden argues that while feminism may have liberated women, it hadn’t changed institutions radically enough to improve the situation of mothers. Women still do most of the work of caring for children—work that is penalized by a “mommy tax,” an increased

risk of poverty, and other financial hardships. Because of an historical focus on other issues, the “disproportionate vulnerability of mothers is not seen as a major feminist issue” (2001: 255). Moreover, Crittenden argues, the “standard feminist response” to the marginalization of mothers and caregiving—to call for a redefinition of labor within the family, and to urge men to do more—is not working, suggesting the need for a “fresh strategy” (7). Crittenden crafts her book in such a way to raise the consciousness of her readers, to demonstrate the political nature of the personal, and to suggest concrete steps toward effecting change.

While Crittenden does not use the phrase “mothers’ movement” in her book—she speaks of “mothers’ potential strength” as remaining “dormant” (2001: 250)—such a political vision accurately describes her goal of encouraging grassroots activism and promoting social change surrounding motherhood and caregiving. This became even clearer a year later, when Crittenden co-founded the organization Mothers Ought to Have Equal Rights (MOTHERS) with writer Naomi Wolf and the National Association of Mothers’ Centers (NAMC). As a “grassroots initiative seeking to improve caregivers’ economic status by calling attention to their essential contribution to the economy and to society,” MOTHERS squarely places itself within a feminist tradition (see “About Us”). Its web site situates the organization’s mission within a feminist framework: “We believe that correcting the economic disadvantages facing caregivers is the big unfinished business of the women’s movement” (see “About Us”). Two of the nine “Frequently Asked Questions” explain how mothers’ issues are, in fact, not at odds with the women’s movement.<sup>6</sup> These answers simultaneously make an implicit argument to feminists and feminist organizations about the importance of motherhood at the same time that they reach out to mothers who may not necessarily identify themselves as feminist or activist. (Evidence of the latter can be seen in the inclusion of consciousness-raising activities such as the “MOTHERS Book Bag.”) In fact, the success of MOTHERS (in addition to that of other mothers’ advocates) may well be one of the reasons that the National Organization for Women (NOW) adopted a resolution supporting mothers’ and caregivers’ economic rights in 2005.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout its material, then, MOTHERS carefully positions itself in relationship to feminism, placing itself as an heir to the women’s movement but focusing on the needs of mothers. This careful self-positioning is a common practice among many mothers’ advocacy groups, and it often reveals a desire to redefine feminism and articulate new agendas. For example, the organization MomsRising, recently founded by Kristen Rowe-Finkbeiner and Joan Blades, uses the symbol of Rosie the Riveter, now cradling a child in her muscular arms, to simultaneously invoke and revise the feminism of previous generations.<sup>8</sup> Such an image suggests the hidden strength of mothers: not only can they break down cultural barriers to exert their economic power, but they can also make the invisible work of care visible by refusing to hide their babies. Yet despite its

deployment of this powerful feminist icon, MomsRising does not use the word “feminist” to describe its mission. Rather, it claims a feminist heritage implicitly instead of overtly, with the hope of “reach[ing] millions of women who have not previously been active.”<sup>9</sup>

While some mothers’ organizations and advocates overtly identify themselves as feminist—including Mother Outlaws and Mothers are Women/ Mères et Femmes [MAW], and Ariel Gore of *Hip Mama*—others seem to betray more of an unresolved ambivalence toward feminism.<sup>10</sup> This ambivalence reveals itself in various ways: in groups placing themselves in opposition to the feminist movement, or eschewing any identification with feminism altogether. For example, the support and advocacy organization Mothers & More declares that it has been “on the forefront of a ‘mothers’ movement since the ‘80s,” but makes no reference to feminism or the feminist movement.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Crittenden’s partner Naomi Wolf has been openly critical of feminism. The same year Crittenden’s book came out, Wolf published *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (2001), which is positioned much like Crittenden’s (2001), in a tradition of feminist critique designed to raise consciousness (though arguably much less successfully).<sup>12</sup> In one of the first contemporary uses of the phrase “mothers’ movement,” Wolf calls alternatively for both a “motherhood feminism” and a “mothers’ movement” in the final chapter. The category of “motherhood feminism” emerges from the author’s own critique of second-wave “victim” feminism that she developed in *Fire with Fire*.<sup>13</sup> Wolf’s “motherhood feminism” represents her attempt to define what she calls a “power feminism” for mothers, though this occasionally slides into what DiQuinzio terms “essential motherhood,” or the ideological formation of mothering as “a function of women’s essentially female nature, women’s biological reproductive capacities, and/or human evolutionary development” that makes motherhood both “natural and inevitable” (1999: xiii).

