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## INTRODUCTION

### Refiguring the Postmaternal

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In *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory, Care* (2011, Columbia University Press) Julie Stephens identifies a significant cultural anxiety about care-giving, nurturing and human dependency she calls 'postmaternal' thinking, based on analysis of offline and online cultural texts and oral histories about maternal experiences. Stephens argues that maternal forms of care have been rejected in the public sphere and marginalised to the private domain through an elaborate process of cultural forgetting, in turn contributing to the current dominance of what Stephens terms a degendered form of feminism. Stephens argues that an alternative politic where human dependency and vulnerability – rather than market performance – are imagined as the primary connection between people has been forgotten. This is manifest in the realm of social policy through the reduction and in some cases elimination of social supports for women as mothers. In the cultural sphere, Stephens cites the anxieties over motherhood and mothering articulated in the genres of popular and advice literature aimed at professional women, and in the conflicted memoirs of young women recounting their experiences as children of feminist mothers. The postmaternal thus describes for Stephens the contemporary condition of forgetting, obscuring, or rendering culturally illegible the maternal in both

social policy and histories of feminism, whereby women's claims as mothers are no longer seen as political.

Stephens situates her diagnosis of the postmaternalism of contemporary social policies in Europe, Australia and North America as one of the defining characteristics of neoliberal policy-making. In this sense, Stephens' book makes an important contribution to theorising neoliberalism as a cultural and political formation. The forgetting of the vulnerability, intimacy, emotion and affective labour entailed by mothering is an important yet under-theorised dimension of how neoliberal policies transform social responsibilities for dependent others into 'burdens' to be borne by individuals. Stephens' critique of this forgetting of maternal thinking, and her return to theorists of care such as Sara Ruddick for inspiration, extends to the telling and retelling of histories of feminist politics in relation to experiences of mothering.

The aim of this special issue, *Refiguring the Postmaternal*, is to explore the concept of the 'postmaternal' as a critique of and response to changing cultural, political and economic conditions for mothering and motherhood (Giles 2014; Wilson and Jochim 2015; Kawash 2011). Our initial interest in bringing together critical reflections on Stephens' book emerged from our inquiry into alternative models of feminine and feminist relationalities and the ways that metaphors of maternity and sorority have tended to dominate feminist theorizations of women's relationships (Fannin and Perrier forthcoming). Stephens' analysis of the deep cultural anxieties around public expressions of maternalism resonated with our experiences as researchers of birth and mothering respectively; however we also found the repertoire of the maternal limiting and sought ways of describing relations of care between women that didn't rely on the metaphor of motherhood. The concept of the postmaternal seemed to speak to some of these concerns, to social policy domains

as well as the memories and practices of intergenerational feminism and feminist politics. It has been diversely deployed in feminist scholarship to analyse new reproductive technologies (Michaels 1996), representations of women's midlife (Gullette 1995, 2002, 2003), and American welfare reform in the 1990s (Howe 2002). In Stephens' book, the postmaternal is offered as a way to diagnose the 'forgetting' of certain forms of feminist practices from feminism's history, inviting a broader reflection on how feminism is remembered, memorialised, preserved, contested, and rewritten. In this collection of essays, we use Stephens' contention that gender neutral feminism has led to a forgetting of the maternal within feminist memory as a starting point for outlining what we see as the most salient set of empirical and conceptual questions facing feminist scholars of the maternal today.

### **A new maternalism?**

The maternal was a central concern of 1970s feminist scholarship with the work of Sara Ruddick, Adrienne Rich and later Ann Oakley standing out as early attempts to make motherhood count as a topic worthy of academic study and to map out the conditions under which motherhood could be empowering outside of patriarchy. While the place of the maternal within feminist scholarship has shifted since these landmark texts, it certainly hasn't disappeared. The scholarship on motherhood is characterised by efforts to capture the differences and divisions in mothers' experiences (Ribbens 1994; Gillies 2007; Reynolds 2005), to record women's ambivalent relationships towards motherhood (Baraitser 2009), to document the continuing unequal division of childcare and the transformations motherhood brings to women's identities (Thomson *et al.* 2011; Miller 2005) and to critically interrogate dominant discourses of good motherhood and their effects (Hays 1996; Tyler 2011).

