Malinowitz's aggressive posture, matched by my own defensiveness, has not dispelled "the collectively damaging idea that each condition—motherhood and unmotherhood—profoundly negates the other," but perhaps insisting on such a dialogue, no matter how uncomfortable it might be, is a productive way to begin (32).

_Feminist (Un)motherhood: Reigning Rhetorics of Mothering Inside and Outside of Academe_

_Eileen E. Schell_

As someone in the throes of recent motherhood, I find myself identifying with many of the claims Harriet Malinowitz makes in "Unmotherhood" even as I have crossed the line into motherhood. In particular, I identify with her analysis of the cultural interrogation of "unmotherhood." Just as unmothers face queries about whether they should have children, whether they are fulfilled, and whether they will have someone to care for them in their old age, those of us who mother in this culture face queries and judgments about whether our parenting skills are adequate, whether we are "fit" enough or good enough to be mothers, or whether we can continue to have careers and pursue other endeavors. As Ariel Gore argues in _The Mother Trip_, women who mother are subject to a suffocating array of discourses and assumptions: "The world tells us we are too permissive, too controlling, too chaotic, too old, too young, too square, too whacked, too poor, too extravagant, and everything in between" (17). Inspired by Malinowitz's interrogation of the cultural stereotypes of unmotherhood, I will explore, from my vantage point as a feminist academic who recently became a mother, some of the cultural stereotypes that pregnant women and mothers face.

Malinowitz argues that unmothers are subject to stereotyping and cultural "misunderstanding." Unmothers are often portrayed in the media as "single career women with ticking biological clocks" or "infertile
women” engaging in “desperate, expensive quests to conceive or adopt,” not women who “choose” (a loaded term, as Malinowitz notes) unmotherhood for conscious social, political, and personal reasons (9). Like teen mothers, unmothers are often judged as a “drain” or “burden” on society; unmothers are also commonly portrayed as “cold, narcissistic, and unfeeling—that is, lacking in the instinct of care” (18). In a parallel sense, mothers are also frequently subject to cultural misunderstandings, especially about their ability to engage in work outside the home and to care for their children. For instance, the listserv post authored by the childfree (CF) feminist academic from the University of Chicago quoted in Malinowitz’s essay shows that some still believe that motherhood and intellectual life are diametrically opposed:

I’m a CF woman and a hard-core feminist, but I am sure as hell not one of those people who sympathizes with female academics who sprog [give birth] and then try to pursue an academic career. Sorry, mommies, you can’t do both. And you can’t then whine and shriek about how research institutions owe it to you to transform themselves into “womyn-centered universities” (read: daycare centers for breeders who fancy themselves thinkers after they’ve lost all their brain cells popping the little shrieklings). (31)

Although, like Malinowitz, I find this writer’s view simplistic, unfeminist, and politically unsound, I believe she gives voice to a powerful myth: that being an intellectual and being a mother are mutually exclusive. While being a mother and an academic is more acceptable in academia than it once was, women who mother in academia still struggle to be acknowledged as intellectuals, as thinkers and creators.

My status as a potential mother in academia was first questioned in 1993 in the fall semester of my first tenure-track job. One of my senior male colleagues, tenured and working on his second single-authored book, asked me if my partner and I would like to have children. He asked this significant question in a casual tone, and my response was equally casual. I told him I was considering motherhood but had no firm plans about it. My colleague looked at me sternly through his glasses and admonished: “No babies until after tenure.” The message was clear: if I became a mother, I would hurt my chances for tenure. Fatherhood, however, had not hurt my colleague’s career. With two children under the age of ten, he was an involved father who devoted some part of his working day to his children, although he also had a stay-at-home partner who seemed to do the bulk of the childcare.
Two years later in another conversation with another male colleague at the same university, I was asked, once again, if I was considering motherhood. This time, my colleague was a literary scholar, young and recently tenured. I told him that I did not plan to have or adopt a child until after tenure, especially since I had been repeatedly told by senior colleagues that having children before tenure would be a career hazard. My colleague reminded me that he and his partner had a child—in fact, two children—before he completed his book and came up for tenure. Although difficult, they made it work largely because his partner stayed home with the children and scaled back her career to part-time work. I could do the same with my partner at home and me at work, he said, although he looked doubtful.

As I thought about these conversations later on, I noted that these two faculty members, like others in the department, had stay-at-home partners, women who either worked part-time time or were full-time, stay-at-home parents. My male colleagues with children and stay-at-home partners appeared to be functioning well and comfortably, buttressed by their partners’ domestic labor. Of course, this observation is hardly original; socialist feminists have long pointed out how women’s domestic labor enables men’s productive labor. The work of the university, like the work of most institutions, is made possible by women’s “support work.” Although some academic women have stay-at-home partners or are able to co-parent, sharing and balancing childcare and domestic duties, many women academics are trying to combine motherhood with academic work, assuming a larger proportion of childcare and domestic responsibilities in addition to professional responsibilities. In addition, pretenure parenthood for women is still fraught with dilemmas and difficulties.

