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“Rethinking Ruddick and the ethnocentrism critique of *Maternal Thinking*”

In the early 1990s, Sara Ruddick’s Maternal Thinking, was criticized for harboring a latent ethnocentrism. Ruddick responded to these critiques in the 1995 edition of her book, but her response has not yet been addressed in the feminist philosophical literature. This essay addresses this lacuna in the feminist-philosophical scholarship.

In the last installment of this critique, Alison Bailey and Patrice DiQuinzio suggested that the only way for Ruddick to avoid the ethnocentrism charge would require her near universalistic claims about mothering be rejected in favor of “particularized, localized accounts of mothering”. In this essay I’ll show that this claim goes too far. After reviewing Lugones’ and Bailey’s critiques of Ruddick, along with Ruddick’s response, I propose a “modified universalism” which addresses the concerns raised by Ruddick’s critics while preserving key elements of her theory.

At the height of the feminist essentialism debates in the early 1990s, Sara Ruddick’s now classic contribution to feminist philosophy, *Maternal Thinking*, was criticized for harboring a latent ethnocentrism. Ruddick responded to these critiques in the 1995 edition of her book, but her response has not yet been addressed in the feminist philosophical literature. This essay addresses this lacuna in the scholarship. It also presents an alternative response to the ethnocentrism charge than that envisioned by Ruddick’s primary critics. In the last installment of this critique, Alison Bailey and Patrice DiQuinzio suggested that the only way for Ruddick to avoid the ethnocentrism charge would require her near universalistic claims about mothering be rejected in favor of “particularized, localized accounts of mothering” (DiQuinzio, 11). In this essay I’ll argue that Ruddick’s critics go too far when they suggest that, in order to acknowledge racial ethnic differences in maternal practices, we must abandon universalism altogether. After reviewing Maria Lugones’ and Alison Bailey’s critiques of Ruddick, along with Ruddick’s response, I propose a “modified universalism” that addresses the concerns raised by Ruddick’s critics while preserving central tenets of her theory. By developing a taxonomy that attends both to similarities and differences among maternal practices, the modified universalism proposed in this essay provides a theoretical framework for developing a richer and more complex

understanding of mothering, one that integrates insights from Sara Ruddick and Alison Bailey/Patricia Hill Collins. This improved understanding promises to help maternal practitioners identify new sites for cooperation, with promising implications for both mothering and peace politics.

In their now classic 1983 article, “Have We Got a Theory for You!,” Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman observe that “it is only possible for a woman who does not feel highly vulnerable with respect to other parts of her identity, e.g. race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual alliance, etc., to conceive of her voice simply or essentially as a ‘woman’s voice.’” (476) One year later Ruddick published her essay “Maternal Thinking” and five years after that, Ruddick published *Maternal Thinking*. In both works, Ruddick extrapolates from her own experiences of mothering to develop a general account of maternal practice, which she thinks is applicable to all mothers. Central to this account is Ruddick’s depiction of practices, which she defines as “collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims.” For Ruddick “*the aims or goals that define a practice are so central or ‘constitutive’ that in the absence of the goal you would not have the practice*” (1989, 13-14, emphasis added). According to Ruddick three goals are central to and constitutive of all maternal practice: preservative love, the protective work mothers engage in to ensure their children’s survival; fostering growth, the work done to nurture “a child’s developing spirit” including her “emotional, cognitive, sexual and social development” (Ruddick 1989, 82-3); and socialization for acceptance, “training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate” (104).

In moving so easily between her experiences and those of mothers generally, Ruddick seems to engage in exactly the kind of slippage Lugones and Spelman warn about, mistaking her

mothering experiences for those of mothers in general. Indeed, Ruddick's work was soon explicitly identified as exemplifying a latent ethnocentrism characteristic of much of white feminist theory (Lugones 1991/2003, Bailey, 1994 a and b and 1995, DiQuinzio 1993). For example, Maria Lugones reads "Maternal Thinking" as recognizing the so-called "problem of difference" raised by women of color while still not adequately recognizing difference itself (1991/2003, 68). Ruddick acknowledges the "problem of difference" through use of a disclaimer. She identifies her own social location as a white, heterosexual, Protestant, well-educated woman and acknowledges that "she is working within 'the limits of her own particular social and sexual history'" (Ruddick, 1984: 215, as quoted in Lugones, 1991/2003, 69). Ruddick, however, then develops a theory that is intended to be applicable to all mothers, thereby leaving women from other social locations (Lugones' primary concern here is with women of color) outside of her work and in the position of having to decide whether or not Ruddick's theory applies to them and how her theory might need to be modified in order to be made useful. Audre Lorde aptly describes the situation women of color find themselves in when she observes "How difficult and time-consuming it is to have to reinvent the pencil every time you want to send a message" (Lorde, 35; as quoted in Spelman, 116). What Ruddick's disclaimer lacks, according to Lugones, is an interactive component. Through use of the disclaimer, Ruddick tries to insulate her theory from criticisms made of it by women who inhabit subject positions different than Ruddick's, rather than to actively engage these criticisms and, through them, these women's lives and experiences. When the disclaimer is used, women of color are still faced with Lorde's dilemma: having to reinvent existing feminist accounts of mothering before they can speak their own truths about mothering. Lugones sees Ruddick as typical of white feminist theorists in that

she seems more intent on protecting the integrity of her theory than addressing and overcoming the problem of racism (69-70).