We can discern significant divergences between those feminists who, as inheritors of Rich and Ruddick, still remain committed to a re-valorisation of the maternal and mothering as a feminist strategy and those who prioritise deconstructing the over-association of femininity with maternal identity and labour. In this special issue we attempt to connect these two distinct lineages of feminist work on motherhood to construct a more thorough analysis of and response to the ongoing devaluing of both maternity and care in post-austerity crises. Specifically, we seek to connect the postmaternal to wider debates in feminist theory about postfeminism and the depoliticization of feminism: to what extent does the postmaternal represent a particular manifestation of neoliberal feminism or can it provide an alternative vision of maternity for 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism?

Discussions of the maternal in the last few years have been very rich but there have been no theoretically informed discussions of how the relationship of the maternal to feminism as a movement and a cultural formation has shifted in the last decades which is our aim in this special issue.<sup>1</sup> *Refiguring the Postmaternal* thus asks important conceptual questions about the relationship between contemporary feminism and maternity which had been hitherto ignored in contemporary maternal scholarship. It echoes and develops other feminist analyses of the ways that the organisation of care has become increasingly individualised and privatised in post-welfare western states: the large proportions of professional mothers and enduring gendered division of care labour have resulted in a care deficit being met by working class and migrant women (Fraser 2013; McDowell 2013; Hochschild 2003). Reflections on Sara Ruddick's work and the work of other theorists of care continue

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<sup>1</sup> A recent discussion of austerity and mothering can be found in Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler's special issue of *Studies in the Maternal* on 'Austerity Parenting: new economies of parent-citizenship' (2012). However, this special issue does not explicitly discuss feminism's relationship to the maternal.

to inform and inspire feminist theories of affect and labour (Ruddick 1990; Akalin 2015). Consideration of the 'maternal' as a concept also informs research into reproduction, gender, care and parenting, in particular given the efforts of scholars to trace the impact of neoliberal economic and social policies in these domains (Adkins and Dever 2014; McRobbie 2013). These latest analyses provide an update on the classic feminist contribution that the concept of 'social reproduction' made to understanding the gendered division of labour and signal the persistence of the feminist project of radically transforming the work and care conundrum today. Lisa Adkins and Maryanne Dever's (2014) call for feminists to rethink the conceptualisation of women's reconfigured waged and unwaged labour under the post-Fordist sexual contract suggests that significant theoretical transformation has yet to happen in this area. This special issue contributes to this debate by capturing some of these transformations through our attention to the building of alternative practices, spaces and economies of care beyond the maternal.

In thinking about how 21st century feminist theory can approach the question of maternity we have found Angela McRobbie's (2013) reflections in 'Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism' a helpful reminder of how socialist feminism aimed to transform reproductive work and paid work by providing state funded childcare that would both collectivise care and denaturalise the gendering of care. Whereas Stephens characterises liberal feminism as having rejected the maternal, McRobbie argues that a particular model of professional maternal citizenship is folded back into neoliberal political economies to become a key mechanism of its success (2013, 136). Stephens' argument sometimes presents a conflict between 'the glorification of market work and the devaluing of family work' (Williams 2001, 41 quoted in Stephens 2011, 21) however we argue this opposition

neglects to consider how the provision of state-funded childcare would enable mothers to combine both care work and paid work without devaluing either. McRobbie shows that in the UK the longstanding political relationship between post-war social democracy and state-funded nursery care has been under attack since New Labour:

to understand the new family values of the present moment it is necessary to look back to the New Labour period and to the way in which previous historical affiliations between social democracy and feminism which aimed to support women as mothers were dismantled and discredited. This opened the pathway for the present day demonisation of welfare which suggests that relying on support or subsidy is somehow shameful (2013, 128).