Tucker argues that concepts of essential motherhood provide a problematic underpinning for “maternalist” frameworks, revealing “critical points of divergence” in an articulation of a mothers’ movement agenda (2006: 189). In contrast to the liberal feminist framework of MOTHERS, “classically maternalist” rhetoric provides the underlying framework for “A Call to a Motherhood Movement,” the manifesto issued by The Mothers’ Council of The Motherhood Project at a conference on maternal feminism in October 2002 (Tucker, 2006: 192).<sup>14</sup> The “Call” firmly situates a *motherhood* (not a mothers’) movement within the tradition of nineteenth-century maternalism. It calls for a “calming of tensions” between maternal feminists and equal rights feminists, citing previous alliances and calling for “the full support of the women’s movement” in the contemporary struggle by mothers.<sup>15</sup> Embedded in this manifesto is a new vision: to “reject the false dichotomy” between the “concerns of mothers” and the “gains of feminism” and “to build ... on the advances of the women’s movement.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the “Call” carefully

distances itself from feminism; as Tucker puts it, the organization “situates the ‘Motherhood Movement’ as parallel to, rather than part of, the ongoing struggle for women’s equality” (2006: 192). Indeed, aside from its use of “motherhood” movement in its overtly activist “Call,” The Motherhood Project tends to use “mothers’ renaissance,” a less politically-oriented phrase with neither “feminist” nor “movement,” defined to include “fresh thinking, discussion, and activism by mothers about motherhood and mothering.”<sup>17</sup> (Significantly, however, “renaissance” was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, a point to which I will return later.<sup>18</sup>)

As an alternative to the unquestioned essentialism of maternalist ideas (in addition to the limits of liberal feminism’s individualistic focus), Tucker (2006) argues for feminist care theory as the most promising framework with which to build a mothers’ movement. Coming out of the work of scholars such as Eva Feder Kittay (1999) and Joan Tronto (1993), feminist care theory “introduces the language of care as a public good and supports the definition of care as labor,” but does so in such a way that it understands caregiving “as a social responsibility rather than an exclusively maternal duty” (Tucker, 2006: 189). Thus it “reinvent[s] motherhood” in order to “relocate care as the central concern of human life” and “emancipate care-giving from its secondary status as women’s work” (Tucker, 2006: 198).

The evidence of feminist care theory can be seen in Tucker’s own website, the Mothers Movement Online (MMO), which has been a major force in popularizing the phrase “mothers’ movement” since its founding in 2003. MMO is firmly positioned within a feminist tradition; and though it frequently includes articles examining motherhood-related issues within the context of feminism, it more frequently uses the lens of an emerging mothers’ movement. Feminist care theory informs Tucker’s own position as well as the website’s signature tag line: to provide “resources and reporting for mothers and others who think about social change.”<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, the use of “mothers” reflects reality (women continue to perform most of the world’s motherwork and carework) as well as a *realpolitik* strategy of identity politics. Like other mothers’ advocacy groups, MMO demonstrates an attempt to attract mothers who may not identify as feminist or see their own lives within a larger, systemic context, but who may (with the help of some consciousness-raising) mobilize around a set of issues concerning families and children. On the other hand, the use of “others” denotes the many individuals who parent—fathers, non-biological lesbian mothers, transsexual parents, extended family members, paid caregivers, and “fictive kin” (Collins, 2000: 179). This approach parallels that of other groups, notably Mothers Acting Up (which uses an asterisk to define “mothers” to include “mothers and others, on stilts and off, who exercise protective care over someone smaller”) and also MOTHERS, which frequently includes “caregivers” in addition to “mothers.”<sup>20</sup>

Other advocates and writers have attempted to broaden the inclusiveness of a mothers’ movement by creating entirely different names. Scholar Miriam

Peskowitz (2005a), for example, has coined the playful and nongendered “playground revolution,” which captures the inherently local nature of caregiving-related activism, an important dimension lost with the use of the word “movement” and its invocation of masses of people.<sup>21</sup> Citing multiple instances around the U.S. and Canada that, Peskowitz argues, constitute playground revolutions—such as the work of the Montana nonprofit Working for Equity and Economic Liberation (WEEL) to help poor mothers stay at home with their children instead of going on welfare/work, or the success of MAW to convince the Canadian government to include unpaid caregiving labor in the census—the author asks us to consider the many instances of grassroots activity that may get overlooked or forgotten in a focus on a national political movement. In this manner, Peskowitz attempts to provide parents with multiple models of local, community-based activism.