Despite the warnings that many women receive from their colleagues and mentors, pretenure pregnancy and motherhood continues to happen in academia—and, yes, even during the crucial job search period. One of my friends from graduate school managed to conceal her pregnancy during her job search and campus visit by wearing a large and imposing blazer. She hoped that the search committee would think she was “stout,” not pregnant. Later, she found out that her “disguise” did not fool any of the women faculty in the department; they “detected” her pregnancy during her campus visit but refrained from “outing” her to male colleagues until after she had signed her employment contract. Protected by this conspiracy of female silence, my colleague had her baby over the summer and began her assistant professorship in the fall.
Judith Pascoe discusses how she concealed her second and third trimester pregnancy at MLA interviews and during campus visits but saw her well-laid plans for two campus visits unravel when she went into premature labor and was ordered by her doctor to go on “bedrest.” Pascoe surveys several research studies on pregnant women and perceptions of job performance, concluding,

One is likely to be categorized, if only unconsciously, in the interviewer’s mind as a good mother or a bad mother. In the first case, the pregnant job applicant seems pleasant and nice, good qualities for mothers, but not qualities that are likely to take precedence in hiring decisions. In the second scenario, the candidate seems smart and assertive, qualities one looks for in a colleague but that may rub slightly against unconscious stereotypes of the good mother. In either case, the pregnant candidate risks leaving a negative impression. (72)

My friend’s story and Pascoe’s story are not unique, nor is mine. What they have in common are what Malinowitz calls “reigning rhetorics of parenthood” (15). In academia, the “reigning rhetoric” of parenthood is that if one wants to become a parent one must wait—especially if one is a woman—until after the job search and after tenure, or one should pursue parenthood at an earlier stage in life when one is not on the academic track. The problem with this reigning rhetoric of parenthood is that it does not acknowledge the specificity of individual women’s lives—or their collective circumstances, for that matter. To be sure, there is much about motherhood and academic life that means adjustments to one’s work patterns and a dearth of uninterrupted time to write, think, and do professional work; however, the nature of one’s daily life as an academic and a mother depends on a number of factors: one’s position in academia (tenured, untenured, nontenured); the maternity and family leave policies offered at one’s employing university; one’s individual and familial economic resources; help at home in the form of a partner or extended family or reliable daycare; family size; and a host of other factors, including one’s stance toward and practice of motherhood. Also, there are biological factors, or what Pascoe calls “the synchronous ticking of the biological and tenure clocks” (70).

Fortunately, feminists and other concerned parties in academia have worked hard to make “family-leave” policies available at a growing number of colleges and universities. Such policies allow parents time to care for an infant, small child, and even in some cases an aging parent or an ill partner or family member. In my case, I taught and worked up until
the birth of my daughter with the assurance of a fifty percent load reduction at full pay granted during the first few months of my daughter's life. Female colleagues in other departments tell me how they lobbied for the university's family leave policies even as they returned to their classrooms and to their research just days after giving birth. Their stories are a reminder of what came before and also of how recent, partial, and tenuous such policies are. In some cases, they are nonexistent, a point affirmed by Pascoe, who tells of an MLA panel on family issues and the profession in which participants told of their struggles to be parents in academia largely without the institutional help of family-friendly policies (70). While there are signs of progress, there is certainly more room for improving the policies and procedures whereby academic institutions address family leave policies broadly conceived. There is also room for improvement on the issue of institution-provided childcare. Many colleges and universities have excellent childcare facilities available to university employees and students, but those facilities are often undersized; faculty, staff, and students often must put their names on waiting lists and wait for a year or more to gain access to childcare.

While Malinowitz faces questions about her status as an unmother and feels as if she must deflect cultural assumptions about her supposed unfulfilled status, I felt as a pregnant woman in this culture that I was, on the one hand, interrogated about my bodily state and, on the other hand, made an often unwitting listener to copious stories about others' pregnancies: physical symptoms, size and weight, food cravings, and emotional states. While pregnant, I noticed that I had become increasingly visible. People I saw on the streets or in stores smiled at me more often than before, and strangers tended to strike up more conversations with me—a plus and a minus, as I soon found. “When are you due?” or “How are you feeling?” were the common questions asked of me by strangers. I had never before felt that my physical being in the world was such an object of scrutiny and subject to such frequent public discourse. I dutifully repeated my due-date, answered questions about the sex of the baby, and heard comments about how “small” or “large” I looked; I also received unsolicited advice about childbirth and childrearing before usually breaking off the conversation. My answer to how I’m feeling was always “fine.” Even if I hadn’t felt fine, I wouldn’t dream of reporting my physical responses or symptoms to complete strangers. Some who inquired after my health seemed crestfallen that I did not report mood swings, bouts of vomiting, and cravings for the stereotypical pickles and
ice cream, the preferred food of pregnant women on sitcoms. I was cautioned by countless people to keep my emotions on an even keel, for my baby will feel what I feel and may be anxious or stressed as a result. I was also warned against my lifelong exercise habit of running: “You’re not running anymore, are you?” friends and family would ask in alarmed voices. I’d reply that I was running low-mileage workouts with my midwife’s approval and medical supervision. For once, I was being chastised for working out too much rather than not enough. As Naomi Wolf says of her pregnancy in *Misconceptions*, “I felt for the first time the experience of being addressed as a good or not-so-good vessel for someone else’s well-being” (61).