The necessity of remembering such feminist demands is key to refiguring postmaternalism at a time when the erosion of welfare support has reached a point where its value as a social good risks being erased from our collective imaginaries.

### **Postmaternal thinking**

In May 2015, we convened a workshop on 'Postmaternal Thinking' held at the University of Bristol. The starting point for this workshop was a collective reading of Julie Stephens' *Confronting the Postmaternal* and the presentation of reflections and responses to the concept of the postmaternal by participants. We asked participants to consider Stephens' diagnosis of the cultural forgetting of maternal thinking in light of their own empirical research and to consider their own work in light of a set of questions posed by Stephens' book: What is or should be the concept of the postmaternal? What theoretical resources does the concept of the postmaternal provide for ongoing and future feminist research? How is neoliberalism refiguring

maternity and mothering, and what are feminist and/or maternalist responses to this? How might the analysis of the postmaternal travel to other geo-political spaces beyond Euro-American and Australian contexts? And finally, how useful is the concept of the postmaternal in helping feminist scholars revisit afresh the problem of essentialism and ethics of care debates?

These questions are particularly timely given the changing political currency and competing meanings of the postmaternal in contemporary western societies facing so-called austerity crises. For example, recent changes by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in the UK replaced maternity leave with shared parental leave from 5th April 2015 –interestingly this policy still depends on mothers giving their consent to share the parental leave entitlement with their partners (Grabham 2014). We found Stephens' contention that adult women are predominantly defined as workers first and foremost compelling given the neoliberalisation of welfare policies around the globe. Additionally, debates over the effects of the 2008 global economic recession on fertility rates have been read as a signal of women 'taking advantage' of unemployment to have children. Such societal changes around the place of motherhood suggest that the idea of the postmaternal is now ripe for (re)definition by feminist scholars.

The workshop on 'Postmaternal Thinking' signaled the importance of considering Stephens' and other feminist scholars' examination of the changing policies and practices of mothering in the context of contemporary social and political conditions. The essays in this special issue come up with different responses to how feminist politics in a postmaternal age might be imagined and enacted. They draw from a range of disciplines, including management studies, cultural studies, psychology/psychosocial studies, social policy, sociology and human geography,



and wider academic literatures on gender, care, parenting, affect and the writing of feminism's histories. They revisit the old dilemma of the de-valorisation/revalorisation of the maternal drawing on fresh insights from different contexts including Canada, Australia and the UK. They are connected by their efforts to analyze the postmaternal using diverse feminist methods and theories - such as radical feminism, psychoanalysis, black feminism and ecofeminism - and argue that such analyses are particularly needed politically in times of neoliberal and austerity crises. The essays are also connected in their attempt to return to well-known 'blind spots' in maternal studies which have long been argued to result in divisions rather than solidarity between mothers, leading to the exclusion and repudiation of black, working-class, and single mothers amongst others. The edited collection charts how such differences and divisions between women are reconfigured in a neoliberal postmaternal landscape.

Although our starting point was a collective reading of Stephens' book, concerns over the 'forgetting' and reconfiguring of the maternal resonate with other scholarly debates in feminist theory and the retelling of feminism's history as a one of generations or 'waves' (Kevin 2005; Hemmings 2011). As the feminist scholarship on alternatives temporalities demonstrates, claims to moving 'beyond' or 'after' a particular social formation make implicit the underlying presumptions of linear or chronological experiences of time that structure conventional reflections on historical change (Bastien 2011). Stephens' analysis of the Euro-American and Australian contexts for mothering needs to be understood contextually rather than as representations of mothering practices in other places and at other times. We contend that the cultural contexts in which Stephens' notion of the postmaternal is articulated may reflect a particular view of motherhood – one that invites comparison

and contextualization outside the dominant Euro-American and Australian frame. We see this special issue as a forum in which to explore more carefully the presumptions made about research on 'mothering' that tends to posit its universality rather than emphasizing how mothering and parenting are practices shaped by temporal and geographical specificity.