The notion of a playground revolution parallels MAW’s “kitchen table revolution,” another term that captures the local dimension of mothers’ and other caregivers’ activism: with its location in the home, in a room that often signifies an open, informal gathering space (not to mention its function as the site of much unpaid labor), “kitchen table” suggests a more private space in which consciousness-raising and activism can cook. “Revolution,” on the other hand, lends it a more radical cast, much like Gore’s “maternal feminist revolution” or the social justice collective Mothers Alliance for Militant Action (M\*A\*M\*A) in New York City, which calls for sweeping change: “our ultimate, long-term goal is not to reform the system but to end imperialism, capitalism and all forms of oppression.”<sup>22</sup> In these cases, the use of “revolution” and “militant action” in lieu of “mothers’ movement” suggests a very deliberate self-positioning, in a tradition of radical and anarchist feminism that stands apart from mainstream feminist politics.

What I find most interesting, and potentially problematic, is that in many of these examples, the feminism that many mothers’ groups are positioning themselves within or against is frequently synonymous with an overly simplified version of the feminism of the second wave. It neither reflects the diversity of feminist ideas and actions during the 1960s and ’70s nor the tremendous changes that have taken place within the feminist movement over the past 30 years, during which many women have redefined feminism in multiple ways. Rather, this version of feminism threatens to collapse into the distorted caricature of feminism created by media misrepresentations that have frequently portrayed social justice activists as a bunch of self-centered, power-hungry, man-hating, and anti-family spinsters.<sup>23</sup> Not to understand the complexity of feminism’s history is to shut the emerging mothers’ movement off from important contexts and frameworks for understanding its own activism. Thus I agree with Peskowitz’s observation that

... in the new feminism we are creating as we reflect on our lives as mothers, feminism offers helpful explanations. And it connects

explanation with a history of activism, of many different types, from personal resistance and creative ways to live a life, to local activism, to writing, to large-scale policy and legal change. And that's important. Some of what has been missing is that many of us who are now becoming mothers can barely remember the decades when our society was more activist, and able to imagine great shifts in what it meant to be a woman, or a man. (2005b: 3)

Not to engage with feminist frameworks and history—not to understand its successes as well as its failures—is to run the risk of forgoing the opportunity to learn valuable knowledge and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Moreover, the very ability of mothers' advocacy organizations to design a political platform based on mothers' economic and social rights depends upon several decades of feminist scholarship that has developed instructive analyses of gender, caregiving, and power. Feminism thus provides important theoretical underpinnings for current activism. Developments in feminist care theory further provide one of the most powerful visions of an emerging mothers' movement: to help develop and promote a "truly inclusive feminism" that brings together the "domains of caring and equality" (Kittay, 1999: 19) and that sees "the rights of the individual and the needs of the society as inextricably intertwined" (Giele, 1995: 185). Mothers' advocates have the opportunity of building on these theories in their work as educators and activists. Perhaps a strategy of consciously linking themselves to the project of continuing and redefining feminism rather than dancing around it, or avoiding it altogether, would not only serve mothers' advocates more effectively, but also help to create bridges to the many feminists who have been working on these very issues for decades.

### **Understanding and bridging difference**

In writing about the second wave, Peskowitz observes that the initial failure of white, middle-class feminists to align themselves and their agendas with those of working-class women and women of color led to an "absence" of the perspectives and voices of large segments of the American population (2005a:141). Some of these women, many of whom were working mothers, wanted "relief from work," but found that their priorities went unheard (141) (see also hooks, 1984). Speaking of the women's movement, Peskowitz observes that "We needed access to work and we needed relief from it. We argued for only one" (141).

This division is one of the reasons why feminists and womanists of color, in addition to working-class and LGBTQ activists, have critiqued the mainstream feminist movement for its inattention to the many interrelated components of identity (race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, religion, disability, age, and so on) and the oppressions built up around them. The fight against the interconnected institutionalization of oppressions has led many marginalized

groups of mothers to develop a complex, multi-issue politics of mothering. For example, Andrea O'Reilly argues that many lesbian, African American, and feminist mothers have developed modes of "empowered mothering" that enable women to resist oppressive stereotypes of the "good" or "sacrificial" mother (2004: 5).<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that for many black mothers in the U.S., motherhood and family have provided a way to derive self-empowerment and stage resistance against destructive social forces such as slavery, racism, economic disempowerment, and the capitalist division of home and work. Collins, like Stanlie James, views motherhood as an experience that can fuel "social transformation" (James, 1993: 45) and that often "*politicizes Black women*" (Collins, 2000: 194).