While Lugones' charges are directed towards Ruddick's 1983 essay, and not her 1989 book, there's reason to believe Lugones would similarly criticize Ruddick's book. For one, Ruddick makes use of the criticized disclaimer in her book as well, stating that "the peculiarities of my experience affect my fundamental conceptions of maternal thinking and work" and then developing a theory of mothering grounded in her own experiences (1989/1995, 54). Moreover, when Bailey and DiQuinzio expand upon Lugones' criticisms, they have Ruddick's book in mind. In her elaboration of the ethnocentrism critiques in the mid 1990s Alison Bailey suggests that Ruddick conflates two voices—one emerges from Ruddick's personal experience, the other is the voice of the near-universal moral theorist. By conflating these two voices, Ruddick lets her own experience stand in for the experience of mothers in general, thereby marginalizing the experiences of women from social locations different than her own.

I recently reread Ruddick's initial article and book with the above criticisms in mind. In her initial article, Ruddick's use of the ideas of non-white women consists in a footnote in which she acknowledges the influence of Audre Lorde (and white working class author, Tillie Olson) on her thinking about mothering (1983, 228, footnote 5). Yet in the text of her 1989 book, Ruddick repeatedly refers to the ideas and experiences of women of color. For example, Ruddick refers to the images of mothering depicted by Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Bernice Johnson, Kamla Bhasin, and others. In the part of her book devoted to feminist peace politics, Ruddick describes the challenges of maternal love using the prose of Chinua Achebe, the experience of mothering in the wake of Hiroshima, and discusses the antimilitarism of mothers from Argentina and Chile. Despite incorporating the experiences of mothers of different

racism and nationalities in her book, Bailey and DiQuinzio still criticize *Maternal Thinking* for being ethnocentric. Why? The main components of Ruddick's account of mothering were developed in her 1983 essay. While Ruddick finds cross-cultural supporting evidence from literature and history to incorporate into her book, her chosen examples don't challenge the basic concepts developed in 1983. To return to Lorde's metaphor, the pencil Ruddick offers to maternal theorists is now painted in a variety of colors, but it is still fundamentally the same writing implement. And if it was inappropriate for analyzing the mothering experiences of women of color in her 1983 essay, it is still inappropriate in her 1989 book. Lugones makes this same point, in somewhat different words. She states "When I do not see plurality stressed in the very structure of a theory, I know that I will have to do lots of acrobatics—lie a contortionist or tight-rope walker—to have this theory speak to me without allowing the theory to distort me *in my complexity*" (2003, 74). Ruddick's account of maternal thinking, as developed in her 1989 book, is still suspected of distorting the experiences of racial ethnic mothers.

In the next two sections of this essay I examine first Ruddick's published response to early versions of the ethnocentrism critique and then Alison Bailey's later, more detailed criticisms of *Maternal Thinking*. By better appreciating what Ruddick's theory purportedly lacks, I clear the way for determining, in the final sections of this essay, whether and how it can be redeemed. While Ruddick's written response to the ethnocentrism critique is ultimately found wanting, her theory itself, when sympathetically reworked, is able to address her critics' concerns.

Ruddick's Response to the Ethnocentrism Critique

In her preface to the 1995 edition of *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick responds to the ethnocentrism critique. Curiously, Ruddick doesn't respond to articles that address her work

directly. Rather, she takes up Angela Harris's article, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," which addresses the writings of feminist legal theorists, Catharine MacKinnon and Robin West (1990). <1> Harris argues that MacKinnon and West fail adequately to recognize the distinctiveness of black women's experiences. Black women's experiences are not simply *quantitatively* different from white women's experiences, Harris argues, they're *qualitatively* different. Thus the "intensifier" view, that if white women have it bad, black women must have it even worse, fails to capture black women's lived reality. Harris uses Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to argue that

beauty itself is white. ... There is a difference between the hope that the next makeup kit or haircut or diet will bring you salvation and the knowledge that nothing can. The relation of black women to the ideal of white beauty is not a more intense form of white women's frustration: It is something other, a complex mingling of racial and gender hatred from without, self-hatred from within (246).