I realized as my pregnancy progressed that most who asked how I was feeling wanted to hear a familiar rehearsal of symptoms so that they could tell stories of their pregnancies or their relatives’ or friends’ pregnancies. Unsolicited storytelling in the presence of a pregnant woman seems to be a cultural ritual. Because of my literary and rhetorical training, I found myself studying the plot lines of such stories to see if the pregnant women in the stories are portrayed as hapless victims of their physical symptoms or as heroines who overcome their symptoms and carry on. There seem to be only two character types—heroine or victim—and I began to wonder about women who don’t fit those stock character types. When the stories did not focus on the physical body of the pregnant woman, they appeared to fall in the narrative line of “life after kids,” which I have taken to calling LAK, pronounced “lack.” Stories told about LAK appear to fall along two extremes: on one end of the continuum are stories of motherhood that take up mothering as a disastrous and overwhelming life change. Motherhood is depicted as a war, and parents dispensing the advice to expecting mothers appear to be hardened combat veterans who look with battle-weary, sleep-deprived faces with pity on the expecting mom: “Just wait, you’ll see. Sleepless nights, colic, dirty diapers.” This is the rhetoric of post-traumatic parenthood syndrome. On the other end of the LAK continuum are those who gush about motherhood: “It’s so wonderful, life changing,” they exclaim, and they get misty, dreamy, and sometimes even teary-eyed. What can one do in the face of such extremes except “nod” in agreement, remain silent, or avoid the exchange altogether? Motherhood always struck me not as a war or as wonderful but as a lot of hard and unremitting labor—labor with its rewards and joys, but labor nevertheless. Like Malinowicz with her evangelist Bob, I find myself in the position of hoping I won’t have to be in this kind of exchange very often.
At the same time that I felt all too visible to some, I was invisible to many, and for that I'm mostly grateful. A number of my colleagues and many of my students after initially acknowledging my pregnancy began to ignore it; they didn’t bring it up very much or did so only in passing. Yet, there were moments when I realized that whether or not my colleagues brought up my pregnancy, it was a factor in their perceptions of me. I remember one exchange with a male colleague, a casual acquaintance, at a university-wide meeting of graduate directors—an exchange that occurred at the end of my pregnancy, which coincided with the end of the fall term. He remarked that he couldn’t imagine how I had the ability to carry on my academic duties. It must be pretty hard for me to concentrate; I must have a lot of things on my mind. I told him I was finishing up an article to submit to a journal and that I felt clearheaded and eager to work: “Now seems the time to get academic work done, before the birth of my daughter.” He raised his eyebrows. I could see that I wasn’t behaving in the expected way—the way an expecting woman should behave: nesting (I’d done that already), lingering over baby clothes, sitting with my hand over my belly in a meditative state. I got the feeling that for him the image of a woman sitting up late at night, nine months pregnant, writing an academic journal article is incongruous and maybe even distasteful.

Like Malinowitz’s pet peeves about parenthood and childrearing, I have my pet peeves about the cultural rituals of pregnancy and motherhood. Malinowitz writes of her dislike of the chaotic behavior of young children prone to “throwing ketchup,” “kicking in crowded airplanes,” and “whining during attempted telephone conversations” (31). As a new mother, I do not like the way that one ceases to be a person for some when one becomes a mother, and I emphasize for some, not all. Fortunately, there are friends, family, and colleagues who work hard to treat mothers like people. But there are also the moments of nonrecognition when one is called “Mom” in grocery stores by complete strangers, and when family and friends on bended knee rush to greet the baby and never look upward to “Mom’s face.” Even more challenging is the way one’s professional identity can be elided when one is seen with a baby. Pascoe writes that when she is on campus with her daughter, her students do not appear to recognize her: “Clearly, when they see a woman with a baby, they do not see a professor” (73).