For many African American women, the civil rights movement provides a model for motherhood activism. In the anthology *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on Motherhood*, writer and editor Cecelie Berry (2004) invokes both the women's movement and the civil rights movement in her exploration of the multiple challenges black mothers face. Given the history of black women's mothering, which took place within the "hydra of mainstream racism and Black self-hatred," and which was furthermore complicated by the fact that black women frequently had to raise "other people's children as well as their own," Berry views the very act of mothering as revolutionary (2004: 8, 10). To "build with love the home and the family of your dreams is the ultimate revolution," she writes, returning to this theme in another essay, "Home is Where the Revolution Is" (1999: 13).<sup>25</sup>

Several scholars have studied the activism of black mothers, much of it grassroots-based and focused on a wide range of interconnected issues, including educational, economic, environmental, and reproductive justice. This multi-issue approach is shared by many black feminists, whose approach toward activism often reflects the "notion that race, class, gender, and sexuality are codependent variables," the understanding that political activism must address the interrelationships of oppressions, and an organization style frequently defined by "decentralized mobilization efforts, informal leadership, and flexible structures" (Ransby, 2000: 1218).<sup>26</sup> In fact, such practices are shared by a broad range of feminists of color, as well as many working-class, LGBTQ, and third-wave feminists. Interestingly, despite its problematic use of maternalist rhetoric, the Mothers' Council demonstrates a similar understanding of activism. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that its founder, Enola Aird, is African American, or that the use of the phrase "mothers' renaissance" signals how the Mothers' Council places itself within a multiracial history that includes the Harlem Renaissance as a model for a mothers' movement. Furthermore, its philosophy of including a diverse group of mothers' advocates is clearly evident in its structure, which includes a leadership group of "mothers of diverse races, backgrounds, disciplines and perspectives committed to protecting the dignity of childhood and motherhood" who will closely examine and discuss "various issues affecting the institution of mother-

hood and the vocation of mothering” over time.<sup>27</sup>

The Mothers' Council, then, may provide one model for the “coalition strategy” that Janet Zollinger Giele calls for, which may enable mothers' advocates to appeal to a wide range of mothers (1995: 165). Indeed, many mothers' advocacy groups are attempting such a strategy, particularly those that claim a feminist legacy even as they redefine the meaning(s) of feminism (most notably MOTHERS' assertion that “correcting the economic disadvantages facing caregivers is the big unfinished business of the women's movement,” and MomsRising's revisioning of Rosie the Riveter). Such a strategy may involve what DiQuinzio terms a “paradoxical politics of mothering,” a politics that “does not require for its foundation a univocal, coherent, and exhaustive position on mothering” (1999: 248). As I have suggested, however, even a “paradoxical” politics needs to tap into feminist thought and activism, particularly as they have expanded and transformed over the last 30 years. Perhaps consciously working across generations, as some of these groups are doing, will help to anchor the mothers' movement in the specific experiences of second-wave feminists as well as the greater history of feminist activism.

Such coalitions across difference have become even more important in a globalized world. As the contributors to the volume *Global Woman* reveal, increasing numbers of Third world/South women migrate in order to find work, often as low-wage caregivers, and they frequently leave their children behind when they migrate (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002: 17). Given the implications of the feminization of migration, a mothers' movement in the U.S. and Canada must grapple with how to think transnationally about the fates of the women who undertake the work of care. First world/North advocates need to consider how we might address the concerns of immigrant women in motherhood and caregiving agendas—for example, might mothers' advocates forge alliances with paid caregivers, immigrants' rights groups, and/or scholars and activists studying these issues? How might a feminist framework of care develop a “global sense of ethics” that truly addresses the lives of all mothers and caregivers in North America (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002: 28)?

I am aware that such suggestions would not necessarily lead to a single, unified platform for a mothers' movement. Indeed, they may well lead in the opposite direction. However, this model—numerous advocates working on their own agendas but committed both to seeing their struggles as interconnected and working together as allies—provides a broader, more inclusive base for social change. For this reason, I am inclined to read skeptically the evaluation of the “burgeoning ‘motherhood movement’” by journalist Judith Warner in *Perfect Madness*, in which she offers a pessimistic view of the current state of affairs: riddled by “disunity,” she observes, it is “utterly corrupted” by politics, feminists, and moralists (2005: 265). While Warner accurately identifies the presence of divisions, she does not explore how “disunity” might instead represent an expanding number of organizations and agendas, or what steps individuals might take toward working together across difference.

## Hip mamas and punk parenting: Third-wave feminism and the mama revolution

In addition to situating the mothers' movement within the broad range of feminisms and womanisms, it is important to situate the mothers' movement in the context of third-wave feminism which, as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake argue, has been greatly influenced by the critique of second-wave feminism by women of color and thus takes as its starting point the understanding that identity is shifting and complex (1997: 9). While "third wave" is, admittedly, a contested term, I find it helpful to signify the generational and political cohort that has come of age in a "postfeminist" world increasingly dominated by global capital, environmental destruction, economic uncertainty, and cynicism (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003: 10).<sup>28</sup> Amber Kinser further suggests that we should think of the third wave as "the era of feminism rooted in and shaped by the mid-'80s-new millennium political climate," a moment that requires all feminists to "negotiate a space between second-wave and postfeminist thought" (2004: 132, 135).

Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that the mothers' movement shares many parallels with third-wave feminism. After all, many mothers' advocates are members of the same generational and political cohort as third wavers, and many have found themselves coming of age during the same time. Indeed, the struggle of various mothers' organizations to establish the identity of their movement in relationship to, or separate from, second-wave feminism is shared by many third-wave feminists, who have also sought to differentiate themselves from the second wave and to redefine feminism. As Rebecca Walker writes in *The Fire This Time*, "We want to be linked with our foremothers and centuries of women's movement, but we also want to make space for young women to create their own, different brand of revolt, and so we choose the name Third Wave" (2004: xvii). Such a sentiment might speak for many of the mothers' advocates who also wish to tap into the tradition of feminist activism even as they place motherhood at the center of their agendas and their analysis. In both cases, however, such an emphasis on newness may well exaggerate differences while obscuring continuities (see Jervis, 2004).

Furthermore, while not all mothers' advocates identify themselves as members of the third wave, many do. This fact is sometimes overlooked in discussions about the third wave, which is frequently understood as a daughter's movement rebelling against its mothers (Rebecca Walker is, after all, Alice Walker's daughter) and not a movement of daughters who are also, often, mothers. Instead, several theorists have focused on the younger generation's identity as daughters, positing that third-wave cultural productions are frequently positioned as daughters' texts, both rhetorically and psychologically. In her tracing of the "matrophor" (mother-daughter metaphor), for example, Astrid Henry argues that the third wave frequently portrays itself (and is often portrayed) as a "daughter's" movement (2004: 11). Similarly, in her examina-

tion of third-wave rhetorical strategies, Deborah Siegel observes that Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real* is "rhetorically a daughterly text" (Siegel, 1997a: 64). (However, Siegel goes on to argue that intergenerational dialogue "must move beyond narrative scripts in which the second wave necessarily becomes the bad mother and the third wave the bad child" [65].)

Yet increasingly, third-wave daughters have also become mothers, and their texts and cultural productions explore and redefine what it means to parent in the third wave. For example, Allison Abner writes about becoming a mother of a black son in Walker's anthology *To Be Real* (1995), Allison Crews discusses her experience choosing motherhood as a teenager in Barbara Findlen's *Listen Up* (1995), and mothers write about day care and breastfeeding in the webzine *Sexing the Political*. The 1990s punk scene gave birth to several parenting zines, including *The Future Generation* ("a zine for subculture parents, kids, friends, and others") in 1990. In 1993, Ariel Gore founded *Hip Mama* as a "forum for young mothers, single parents, and marginalized voices."<sup>29</sup> (In its current form as a glossy zine and web zine, edited with Bee Lavender, it has "grown to represent progressive families of all varieties.") Both of these zines helped to play an important role in inspiring the many mama zines, parenting zines, and perzines (personal zines) now being produced, including such titles as *Punk Parent*, *East Village Inky*, *Zuzu and the Baby Catcher*, *Fertile Ground*, *Miranda*, *Hausfrau*, *Placenta*, and *Rad Dad*, in addition to compilation zines such as *Mamaphiles*, to name only a few—not to mention several anthologies (*Breeder* and *The Essential Hip Mama*), quite a few web zines (including Lavender's *Mamaphonic* and *Girl-Mom*), and a veritable explosion of websites and blogs. From what is generally understood as the beginning of the third wave, then, third-wave mothers—or, more accurately, third-wave *mamas*—have been out in full force.

The name "mama," of course, is significant. "Mama" is to "mother" as "grrl" is to "woman" (and, perhaps, like "third wave" is to "second wave"): it creates an alternative vocabulary that defines itself in opposition to restrictive notions of identity. "Mama" suggests an attempt to redefine motherhood, a political project that begins for many third wavers in the realm of language and culture (see Heywood and Drake, 1997). Likewise, Gore and Lavender reclaim the word "breeder," a word that has been used "to denigrate (lower-class, trashy, slutty) women who procreate," much like the reclamation of words such as "bitch," "slut," and "cunt" (Hewett, 2006: 133). The editors' defiant and celebratory proclamation in the introduction to *Breeder*—"as willing breeders, we refuse to be oppressed by the institution of motherhood"—furthermore suggests how this redefinition of motherhood emerges from third-wave understandings of sexuality (Gore and Lavender, 2001: xiii).