Similarly, Harris argues that white and black women have qualitatively different experiences of rape. She points out that while the law has inadequately protected white women from rape, during slavery it granted black women no legal protection whatsoever. Indeed, rape of slave women worked to the advantage of slave-owners, by adding valuable fair-skinned slave children to their list of assets. And after slavery, Harris notes, rape laws were rarely invoked to penalize rapists of black women, as black women were seen as "promiscuous by nature." Within this historical context, Harris observes, rape "was something that only happened to white women; what happened to black women was simply life" (247). In addition, through creation of the myth of the black male rapist, unforgettably portrayed in the early motion picture film, "The Birth of a Nation," rape was used as a tool of racial oppression that controlled black men as well as black

women. <2> The implication here is clear: due to qualitative differences between black and white women's experiences, illustrated by Harris through the examples of racial differences both in beauty standards and in social meanings attached to rape, extrapolating from white women's experiences to all women distorts the experiences of black women by ignoring salient and distinctive features of their oppression. By addressing the Harris essay in her 1995 preface, Ruddick clearly indicates that she sees Harris's critique as potentially applicable to her own account of mothering. She seems to be asking herself: perhaps there are qualitative differences in white and black women's experiences of mothering that her theory needs to address? How does Ruddick respond to this possibility?

In her 1995 preface Ruddick addresses together criticisms of her theory for failing to address issues related to mothering disabled children and for failing to address differences in maternal practice grounded in racial/ethnic difference (xiv-xvii). Ruddick sees both black mothers and mothers of disabled children as sharing in common that their children are stigmatized and marginalized by predominant and exclusive conceptions of what constitutes the "normal" child and worries that mothers may internalize these views, to the detriment of their maternal practice and, ultimately, their children (xv). Ruddick's suggested strategy to deal with this stigmatization is to engage in universalization by insisting on these children's humanity. "I am tempted to say that the conception of a human child, or of all children as human, is an antistigmatizing act" (xvi). Ruddick is aware that her critics see universalism as problematic, the source of stigma not the solution to it. She reports that her readers warn, "the fictional human child contributes to the stigmatizing of some children as other than 'standard human' and thereby ignores, distorts, or exacerbates the particular struggles of their mothers" (xvi). After identifying

some of the ways that children differ from each other, both within a family and within a culture, Ruddick responds

Yet I continue to universalize—or perhaps more accurately, to moralize. I am not so much interested in *crosscultural psychological claims about how children are*—though these would have more of a place in a book I would write today. My primary concern is with *moral claims about the responses children deserve* (xvi, emphasis added).

With this quote, Ruddick seems to reduce the concerns of her critics to matters of cross-cultural psychology, which she then dismisses as tangential to the normative project of *Maternal Thinking*. I find Ruddick’s response striking given that in a footnote to her 1983 essay Ruddick states that she is “dependent on others, morally as well as intellectually, for the statement of differences, the assessment of their effects on every aspect of maternal lives, and finally for radical correction as well as for expansion of any general theory I would offer” (footnote 5, 228). Ruddick seems to read Harris as offering just such a “radical correction” (otherwise, why address Harris’s article in her new preface?), and yet she quickly dismisses Harris’s concerns. Why?

Let me try to clarify Ruddick’s meaning, in order to shed light on this issue. In her response to Harris, Ruddick suggests that her normative analysis operates at a high level of abstraction; it seeks to identify what concerns children share in common and not how they differ; it is in these commonalities that Ruddick expects to ground an account of the moral obligations due to children. It’s for this reason that Ruddick thinks racial ethnic permutations of maternal practice belong to the area of cross-cultural psychology rather than moral philosophy proper—her theory isn’t concerned with culturally specific interpretations of children’s needs. Hence, Ruddick does not think the ethnocentrism critique necessitates a rethinking of her core ideas because it operates at the wrong level of analysis.

While this attempted reconstruction of Ruddick tries to make sense of her line of argument, it opens up new questions. Ruddick is a standpoint theorist who believes all knowledge is situated. Yet she rejects racial ethnic differences in children as a matter of theoretically irrelevant cross-cultural psychology rather than as theoretically relevant social context that helps mothering theory avoid the much criticized abstraction of dominant ways of knowing (1989, 127-39). Ruddick does not dwell on this concern long enough to explain how she proposes to distinguish between those details that do and those that do not properly belong to the domain of theory. I return to this point in “Rethinking Ruddick’s Universalism”, below.

Ruddick’s reasons for rejecting the ethnocentrism critique shift in her final comments on this issue, when she reiterates her approach to writing her book “I offer my own variant of maternal thinking as the product of a particular white and gentile woman’s experience... I recognize that my conception of the human child as singular and complex is a product of my culture and history...” Here Ruddick seems to acknowledge that her perspective on mothering, is culturally specific and thus, presumably, limited. Ruddick ends this passage with the words “*But I can at most only curb not eliminate universalizing tendencies in my own history*” (xvii, emphasis added). Here Ruddick invokes a different kind of universalism than that previously discussed. Rather than universalism being the goal of her normative analysis, and the solution to the stigmatization that can stem from marginal identities, here Ruddick invokes a kind of “false” universalism that unwittingly sneaks into her narrative, causing her to extrapolate from her specific social location to *all* mothers. Where in Ruddick’s analysis does universalism as the legitimate aim of normative analysis end and “false” universalism that presents a partial perspective as generally shared begin? Ruddick doesn’t provide us with the tools to know.

Ruddick ends her discussion of disability and ethnocentrism by expressing her gratitude to the many mothers who tell maternal stories different than her own.

