
Natalie Loveless, ed.
New Maternalisms: Redux
Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2018
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In Natalie Loveless' edited anthology *New Maternalisms: Redux*, Loveless, a curator and scholar, defines the term "new maternalism" (which she coined in 2012) as the merger between the concepts of the maternal and contemporary feminist new materialism. The book itself is the child of a conference and an exhibition that took place at the University of Alberta's Arts-Based Research Studio in May 2016, co-organized by Loveless and Sheena Wilson. Featuring the work of Lenka Clayton, Jess Dobkin, Alejandra Herrera, Courtney Kessel, and Jill Miller, the exhibition and the conference built on the projects exhibited in the two earlier iterations of *New Maternalisms* (Toronto, 2012; Santiago, 2014), though this book does not bring back every participant nor project.

The book is structured in two parts: the first, a series of essays by academics working on theories of the maternal that each discuss the work of one artist; the second, a two-way interview between Loveless and Lise Haller Baggesen, an artist and scholar whose installation and publication *Motherism* (2013) was the centrepiece of *Mapping the Maternal*, the conference which produced this publication and hosted the exhibition *New Maternalisms: Redux*.

I mention all these interconnected pieces, the ways in which this iteration of Loveless' project builds on earlier versions and recalls the various players, because I believe this level of collaboration and co-creation to be central to both a feminist approach and a maternal one. A child needs a

community to thrive, as does a mother, and here a community has banded together to raise this conference-exhibition-book baby over the course of many years. I applaud this tactic of mutual support. The benefits of community and shared experience and knowledge cannot be understated. In the book and in the larger project, we witness a formidable example of holding space for community. Here is a physical declaration of love among a tight-knit group of women who all happen to work in the arts, and to be mothers. As this book reminds us—and we all really do need to be reminded—being a woman in the art world is hard enough; bring a living, breathing child into the discourse and you are setting yourself up to be viewed as a failure. My own work on the subject notes this as well.¹ The very real barriers to active participation in the (art)world that mothers (and parents more generally) face, which are detailed in each project and essay included in *New Maternalisms: Redux*, merit extensive discussion, and here these subjects are given real consideration. Where I wished the book would have gone further would have been to extend the conversation beyond the fairly limited community within which these questions are already circulating.

New Maternalisms: Redux offers plenty of food for thought to the reader. In addition to the curatorial reflections and descriptions by Loveless, the book calls on artists and scholars to reflect on the works presented. Deirdre Donaghue writes about us-based Courtney Kessel's literal motherly balancing act, in which she puts all the stuff she needs to be (an artist, a researcher, a single mother) in balance with the real-life body of her child on a homemade and somewhat intentionally dangerous teeter-totter. If the balance is not right, her child (who spends the performance appearing mostly ambivalent to her mother's labour, and is billed as an active collaborator) will fall. While didactic in nature, it made me hold my

breath. Rachel Epp Buller provides an overview of Jill Miller's (USA) practice, focusing on the three works in the exhibition. One, *The Milk Truck* (2011), is a mobile breastfeeding station. This work was originally developed to work in the American context, which is historically more hostile to open acts of breastfeeding than the Canadian context. I'm not sure that a project about making a taboo visible maintains its potency in a context where the taboo holds less force. When the work was included in the 2012 iteration of the exhibition in Edmonton, the truck was parked outside of the museum, which perhaps diluted the concept—it was originally intended to respond to someone experiencing harassment for breastfeeding in public by driving up to the person in distress and create a spectacle (the truck has a giant nipple dome roof). The other works included by Miller and discussed by Epp Buller include *Extreme Mothering!* (2013) and *24 Hour Family Portraits* (2016), both of which put Miller's children, as with Kessel and her daughter, into collaborative roles with the artist-mother figure. Irena Aristarkova writes on Jess Dobkin's (Toronto) *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*, a much-exhibited project originally from 2006, in which the artist invites the public to sample various womens' donated (and screened) breast milk. The book also includes writing by Jennie Klein on the art of Alejandra Herrera Silva (Chile and USA) in which maternal anger and frustration is explored through performance, and Andrea Liss on the art of us-based Lenka Clayton in which the artist creates a solution to her maternal ennui via an *Artist Residency in Motherhood*.