Henry observes that one of the major rhetorical and self-definitional strategies of many third wavers has been to differentiate themselves from their foremothers by embracing the entire spectrum of sexuality and sexual pleasure. "[S]exuality has become the central means by which third-wave feminists have

asserted generational differences,” she writes, even though this has at times meant “ignoring or misrepresenting pro-sex feminisms of the second wave” (Henry, 2004: 14). “Breeder” suggests how “pro-sex feminism” has also extended into the realm of motherhood, so that many mamas claim a pro-pregnancy, pro-childbirth, pro-breastfeeding, and pro-mama position at the same time they claim their right to reproductive justice. Frequently underlying this rhetoric is the implication that some second-wave feminists, while pro-choice, may not have been as pro-mother as they had claimed. It also suggests one of the major rhetorical strategies of many third-wave mama writers: redefining the language of choice and of reproductive rights to include the choice to bear children and mother them.

Certainly not all mama writers identify themselves as pro-choice, or even as third wave (or feminist); but at the risk of simplifying a complex phenomenon, I would say that *Breeder* offers us an instructive example of what characterizes much if not most third-wave writing about motherhood—the claiming and exploring of the personal experience of motherhood in ways that contest cultural ideologies that whitewash and distort uncomfortable realities. “We are sick of silences, so we are telling the truth,” Ariel Gore writes in the introduction to her anthology, and this sentiment is echoed in many other places (2000: xiv) (see Hewett, 2006: 131-32). Of course, *Breeder* provides a particularly defiant and in-your-face example of this impulse, and certainly not all third-wave mama writers share the same aesthetics or style. But whether we are speaking of radical zines, personal blogs, or the outpouring of autobiographical writing since the success of Anne Lamott’s *Operating Instructions* in 1993 (a category that includes memoirs by writers such as Rachel Cusk (2003), Faulkner Fox (2003), Ayun Halliday (2002), and Andrea Buchanan (2003) in addition to magazines such as *Brain, Child*, web zines such as *Literary Mama*, and numerous anthologies), the impulse remains similar.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, despite frequent assertions of newness, the project of claiming one’s voice as a mother and exploring maternal experience is indebted to the third wave’s feminist predecessors (including Adrienne Rich [1986], Jane Lazarre [1976, 1977], Toni Morrison [1987], Sharon Olds [1980], and Grace Paley [1995], among others) who laid much of the groundwork for exploring the complexity of maternal subjectivity during the previous decades.

If personal politics emerge as a common thread, third wavers differ from one another in many other aspects. Some writers, for example, dwell almost exclusively on the daily rhythms of childrearing, frequently finding the humor in days spent nursing infants and running after toddlers. Many perzines, for example, are put together by stay-at-home or work-at-home moms (as well as a few dads) who chronicle the everyday adventures and frustrations of domesticity, with some (such as *Edgy-catin’ Mama*) also focusing on particular issues such as homeschooling. Quite a few perzines additionally embrace what might be considered a more traditional understanding of politics by engaging in discussions of what anarchist, radical, and feminist parenting entails, or how to

attend a demonstration safely with children. After all, much (though not all) of the mama writing in zines comes out of the punk, anarchist, and do-it-yourself (DIY) movements of the 1990s, including Riot Grrl. As a result, quite a few mama zinesters directly address the need for social change and grassroots (as well as national) political action surrounding motherhood and parenting. Some have particular niches: *Placenta*, for example, is a “Punk Rock and Vegan Parenting Zine Just For You.” Many come out of community mama collectives, such as *Raise High the Roof Beams*. Other zines come out of activist communities and address the concerns of politically active mothers, such as *Don't Leave your Friends Behind*, a manual on “anarcha-feminism & supporting mothers and children,” and the compilation zine *Mama Sez No To War*.<sup>31</sup>

Personal politics have come under fire. Some critics have charged that too much emphasis on the personal can cause writers to lose touch with the political; and although I agree that autobiographical writing can sometimes lack “a sustained analysis of how ... personal stories fit into a larger political picture,” these zines are examples of the deeply political nature of much third-wave mama writing (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003: 12). While not the organized mainstream political approach of mothers' advocacy groups, zines represent important locations of active resistance. As Alison Piepmeier (2005) argues, feminist zines “perform small interventions into mainstream culture, acting as tiny wedges that exploit fissures in corporate-controlled media conglomerates and in the wall of cynical resignation.” This is certainly true of mama zines (as well as much of the autobiographical writing on the Internet), all of which not only performs cultural work that contests dominant ideologies of motherhood but also forms community by sharing personal experiences of mothering. Because of the ideologies of essential motherhood and intensive mothering, this creation of community *is* political (see Hays, 1996; Douglas and Michaels, 2004). And whether or not we agree with Ariel Gore that the “maternal feminist revolution” will take place in cyberspace, community is the first step toward collective action (2000: 220). Many of the lactivist nurse-ins in the U.S. during 2005, for example, were organized on the Internet. Some websites, such as Hip Mama and Girl-Mom, help create community for mamas, including many teenagers, which then fosters political activism. Certainly the web raises important questions of access, of who is able to participate in mothering cybercommunities; but even with these qualifications, the sheer amount of writing on the web cannot be overlooked or underestimated in any discussion about the emergence of a mothers' movement.