Lugones would describe Ruddick's response to the ethnocentrism critique as non-interactive (2003, 68ff.). In her discussion of the ethnocentrism critique, Ruddick doesn't address Lugones or DiQuinzio, her primary critics at the time of her 1995 introduction. And while Ruddick does seem to see that Harris's critique of MacKinnon and West may be applicable to her own work, she effectively sweeps Harris's concerns off the table by relegating them to the sphere of "crosscultural psychology." Clearly, Ruddick does not think there are substantive, qualitative differences between the maternal practices of black and white women. Rather, her view seems to be that black and white women offer cultural variations on the same near universal goals that guide maternal practice. Thus, she sees no reason to rethink the central tenets of her theory.

Ruddick's reluctant response to this critique contrasts sharply with her response to the disability critique, in the very same pages. Ruddick observes that Jane McDonnell, a mother-author of disabled children, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, an anthropologist who studied the maternal practices of poor women in Brazil, "inspire me to revise *Maternal Thinking*—both its fundamental concepts and its details" (xvi). No such observation is made regarding the feminist authors who launch the ethnocentrism critique. This difference in uptake on two critiques Ruddick sees as closely related is remarkable. It's made more remarkable by Ruddick's subsequent comments on the disability critique in her 2002 review of Eva Kittay's book, *Love's Labor*. Ruddick observes "Kittay says, as others have, that I wrote of mothering as if all children were 'intact.'" She is pointing out a *conceptual flaw* and a *failure of imagination* I will try to remedy." (Ruddick 2002, 222; emphasis added) She then goes on to accept Kittay's

recommendation that “the ability to foster the capacity to experience joy” should be acknowledged as a “primary ideal of mothering that well serves both mothers and children”.

(222) Here, Ruddick both acknowledges and responds to an interactive demand made by her critics; consideration of the disability critique has led her to see shortcomings in her thinking and to accept an addition to the central tenets of her theory. The ethnocentrism and disability critiques, which Ruddick initially treats as comparable, get very different uptake in the new edition of *Maternal Thinking* and in her subsequent writing.

I have given considerable thought as to why Ruddick would respond so differently to these two critiques, which she clearly sees as related. The easy answer is that this is evidence of Ruddick’s own unreflective ethnocentrism. While I cannot rule out this possibility, in the spirit of the principle of charity I’d like to propose an alternative explanation. The Harris, Lugones, and DiQuinzio critiques raise general, theoretical, and abstract concerns about problems of inclusion and exclusion in feminist thought. They don’t identify specific shortcomings in Ruddick’s analysis of mothering but leave Ruddick to identify and rectify such shortcomings on her own. By contrast, the disability critiques made by McDonnell, Scheper-Hughes, and Kittay provide concrete, real life examples of differences in the needs of abled versus disabled children and provide specific examples of how these differences require an addition to Ruddick’s proposed three goals of maternal practice. My hypothesis is that, absent similar concrete examples provided by her primary critics that illustrated the distinctive needs of children of color, it was easier for Ruddick to dismiss the possibility that the ethnocentrism critique affected her core ideas.

I submit that if issues of disability are properly philosophical and raise normative concerns that meaningfully add to Ruddick’s account of maternal thinking, there is no *prima*

facie reason to reject the possibility that other types of maternal practice, such as that carried out by women of color, similarly raise philosophical and ethical concerns that would also add to her account. We see an attempt to demonstrate how much we have to learn from racial ethnic women's maternal practice in the work of Alison Bailey. Bailey's use of Patricia Hill Collins' writings provides a model account of an interactive white feminist response to the ethnocentrism critique. As we'll see, while Ruddick uses examples of mothering by women of color to support her claims about maternal practice, Bailey uses Collins' analysis to complicate white feminist views on mothering. While Ruddick emphasizes sameness, Bailey attends to differences.

Bailey's Use of Collins' Motherwork Goals

After providing a thoughtful overview of the problem, within feminist theory, of illegitimately extrapolating from white heterosexual middle class women's experiences to *all* women, Bailey uses Patricia Hill Collins' essay, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood," and her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, to describe three goals internal to racial ethnic women's motherwork.

1) Motherwork and physical survival. This goal seeks both the survival of the individual child and that of the racial ethnic community itself. Racial ethnic mothers try to secure their children's physical and psychological survival within a hostile society in which U.S. black children face higher mortality rates than white children, and black, Hispanic, and Native American children all experience elevated poverty rates (1994, 201). In *Black Feminist Thought* Collins argues that black mothers pursuing this maternal goal must raise their children to know what behaviors are socially acceptable, so that they can better protect themselves. Newspaper columnist Deborah Mathis described well this aspect of black mothering years ago, when she recounted how she taught her teenage son always to keep his hands in plain view, when inside a

store, lest he be accused of shoplifting or be thought to be hiding a gun. At the same time, Collins describes how racial ethnic mothers also teach their children to exceed society's stereotypical expectations for them.

