

Liberating Motherhood: Birthing the Purplestockings Movement

Vanessa Olorenshaw

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REVIEWED BY RAVEN HAYMOND

Vanessa Olorenshaw's 2016 book, *Liberating Motherhood: Birthing the Purplestockings Movement* is a rallying cry, a call for the feminists, leaders, and policy makers of the world to remember mothers. A mother, activist, breastfeeding counselor, and former lawyer, Olorenshaw declares that, "The time for a mother-movement has arrived" (ix). She does not shy away from the gendered terms "mother" and "mothering" because, she argues, "We must be able to speak our name" in the face of erasure by society (105). Olorenshaw urges readers to join her as part of the Purplestockings Movement. The name functions as a tribute to the Blue and Redstockings of the past and as a bold statement that we need to reconsider how we conceptualize feminism. "If feminism is for the rights of women but does not reflect or fully support the rights of a woman as a mother," she explains, "then it's letting women down" (6). She argues that modern feminism only really supports women who either opt not to have children, or those who combine motherhood with employment outside of the home (9).

According to Olorenshaw, it is time for a radicalized maternal feminism. While gaining access to education and the workplace for women were key first steps, Olorenshaw fears that feminism has swung too far in the opposite direction. Motherhood and care work has been painted as oppressive, as a drudgery to escape by taking up a job in the marketplace. She points out that many women are not asking to be saved from the oppression of motherhood. They actually want to dedicate their time to mothering. What they are asking for is freedom from the capitalistic chains that force them to work outside of the home or face economic consequences.

In the wake of biological essentialism, Olorenshaw argues that feminism has made the mistake of trying to ignore women's bodies. "Yes, yes, we must not be *reduced* to our bodies," she writes, "but we must *own* them, we must *live* them, we must *protect* them, we must *love* them" (48). Instead of denying that anything related to reproductive biology matters, she calls on feminism to attend to the "Five M's" of menarche, monthly menstruation, motherhood, mammalian milk-making, and menopause and to the politics that inform them (49).

Liberating Motherhood is divided into three main parts. Part 1: "A Mother's Body," addresses women's bodies, both their functions and their oppression

under patriarchal capitalism. Olorenshaw references Gaskin, Kitzinger, and Odent while problematizing the theories of de Beauvoir and Friedan. Pregnancy, birth, postpartum recovery, breastfeeding, and mothering, according to Olorenshaw, are all feminist issues and deserving of attention and activism (75). Part 2: “A Mother’s Mind,” acknowledges how women’s minds and thinking change when they become mothers and calls for a radical overhauling of postpartum support and care. She also engages with images of toxic motherhood in the media and in culture at-large.

In Part 3: “A Mother’s Labour,” Olorenshaw discusses how the view that motherhood is oppressive actually works to further devalue mothers. What is truly oppressive, she claims, is the social environment that makes mothers economically dependent and that refuses to support their vital care work. She addresses the economics of motherhood and makes suggestions for reforms, like basic income, that would give women the freedom to dedicate their time to mothering. She urges readers to reconsider how we value and promote public versus private engagement and how our current social and political systems label the latter as unimportant and without value. Finally, Olorenshaw draws on her experience as a lawyer and as an activist to address maternal politics.

Liberating Motherhood is incredibly accessible and suited for a wide audience. Olorenshaw’s writing radiates passion, knowledge, and a wry sense of humor. She includes a helpful glossary defining key terms and uses friendly footnotes to support her readers. For example, when explaining the concept of “the Other,” she tells readers to “just think ‘non-male’, lesser, inferior and subordinate. The tinsel to the male Christmas tree” (33). Olorenshaw is committed to her message and works to make sure it is clear. This clarity, combined with the strength and revolutionary nature of her arguments, makes Olorenshaw’s *Liberating Motherhood* a text that belongs on the bookshelf of every scholar interested in feminism and motherhood studies.