Indeed, I am arguing that we must include third-wave writing about motherhood in our understanding of the emerging mothers' movement. Despite the differences among mama writers, not to mention the ideological gaps between an anarchist zine such as *The Future Generation* and an organization such as The Motherhood Project, they all aspire to create a truly caring society. All are necessary for a mothers' movement; after all, when one considers the range of activities during the second wave of the feminist movement, a time

when many different groups of women advocated for social change in multiple ways, one begins to see how each might play an important part of a bigger picture. Certainly those who formulate public policy agendas and recommendations should not forget the writers who engage in the admittedly messy and complex business of artistic creation. The writerly exploration of the complex mixture of personal desire, pleasure, and love that constitutes mothering and parenting has an essential role to play in affecting cultural constructions of motherhood. Moreover, literary and cultural productions provide access to the many realities of mothers' lives that can help to inform public rhetoric (and perhaps even provide some insights into grassroots organizing). Mothers' advocacy organizations should not forget about the presence and energy of mama writers; indeed, they could perhaps even learn something from the vision of a mama revolution.

### **Looking forward: Future possibilities for a mothers' movement**

As I have tried to suggest, addressing issues of inclusivity and diversity are paramount to creating a truly representative mothers' and caregivers' movement with a transformative vision. We must think about issues across difference, and we must reach out to build alliances with a diverse range of groups. Finally, as we transform a discussion about mothers and mothering into a discussion about parenting and caregiving, we must also include men.

I offer my observations as an academic in the third wave who is also a feminist mother engaged in the project of working toward positive social change. I offer them, too, as a feminist writer who continues to learn from a diverse range of scholars, writers, and activists. This perspective enables me to extend my final observation: that the act of crossing disciplinary and professional boundaries is important for building a mothers' movement. Given the ways in which the mainstream media sets the parameters of public debate about motherhood (with a repetitive cycle of problematic articles such as the "opting out" story), the public sphere needs feminist scholars and researchers who can join writers and activists in redefining the terms of the collective conversation (see Hewett, 2005). There are numerous examples of feminist public intellectuals and academics who have brought their expertise on motherhood and mothering to bear on the public discourse, many of whom I have drawn upon in this essay; and while many of us seek to do this work in the classroom, I argue that we should collectively aim toward making these forays out of the academy a "normal" part of our intellectual and academic culture. Such an understanding could lead to alliances and partnerships that would also help to create a more inclusive mothers' movement.

Deborah Siegel makes this argument about the third wave more generally. In "The Legacy of the Personal," Siegel offers these observations about the multiple intersections between contemporary academic feminists and popular feminist writers:

...I envision the third wave as a moment that asks us as scholars to re-imagine the disparate spaces constructed as 'inside' and 'outside' the academy instead as mutually informing and intersecting spheres of theory and practice.... For the activity of the third wave, I maintain, is quite possibly beginning to resemble that of an earlier period, in which links between feminism, the academy, and grassroots activism were visible and viable. (1997a: 70)

If Siegel accurately describes the contemporary landscape of feminism, we most certainly must place the mothers' movement within this context. Such border-crossing provides an essential element of feminist practice, one that enables us to create a conversation that defies the lines drawn to keep us from talking with one another. If anything, what we need is *more* movement between the various spheres involved in thinking about, and organizing, political action surrounding motherhood and caregiving. Only with more of this kind of movement can a mothers' movement truly gain momentum.

<sup>1</sup>For two examinations of the meaning(s) of postfeminism, see Deborah Siegel's "Reading between the Waves" (1997b) and Sarah Gamble's (2001) chapter on "Postfeminism" in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Janet Zollinger Giele's (1995) discussion of the suffrage and temperance movements, especially pp. 23-6.

<sup>3</sup>Amy Kesselman, email correspondence, 2006. On the distinction between mothering and motherhood, see Adrienne Rich (1986).

<sup>4</sup>Tucker's article, cited here in its 2006 form, first appeared on the Mothers Movement Online website. See Tucker 2004.