2) Motherwork and identity. With this goal, racial ethnic mothers try to develop in their children both a positive sense of racial ethnic identity and the capacity for developing their own self-definition, while living in a white dominant society that "devalues their history, work, culture, and customs" (Bailey, 1994b, 193-94). Drawing on the work of Bonnie Thornton Dill, Collins provides the example of black women domestic workers who sought to convey to their children values and skills that would allow them to achieve higher social positions than their mothers (1994, 125). This dual aspect of black maternal practice, namely socializing black children for acceptance into white society while simultaneously teaching them to resist white norms, is captured well by this quote from historian Elsa Barkley Brown: "[my] mother's behavior demonstrated the 'need to teach me to live my life one way and, at the same time, to provide all the tools I would need to live it quite differently'" (Brown, 1989, 929, as quoted in Collins 1994, 124).

3) Motherwork and power. Collins depicts motherwork as exceptionally challenging for racial ethnic women who already face multiple oppressions themselves. She states that motherwork for physical survival "often extracts a high cost for large numbers of women. There is loss of individual autonomy and there is submersion of individual growth for the benefit of the group. While this dimension of motherwork remains essential, the question of women doing more than their fair share of such work for individual and community development merits open debate" (1994, 201). Motherwork for identity requires that racial ethnic mothers resist the dominant culture's attempt to compel them to be complicit in their children's assimilation to

stereotypical racialized views, such as “Pocahonteses” or “squaws” for Native American girls; “geisha girls” or “Suzy Wongs” for Asian girls; “Madonnas” or “whores” for Hispanic girls; or “mammies”, “matriarchs” and “prostitutes” for African American girls (1994, 208-9). Thus, the third Collins/Bailey motherwork goal is that racial ethnic mothers engage in self-definition, self-valuation, and self-empowerment themselves so that, despite economic and racial exploitation, they can make their own choices about mothering and, thereby, meet the needs of their children and communities (Bailey, 1994 b, 193-4; see Collins 1994, 204-7). This goal seems to emerge out of Collins’ relational understanding of mothering—the maternal challenges faced by racial ethnic women are so significant, that the goal of maternal empowerment must be an explicit goal of racial ethnic women’s motherwork practice if they are to achieve their other, child centered maternal goals. Bailey presents Collins’ three goals as alternatives to Ruddick’s.

Bailey and Ruddick exhibit significant differences in how they utilize the ideas of women of color. Whereas Ruddick uses their ideas to find supporting evidence for her own views, Bailey begins her theorizing about mothering with a close reading of Patricia Hill Collins. Rather than impose her own categories upon racial ethnic women’s experiences, Bailey imports categories directly from Collins’ analysis of these stories and brings them into conversation with Ruddick. Finally, following Collins, Bailey uses race, class, and gender, as categories of analysis, which allows her to develop a more nuanced and differentiated account of how power and inequality shape racial ethnic maternal practices.

I find compelling Bailey’s close reading of Collins to advance an alternative account of maternal practice that is attentive to the intersections of race, gender, and socio-economic class. And I am sympathetic to the concern she and others raise regarding an “intellectual division of labor” in which white women develop the theories and women of color provide the stories that

support them (1994, 195). <3> Yet while Ruddick doesn't go far enough in responding to the ethnocentrism critique, I worry that Bailey goes too far by suggesting that feminist theorists must eschew universalism altogether if they are to do justice to the variety of maternal experiences. Angela Harris makes an observation within the realm of feminist legal theory that is relevant here as well; she reminds us that "even a jurisprudence based on multiple consciousness must categorize; without categorization each individual is as isolated as Funes < 4>, and there can be no moral responsibility or social change (239)." I understand Harris as making two claims here. The first is epistemological and the second is normative. 1) Human thinking functions by way of categorizing; we cannot give up categorization or else we'd be left with disparate, disconnected, and hence incomprehensible experiences that we could not fully understand ourselves and we certainly could not communicate to others. When we apply Harris' reasoning to mothering in particular, we see that if we eschewed universal categories, we'd have information on specific local mothering practices, but would have no way of putting these practices in relation to each other. Not only would this impede our understanding of other women's maternal practices, it would also impede knowledge of our own. 2) Harris is making a normative claim with her concluding words "there can be no moral responsibility or social change." I read her as saying that even if we could eschew categorizing, we wouldn't want to. The kinds of comparisons and analyses categorizing makes possible allow us to make moral judgments and thereby lay the foundation for social change. For example, by defining oppression and then being able to demonstrate that x, like y, is an instance of oppression, I've used categories and categorization to make comparisons that allow for moral judgment (x, like y, is an instance of oppression and thus is wrong) and social change (we need laws to change x, just like we have already passed laws to remedy y).