If we take the concept of new maternalism at face value, then in these projects, the artists make visible the ways in which the experience of motherhood can become the material—our milk, our children, our pain, our anger, all of it—to create with. But that's a limited conception of the term. I want to consider the ways in which this book—and in fact all the ways in which the *maternal*

are conceived of in the project—are inward-facing. The field of new materialism expands upon the materialist precept by which everything is regarded as literal matter or material interactions. New materialist scholars are noted for rejuvenating this model of thought with writing on the vibrant matter of the interconnected universe; as Jane Bennett writes, “my ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human.”² When Loveless brings together contemporary new materialism with scholarship on the maternal she is perhaps making an argument that the basic (and possibly primordial) material of motherhood—the womb, the fluids, the emotional and physical baggage—requires more space in the academic sphere. Not just writing about the good or the bad mother, the virgin and the whore (subjects so typical of art historical writing around the mother) but advocating for the messy material taking up space too. This is, of course, a necessary project. As I’ve argued elsewhere, notably the curatorial project *The Let Down Reflex*, co-curated with Juliana Driever between 2016 and 2018, parenthood, but motherhood especially, because of the unbalanced conditions of our patriarchal society, should demand more space in the public sphere. This is a question of accessibility and equity.

But some of the very valid criticisms of new materialism, in particular, of the lack of consideration for race, class, sexuality, and gender, can also apply to *New Maternalisms*³ Here is a project about the universality of the mother experience from the exclusive point of view of straight, cis-gendered, white-passing mothers, which in effect erases any possibility for a universal discussion. While some new materialists, especially feminist new materialists like Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti, examine and recognize matter’s agential relation to being, *New Maternalisms* doesn’t go far enough to recognize the need

for an intersectional analysis of its material, from a variety of different perspectives.

Further, critiques of new materialist writing (see recent writing by Jennifer Clary-Lemon, 2019; Peta Hinton, Tara Mehrabi, and Josef Barla, 2015; Victoria M. Massie, 2018; or Jen Rose Smith, 2018) point out that the language used by scholars today reflects and borrows, without attribution, the knowledge of Indigenous communities. I would argue that the writing in *New Maternalisms: Redux* does nothing to challenge this critique. The only inclusion of Indigenous voices is a line that borrows from conference participant Kimberly TallBear within a discussion between Haller Baggesen and Loveless on the work of Donna Haraway (with whom TallBear studied at MIT). Why the omission? This year the Mitchell Art Gallery at MacEwan University in Edmonton hosted the exhibition *Mothering Spaces*, curated by Becca Taylor and featuring work by Tiffany Shaw-Collinge, Faye HeavyShield, and The Ephemerals (Jaimie Isaac, Niki Little, and Jenny Western). As Franchesca Hebert-Spence notes in a review for *Canadian Art*: “rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and through deliberate programming, *Mothering Spaces* opened dialogue to address the barriers and inequities caregivers experience—barriers and inequities enforced by institutions, granting bodies and residencies,” from an Indigenous perspective with Indigenous participants.⁴ When Haller Baggesen and Loveless dissect TallBear and Haraway’s notion of kinship they ignore the ways in which kinship functions outside of an all- or mostly-white environment.

The lack of diversity of perspectives and the heavy reliance on white, Eurocentric scholars for support demonstrates the very real ways in which post-third wave feminism has still not caught on in the art world or the academy. It is a shame to see that many are still paying lip service to second-wave scholarship and neglecting to advance the argument beyond the biological

materialism of the maternal. Karen Barad, a feminist physicist tied to new materialism (and quoted by Loveless in the introductory essay), notes that matter does not just form inter-action, there is potential for intra-action—the mutual constitution of entangled agencies or agents. *New Maternalisms: Redux* is an important, timely and strong contribution to recent scholarship on the maternal but it is too dependent on the inter-activity of its community. It’s time to expand the dialogue outward, not just beyond the agents involved in this book, but beyond the narrow definition of community these agents represent. ¶

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1. “The Let Down Reflex” (with Juliana Driever), in *Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design, and Maternity*, eds. Rachel Epp Buller and Charles Reeve (Demeter Press, 2019).
2. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.
3. See for example Paul Rekret, “A critique of new materialism: ethics and ontology,” *Subjectivity* 9, no. 3 (2016): 225–45, or Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “New Materialisms,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016).
4. Franchesca Hebert-Spence, Leah Sandals, Maibritt Borgen, Meredyth Cole, Anna Kovler, and Yaniya Lee, “Reflections on an Art Project about Indigenous Mothering,” *Canadian Art*, June 18, 2019, <https://canadianart.ca/essays/mothering-spaces-mitchell-art-gallery-edmonton-indigenous-mothering-collective-action/>. Accessed October 3, 2019.

Amanda Boetzkes
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