Our reflections on the postmaternal bring to the fore how the study of maternity, motherhood and mothering continues to be divided between scholars interested in the psychoanalytical and psychological aspects of mothering and those interested in the social construction of motherhood across different groups of women: thus the terminology of the *maternal* has tended to be confined to humanities scholars interested in cultural representations and individual experiences, whereas *mothering* and *motherhood* are preferred by social scientists. This special issue brings these perspectives together to analyse the cultural formation of postmaternalism and deploys a variety of feminist methodological and empirical resources including archives, interviews, policy, manifesto and memoir writing to imagine alternative postmaternalisms.

Lisa Baraitser's essay opens this special issue with the important and critical reminder that mothering cannot be reduced to care and nurturance and includes feelings of hatred, aggression and frustration. She insightfully traces maternalism's connection to feminist socialism through her juxtaposition of psychoanalytical readings of maternity and Kathi Weeks' book *The Problem with Work* (2011). Baraitser writes of mothering as letting go and bearing the time of another's unfolding. This opening up of what constitutes maternal practice involves expanding who participates in mothering and where mothering takes place. This is a refrain found throughout the subsequent essays in this special issue, where Sara Ruddick's

exhortation to consider the practices of mothering opens up the possibility for alternative figures of the maternal.

A refigured concept of the postmaternal also opens up how presumptions of what constitutes 'good' mothering reflect the racial hierarchies that underpin calls to re-orient mothering practices through dualisms of 'traditional' and 'modern' or 'natural' and 'technological.' Patricia Hamilton's paper skilfully excavates the debt attachment parenting owes to late colonial research on non-Western mothering as well as to the individualistic ethos of neoliberal parenting, in which mothers are expected to make wise personal choices on behalf of their children. Hamilton suggests that analysis of the postmaternal condition of Euro-American mothering also needs to take into account the presumption that the contemporary period is a postracial one, in which racial and class inequities are imagined as having been overcome.

Highlighting the elasticity of maternal practice as it is instantiated in social policy, Junko Yamashita argues for taking up Sara Ruddick's provocative claim that men could be mothers. Yamashita's analysis of how social policy models have grappled with the practice of care suggests that the recent transformation of maternity leave in some social welfare states (e.g. the UK) to shared parental leave opens up the opportunity for expanding maternal practice to fathers. She reads Stephens' diagnosis of the 'unmothering' of the public sphere as a reconfiguring of mothering that will make good on the efforts of Ruddick and other feminist scholars to imagine a more open-ended reorientation of social and cultural forms of mothering to include fathers' care.

Indeed, expanding maternal thinking and practice beyond the mother-child dyad informs our paper included in this special issue on the 'maternal entrepreneurs'

who are attempting to shape self-employment in the pregnancy, birth and parenting economy around the practices of mothering, or as one interviewee described her work, around ‘mothering the mothers.’ This essay highlights the presence of maternal practice beyond maternal relationships and the private sphere, such as the carework carried out with and for other mothers. It also seeks to open up the analysis of mothering to include the how precarious, part-time and self-employed work cultures of the neoliberal economy are also sites for the production of new forms of collective imaginaries around mothering, recalling Angela McRobbie’s account of ‘mediated maternalism’ discussed earlier in this essay.

This refigured concept of maternalism as social and collective is explored in more depth in Mary Phillips’ essay on the possibilities of an ethics of care beyond the human. Phillips returns to key ethics of care texts and ecofeminist literatures to show that recognition of vulnerability and interdependence should not limit itself to maternity but include an imaginary of embodied emotional attachments to landscapes, animals and ecosystems beyond our doorstep. She argues that a concept of embodied care for nature and non-human others offers a more inclusive vision on which to build care ethics than a narrow appeal to maternalism.