Harris' suggestion is that rather than resist categorization or generalization altogether, we need to change the *status* of the categories we use, we should "make our categories explicit, tentative, relational, and unstable." (239) In the rest of this essay, I will use Harris's theoretical suggestions and Bailey's/Collins' description of racial ethnic mothering, to propose a reconstruction of Ruddick that, I hope, provides a more satisfactory response to the ethnocentrism critique than does Ruddick or Bailey. I will proceed by carving a middle path between Ruddick's universalism and the localized accounts of mothering advocated by Bailey and DiQuinzio. In keeping with Harris's suggestion above, the new categories I introduce should be understood as provisional and subject to change, as new voices contribute to our understanding of mothering.

Rethinking Ruddick's Universalism

Recall: Ruddick describes mothering as a practice and then defines practices as "collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims. The aims or goals that define a practice are so central or 'constitutive' that in the absence of the goal you would not have that practice" (1989, 13-14). Ruddick argues her three proposed goals are constitutive of *all* maternal practice. They emerge from the demands children place on their caregivers. By contrast, Bailey argues against universal goals by demonstrating that within the U.S. racial ethnic maternal practice is guided by its own separate and distinctive set of constitutive goals (1994b, 193).

I think these views are not as incompatible as it at first seems, once we shift our attention to an examination of the different **types** of goals that guide maternal practice. Again, following Harris' suggestions, any initial assignation of maternal goals to one of these types must be considered tentative and subject to revision, as the voices of mothers from diverse backgrounds

and with diverse mothering experiences are included in the conversation. (Here I'm thinking not only of poor women and women of color, but also adoptive mothers and birthmothers who relinquish their children for adoption).

Some goals are universal, they're internal to all forms of maternal practice, yet get interpreted in culturally specific ways. Linda Alcoff understands Ruddick in this way, which is why she doesn't believe Ruddick's theory is ethnocentric. Of the goals of maternal practice, Alcoff observes "She [Ruddick] suggests that if these are defined loosely enough we might apply them across cultures, but in the main her project is wisely to do a very particular ethnography of the maternal practices she herself knows best" (78). Ruddick is correct that preservative love is such a universal goal; without it, there would be no child and hence, no maternal practice to discuss. For privileged mothers, concern about whether their children will survive the day is a concern that fades into the background of their daily maternal practice, as children grow out of their vulnerable infant stage and mothers become more experienced and confident. Such concerns, though, can quickly erupt when a car speeds too quickly down the street or information is disseminated about a pedophile moving into the community. Economically and socially disadvantaged mothers' ongoing and pervasive concern with ensuring their children's survival, a maternal goal discussed by both Collins and Bailey, is a culturally specific form of Ruddick's near universal goal of preservative love. It's the form preservative love takes under situations of oppression, when a mother can no longer blithely assume that the surrounding community is, by and large, benevolently disposed towards (or at least not openly antagonistic towards) her child.

I see the maternal goal of ensuring children's survival under oppression as being achieved through aiming at intermediate goals. For example, mothers of racial ethnic children pursue the intermediate goal of teaching their children to understand, anticipate, and respond to

racism. If it weren't for the social context of racism, this intermediate goal would not need to exist. Yet, given this context, failure to pursue this maternal goal threatens the physical safety, self-esteem, and well-being of children of color. Likewise, mothers of non-gender conforming children pursue a similar intermediate goal when they teach their children to understand, anticipate, and respond to homophobia and trans-phobia. Different maternal strategies can be utilized to achieve these constitutive goals. As already discussed, one strategy racial ethnic mothers employ when pursuing this goal is to teach their children socially acceptable behavior, as does black mother-columnist Deborah Mathis. Mothers of non-gender conforming children might utilize a strategy of teaching their children society's gender norms so that their children can outwardly conform to these norms when in public, while celebrating their children's self-expression at home and when in other safe locations.

As this brief discussion suggests, feminist understanding of the complexities of maternal practice and maternal thought is enhanced when we identify culturally specific variations of this universal goal. Here we have seen that the goals that guide the daily maternal practices of mothers of racial ethnic children and of gender non-conforming children share similarities with each other (both sets of mothers teach their children survival skills for dealing with a hostile social world), even as they differ greatly from the daily maternal practices of mothers of children who conform to regnant race and gender ideals. This improved descriptive account of mothering reveals an ethically significant fact: that social worlds which appear relatively benign to some mothers and children are experienced as hostile by others. It enhances the possibility of mutual understanding, respect, and support for mothers to be familiar with such similarities and differences between their daily maternal practices. Thus, rather than dismissing racial ethnic differences in maternal practice as a matter of cross-cultural psychology, the discussion here

suggests that Ruddick should view such differences as part of the philosophically relevant social context of mothering. As Ruddick herself warns us: “To abstract is to simplify complexity, in particular to reduce the manifold issues of moral life into dichotomous choices” (1989, 95). To dismiss racial ethnic differences in maternal practice and maternal thinking as “matters of cross cultural psychology” is to engage in the very abstraction that Ruddick elsewhere rejects.