I had a variation of such a moment of nonrecognition when I recently attended and presented at an academic conference. My daughter, tired and unwilling to stay with her caregivers, attended the opening session
with me, sitting in her stroller in the back of the room as conference attendees introduced themselves and listened to the keynote address. From then on, even though my daughter was not in attendance at other sessions and was being cared for by relatives, the other conference participants related to me primarily as a mother, not as a colleague, a situation I had never encountered before. The usual inquiries such as “What are you working on?” and “What do you teach?” turned to “How old is the baby? How did the baby sleep last night?” and “Who’s taking care of the baby while you are in sessions or giving your paper?” Instead of talking about their academic work and mine, the usual conference fodder, my colleagues told me stories about their children’s food habits and toilet training. Now, I don’t mind hearing a little bit on those topics, but I agree with Malinowitz that hearing about food and toilet habits of children—especially those who are not one’s own—can be tedious. I also agree with Malinowitz that the comparative discourse that seems ubiquitous in parenting is not fun, the way in which parent X’s baby or grandchild is in the ninety gazillionth percentile for height and already playing the bongo drum in infant gymboree class.

I am also struck by the way acquaintances, when I say that I will only have one child, respond with a sad gasp of “Ohh...” followed by raised eyebrows asking the inevitable question: “Why?” Lately, I have taken to answering the question with the ironic statement, “Because I want to raise a spoiled, maladjusted, solitary neurotic child and deny her the joy of fighting with siblings,” which is what most people who ask that question are thinking anyway. The real answer is that I don’t want more children. I enjoy being with my daughter and enjoy my career; I know that having a larger family will mean a need for more time, resources, and space that I don’t have in my life, or in the world for that matter. Specifically, I am cognizant of the fact that the consumption habits of American children (including mine and those of all other middle-class academics) leave quite an “ecological footprint.” Diane Glass in a recent article paraphrases Dan Maguire, author of Sacred Choices, who notes that the “ecological footprint” of an affluent child is 200 times greater than that of a child in a poor country” (C1). In other words, American children, like America’s adults, consume more resources than those of other world populations and are more likely to contribute to furthering ecological disaster. I’ve been told that making a decision about family size partly on an ecological basis is practical, unemotional and unloving; I think it is realistic and honest.

“You’re too intellectual, too analytical,” my midwife told me after
the birth of my daughter, Autumn Elizabeth, after an induced labor that lasted two days and ended in a cesarean section. She told me that my intellect held me back from having a “normal” birth. She also wondered aloud if my feminist orientation means that I secretly wanted a cesarean section so I could have an axe to grind against the medical establishment! I was infuriated by these comments. I knew she was as disappointed as I was that I had to have a cesarean section, and I knew she was defensive, since I was unhappy about the way she had handled my birth process. Strung out on post-op painkillers, I, nevertheless, did my feminist best to call her on her statement about “intellectual” women, and I asked her to present me with proof that intellectual women have a higher incidence of cesarean sections. She shrugged and backed off, admitting that other factors caused me to have a cesarean section. Still, her words caused me feelings of anger and bitterness. I composed and re-composed letters to her in my head in which I refuted her claims and critiqued her anti-intellectualism and sexism—letters that I neither wrote nor sent. Somehow, I thought that the job title “midwife” meant she wouldn’t place my birth process within a patriarchal frame, but the majority of certified nurse midwives do work within the medical establishment, delivering in hospitals. Pronatalist culture, Malinowitz reminds us, is not necessarily feminist culture (30).

As Malinowitz looks to May’s book for a productive take on choosing unmotherhood, I look to Ariel Gore, a feminist and a single mother who has written a number of realistic, funny guides to mothering and who maintains a Web site for feminist mothers called hipmama.com. Gore emphasizes women’s lived experiences of motherhood instead of merely dispensing generalist advice. Unlike the ur-practical/medical guide What to Expect When You are Expecting (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway) that assumes a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman from the suburbs or from an urban upscale environment who can endlessly rest, eat leafy greens, and ask tons of anxious questions about pregnancy and motherhood, Gore speaks to a range of mothers and theories and practices of motherhood. Gore, like Malinowitz, refuses the pronatalist bromides about motherhood and unmotherhood (see also Lerner; Rich).

In her essay, Malinowitz successfully debunks the notion that unmothers and mothers have little in common, arguing that “as feminists we err in taking a shortcut toward ‘validation’ when our real work lies in analyzing and redressing the collectively damaging idea that each condition—motherhood and unmotherhood—profoundly negates the other”
In other words, feminists have far more to gain from joining forces to critique and change conceptions and practices of motherhood and unmotherhood than falling back on cultural stereotypes about either state of being. In the parlance of the childfree feminist writer: Even as a breeder who recently sprogged and is currently pursuing an academic career at a research university with my supposedly half-firing brain cells and my shriekling at my side, I know a good essay when I see one.

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