<sup>5</sup>Joan Williams's *Unbending Gender* was published in 2000, and Nancy Folbre's *The Invisible Heart* in 2001.

<sup>6</sup>The questions are: "Are you advocating that mothers stay home with their children and not work outside the home? Isn't this a step backward for the women's movement?" and "But by focusing on women's roles as mothers, aren't you undermining the feminist goal of equal treatment for women?"

<sup>7</sup>See <http://www.now.org/organization/conference/resolutions/2005.html>. As NOW points out, its support of mothers' rights reaches back to 1978, which dates the "Homemaker's Bill of Rights: Economic Recognition for Homemakers." However, the goals of this resolution remain "largely unfulfilled in state and national legislation nearly thirty years after its passage."

<sup>8</sup>See <http://www.momsrising.org/>.

<sup>9</sup>See <http://www.momsrising.org/aboutmomsrising>.

<sup>10</sup>Both Mother Outlaws and Mothers are Women/Mères et Femmes (MAW) identify their participants as "feminist mothers," and Ariel Gore, who calls for a "maternal feminist revolution" in *The Mother Trip*, frequently positions herself and her activism within a feminist tradition (2000: 218).

<sup>11</sup>See [http://www.mothersandmore.org/Advocacy/advocacy\\_and\\_action.shtml](http://www.mothersandmore.org/Advocacy/advocacy_and_action.shtml).

<sup>12</sup>The reception to *Misconceptions* (Wolf, 2001) was decidedly mixed. See Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels's (2001) scathing review, "The belly politic." Nevertheless, *Misconceptions* recommends a series of thoughtful activist and policy initiatives that fall in line with those of Crittenden and other mothers' advocacy groups.

<sup>13</sup>For an insightful discussion of Wolf's (2001) ideas concerning "victim" and "power" feminism in *Fire with Fire*, see Siegel, 1997b.

<sup>14</sup>Interestingly, Tucker finds traces of maternalism mixed in with the liberal feminist rhetoric of groups such as MOTHERS and Mothers & More, often used as a tool of persuasion (see Tucker, 2006: 192).

<sup>15</sup>See "Call to a Motherhood Movement" ([http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/call\\_to\\_a\\_motherhood\\_movement.html#Call](http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/call_to_a_motherhood_movement.html#Call)).

<sup>16</sup>See "Call to a Motherhood Movement."

<sup>17</sup>See <http://www.motherhoodproject.org/>.

<sup>18</sup>See "An interview with Enola Aird" on The Mothers Movement Online.

<sup>19</sup>See <http://www.mothersmovement.org/site/about.htm>.

<sup>20</sup>See <http://www.mothersactingup.org/>.

<sup>21</sup>See the last chapter of *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* and Peskowitz's own website, Playground Revolution (<http://www.playgroundrevolution.com>).

<sup>22</sup>The collective states its goals as "creating a child-inclusive culture within the social justice community and beyond" and "increasing free, public family-friendly space." See MAMA's website (<http://mama-nyc.org/>).

<sup>23</sup>Still relevant to understanding media misrepresentations of feminism is Susan Faludi's (1991) *Backlash*.

<sup>24</sup>Also see the essays in *Mother Outlaws* (O'Reilly, 2004) and Laura Kessler (2005).

<sup>25</sup>Berry's (2004) Salon essay exposes her own deep ambivalence about political revolutionary work outside the home (which she feels pulled toward) and the revolutionary work of mothering inside the home (which she has chosen).

<sup>26</sup>Also see Kimberly Springer's (1999) work on African American women's activism.

<sup>27</sup>See [http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/about\\_us.html](http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/about_us.html) and [http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/mother\\_s\\_council.html](http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/mother_s_council.html).

<sup>28</sup>For critiques of the third wave, see Lisa Jervis (2004). My understanding of the third wave has been helped in particular by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier's *Catching a Wave* (2003), Deborah Siegel's "The Legacy of the Personal" (1997a) and Amber Kinser's "Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism" (2004).

<sup>29</sup>See "About Us" on <http://www.hipmama.com>.

<sup>30</sup>Consider, for example, anthologies such as Cathi Hanauer's *The Bitch in the House* (2002), Camille Peri and Kate Moses' *Mothers Who Think* (1999), and subsequent *Because I Said So* (2005) (which came out of the Salon department, Mothers Who Think), and most recently, Leslie Morgan Steiner's *Mommy*

*Wars* (2006), and Lori Leibovitch's *Maybe Baby* (2006).

<sup>31</sup>I am indebted to the expertise and guidance of Jenna Freedman, the Coordinator of Reference Services at Barnard College Library, for her invaluable help in navigating Barnard's rich collection of zines.

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