A second group of goals, while universal and internal to all maternal practice, only becomes reflective and intentional—and hence thematized—for some groups of mothers. <5> Thus, all families instill in their children a sense of ethnic-cultural identity. Within the U.S., white parents of white children engage in this goal largely unconsciously and unproblematically—as the dominant culture provides many examples of historical figures, superheroes, fairytales, movies, books, and news media that positively portray persons of their ethnic-cultural identity. By contrast, U.S. parents of children of color who wish to instill in their children a strong sense of self-esteem and pride must make cultivation of ethnic-cultural identity an explicit and intentional goal, as positive role models are scarce. The social context of racism results here in a qualitative difference in the maternal practices of mothers of white and non-white children; the maternal practices of the latter group is guided by an additional explicit maternal goal. Cultivating a child’s capacity for joy would also belong to this second group of maternal goals. As Eva Kittay suggests, cultivating this capacity is an important and intentional goal for mothers of severely disabled children but most parents don’t need to explicitly think about this goal. As these two examples demonstrate, by carefully examining non-dominant family forms, we may be able to identify goals of maternal practice internal to all maternal practice that would otherwise remain undiscovered.

A third type of maternal goal is, as Bailey claims, specific to and constitutive of some forms of maternal practice but not others. With this claim, I depart from Ruddick, who rejects the notion that non-universalizable children's demands can raise normative concerns (preface, xvi).

Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins' analysis, Bailey presents racial ethnic women's efforts at self-empowerment as an example of this third type of maternal goal. Collins makes it clear that racial ethnic women face enormous challenges in carrying out their maternal practices. These challenges include a history of sterilization abuse, past and current experiences of having wanted children removed by governmental authorities, and schools that denigrate the identity, culture and values African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native American mothers try to instill in their children (1994, 205-6). Under situations of racial oppression, only self-empowered racial ethnic mothers can hope approximately to realize the goals that guide their maternal practice. In addition, it seems plausible that even white mothers faced with oppressive life circumstances will have to strive for self-empowerment as a means to achieve their maternal goals. For example, poor women of all races who are on welfare face social stereotypes that depict their maternal practices as inadequate. As a result, they must learn how to respond to the intervention of social workers and other "experts" into their families. Bailey is likely correct that, due to Ruddick's relatively privileged social position, she was less likely to identify self-empowerment as an explicit goal of maternal practice.

But it is also true that in proposing self-empowerment as a maternal goal Bailey and Collins fundamentally challenge Ruddick's theory. Ruddick's three proposed goals all focus on mothers meeting the demands made by their children. While Ruddick occasionally describes how mothers change as a result of engaging in maternal work, none of her proposed goals of

maternal practice focus on the mother herself. As Vrinda Dalmiya observed to me, in this regard Ruddick's account of maternal practice isn't relational <6>. Ruddick's goals are all child-centric, not mother-centric, or relationship centric. I find compelling Collins' description of empowerment as a relational goal that informs racial ethnic women's motherwork. Her relational approach promises to bring into feminist theorizing about motherhood theoretically, politically, and ethically valuable information about the distinctive challenges faced by mothers from various social locations, much as the intermediate goals, described above, did. Thus, a relational view of maternal goals promises to help address Lugones' concern that feminist theory should address the complexity of experience brought to the table by women of color (1994, 74). It would also be consistent with the relational emphasis so central to recent work in feminist ethics. Ruddick herself, however, seems unlikely to accept Collins'/Bailey's proposed goal of maternal empowerment because, for her, it has the wrong focus—mothers as compared to children. From the perspective of Ruddick's theory, maternal empowerment appears to be a *strategy* pursued in order to achieve one of the child-centric goals described in *Maternal Thinking*.

While I'm sympathetic to a relational account of the goals of maternal practice, a thorough consideration of such a view exceeds the scope of this essay. <7> Thus, to make my point that some goals of maternal practice are specific to and constitutive of some forms of maternal practice but not others, I propose the following child centric goal: helping children deal with loss and grief. The particular setting I have in mind is adoptive mothers who aim to help their children deal with the loss and grief that typically accompanies adoption, although clearly other children (those who lose a parent or close family member through death or divorce or those who grew up in a war torn country) also must deal with loss and grief. Adoptive parents are

informed that adoptees typically grieve, from early childhood into adulthood, the loss of their birth families and in the case of transnational adoption, loss of birth country and birth culture. This sense of loss and grief can be triggered by events as varied as birthdays, Mother's Day, or school assignments that ask students to trace their family tree. The sense of loss takes different forms at different developmental stages and may never be fully overcome. Adoptive parents do not so much try to help their children recover from this grief, which is why I see this as a goal distinctive from Ruddick's goal of fostering growth. Rather they use the maternal virtue of attentive love (Ruddick 1989, 123) to attend to behaviors that may indicate the child is grieving and then they work to listen to and be present to their children, to affirm and validate their feelings (if not always their behaviors), so that their children feel validated, understood, and supported. Adoptive mothers who fail in this maternal goal put their child's sense of well-being and her relationship with her adoptive family at risk; I find it likely that such failure also inhibits the adoptive mother's ability to foster her child's growth.