Alison Bartlett’s essay reminds us of the ways radical feminism transformed motherhood through its critique of the nuclear family. Taking up Stephens’ contention that the telling of feminist history occludes the complexity of feminist practice, Bartlett draws on research on women’s peace movements in the UK and Australia to complicate the notion of the postmaternal, showing how experiments with alternative social formations of mothering (collective, queer, ecofeminist) multiplied the possibilities for maternal practice and seemed to prefigure what Stephens’ diagnoses in her book as the ‘postmaternal.’ Bartlett closes her essay with ‘a manifesto for

postmaternal times,' a reminder of the momentous transformations to being maternal over the latter half of the 20th century and a call to stay with the undecidability of what the *postmaternal* will become.

This special issue on *Refiguring the Postmaternal* concludes with a response by Julie Stephens. Her careful and generous reading of these essays emphasises the necessity of limits: limits to the neoliberal fantasy of an endless horizon of personal choices *and* the limit as instantiated in the unavoidable vulnerability and dependency of infants and newborns. Stephens' response raises generative questions about the continued difficulties in feminist scholarship of reconfiguring maternalism, including more affirmative modes of maternal ambivalence. We are grateful to her for taking up the invitation to respond to the essays collected here. We hope the questions raised by her response will inspire further work on how social policies, cultural practices, and political activism are refiguring the maternal in postmaternal times.

In conclusion, all of the essays take on and expand Stephens' diagnosis that gender-neutral feminism has led to a forgetting of the maternal within feminist memory by reconnecting the maternal with its varied and ambivalent place in feminist histories. They engage with the concept of the postmaternal in order to extend, interrogate, and enter into dialogue with Stephens' conceptual and empirical starting points and her methodological approaches to the study of popular culture and feminist history. They demonstrate how envisioning alternative postmaternal futures requires opening up the maternal beyond the category of mothers to reflect the diversity of maternal practices and their contestations. This opening out of the postmaternal is also critical if feminism is to reflect and engage the ever-rising number of childless women and men in the global north whose involvement in

relations of care cannot be captured by maternalism. They highlight the necessity of postmaternal studies that are attuned to power differentials amongst mothers and between men and women, as neglecting this strand of scholarship on mothering would result in a different but equally problematic kind of cultural forgetting to the one on which Stephens is focused.

The contributions in this special issue show both the relevance of the term postmaternal to analysing the problematics of work and care in western neoliberal economies from feminist perspectives and offer up the postmaternal as a useful concept to articulate what alternative futures for maternalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might look like. They interrogate how the postmaternal is configured and refigured as a conceptual tool for feminist scholarship, and in doing so, explore contemporary transformations in the practice of mothering, the metaphors of maternity, and the gendering of maternity, childrearing and family in social policy and beyond. The essays brought together here contribute to ongoing debates in feminist theory over essentialism and the ethics of care, especially in light of how anxieties over essentialism may continue to obscure the complexity of previous feminist work on embodiment, the maternal, and the 'forgotten' histories of eco-feminism over the last four decades. Following the much discussed affective turn in feminist scholarship, this special issue signals the recent return in feminist theory to issues of relationality, autonomy and interconnectedness beyond their resonance and association with essentialism. It also make an important contribution to the field of maternal studies by investigating the connections between maternalism, feminism and neoliberalism and by deploying rich and diverse feminist resources to refigure postmaternalism in creative ways.

By responding to Stephens' diagnosis of the 'forgetting' of certain forms of maternal practices from feminism's history, the essays here highlight the importance of remembering the contested place of the maternal in feminist scholarship and activism for the last five decades. They show that the process of remembering and memorializing the maternal in feminist scholarship needs to reflect its central location in diverse bodies of feminist scholarship and make visible its legacies in the analyses of black feminism, socialist feminism and ecofeminism beyond that of Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*. Through these performances of remembering they destabilise the association of the maternal with postfeminism and with the depoliticization of feminism.

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