The goals of maternal practice laid out thus far guide the project of raising one's own children so that they can survive and grow. This is in keeping with how Ruddick describes the goals of maternal practice. Yet reflection on the intermediate goals identified above, of teaching children of color to understand, anticipate, and respond to racism and teaching non-gender conforming children to understand, anticipate, and respond to homophobia and transphobia, suggests the possibility of a fourth and distinctive type of maternal goal, which would have a different grounding than the others. In raising their children, mothers are aware of the unique, wonderful, challenging beings they are. This awareness may make mothers especially well-suited to use their moral imagination to recognize that other mothers' children are *also* uniquely valuable. If I am correct, this recognition can ground a different type of maternal goal—a

normative goal that emerges, not from the desire to enhance the flourishing of one's own child, but out of the desire to ensure that other beloved children can also survive and flourish. Mothers who learn about the maternal concerns, struggles, sorrows, successes, and practices of differently situated mothers, such as mothers of non-white or gender bending children, may be motivated to change their own maternal practices in order to support the maternal practices of these other mothers. For example, white mothers of white children may be motivated to raise their children to be anti-racist and mothers of all races who have gender conforming children may be motivated to raise their children to be accepting of gender difference, as a way to help ensure that other mothers' children will also be able to survive and flourish. While more speculative than the other maternal goals I've described, the possibility of this fourth type of maternal goal underscores the ethical importance of mothers sharing their maternal stories. For the possibility of mutual understanding, support, and solidarity relies upon developing a more concrete, detailed, and embodied understanding of both the similarities and differences among maternal practices. This essay has sought to develop a theoretical framework for such an account, by providing an initial, provisional description of four types of goals that guide maternal practice.

In her article, "Mothers, Birthgivers, and Peacemakers: The Need for an Inclusive Account," Alison Bailey observes "Given the diversity among maternal practitioners ... it is questionable as to whether Ruddick can plausibly construct a complete picture of mothering work which leads to a cohesive account of 'maternal thinking' that accurately captures the variety of mothering work" (1994a, 275). This observation seems on target. Ruddick herself acknowledges that her list of maternal goals is incomplete (1989, 22), and her task in *Maternal Thinking* isn't to demonstrate the variety of maternal practices but to illustrate the commonalities

among them. As Bailey compellingly shows, and as I try to further demonstrate here, feminist understanding is enriched when we examine not just the commonalities, but also the differences among maternal practices, as it's here that inequalities of power become visible, complexities of maternal thinking and practice become more evident, and the possibility of new coalitions among maternal practitioners arise. This essay has tried to carve a path between Ruddick and Bailey. By shifting the level of analysis, from a focus on specific goals that guide maternal practice to a consideration of different **types** of goals, we're able to underscore Bailey's point that an account of mothering that doesn't examine different forms of maternal practice will be deficient, as it will overlook culturally inflected universal goals, intermediate goals, goals that are reflective and intentional only for some groups of mothers, and goals internal to local maternal practices. In addition, it was suggested that mothering theory that strives to address the complexities of maternal practice may be better served by a relational versus a child centric conception of the goals that guide maternal practice. While this essay complicates Ruddick's account of mothering, such that it can better accommodate the mothering practices of a range of differently situated mothers, it also defends the central tenets of her theory by proposing and endorsing a modified universalism.

Notes

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National Women's Studies Association Meeting (spring 2008), Minnesota Philosophical Society Meeting (fall 2008), and Feminist Ethics and Social Theory Conference (fall 2009) for encouraging this work.

<1> When I asked Ruddick why she chose to write about Harris, her reply was that she was teaching Harris's essay at the time she was writing her new introduction. So it was the version of the ethnocentrism critique with which she was most immediately engaged. Personal Communication, fall 2008.

<2> See Andrea Smith's Sexual violence as a tool of genocide in *Conquest: Sexual violence and American Indian genocide*, for a compelling analysis of how the rape of Native women is qualitatively different from the rape of both white women and black women. Smith argues that the particular form that the rape of Native American women has taken is that of genocide; rape has been a key tactic used to eradicate Native peoples (7-33). By contrast, rape of slave women served to increase the property holdings of slave-owners. Thanks to *Hypatia* reader 1 for bringing this essay to my attention.

<3> This concern was just raised, by Ofelia Schutte, at the fall 2009 Feminist Ethics and Social Theory (FEAST) Conference's conversation "Are Academic Feminist Philosophies and Methodologies Still Too White?".

<4> Funes is a fictional character created by author Jorge Luis Borges. Due to a brain injury, Funes can no longer categorize but is instead left with a plethora of unique, discrete, and hence incomprehensible experiences.

<5> Kittay makes this point in her essay, *Maternal thinking with a difference*, pg. 163.

<6> Personal conversation at the Feminist Ethics and Social Theory Conference, fall 2009, Clearwater Beach, Florida.

<7> I take some steps towards developing a relational account of mothering in “Sara Ruddick, Transracial Adoption, and the Goals of Maternal Practice.” In that essay I discuss the changes in white parents necessitated by the desire to achieve the goals internal to and constitutive of transracial adoptive maternal practice.

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