

# Motherhood – The unfinished business of feminism?

LOVA Winter School  
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On Thursday December 9<sup>th</sup> 2021, in a period of strict but not too restrictive covid measures, the LOVA winter school in Amsterdam took off. It proved to be a very intense four days with a range of subjects and workshops, all centred around the relationship between motherhood and different kinds of feminism. Emma Emily de Wit and Irene Arends successfully organised a hybrid conference, enabling participants who could not attend the live conference to follow the lectures online. Some of the speakers met us in the same way, for example Andrea O'Reilly, the leading scholar in maternity theory, based in York, Canada, who joined us not once, but twice.

The conference took off with an unconference in which each of the participants asked a question or shared a story or a concern. Through these conversations the complex junction of motherhood and feminisms was immediately made apparent; four days would not be long enough to talk about every issue we touched upon in that first session. After getting to know each other, Tine Davids (Radboud University) welcomed us on behalf of LOVA. Immediately after that, most of us went for lunch in the nearby Javastraat, enjoying the multicultural culinary cornucopia.

In the afternoon, Andrea O'Reilly (York University, CA), who has been working on motherhood and feminism the last 20 years, provided her keynote. Live from Canada, she talked about the need for mothers to have a feminism of their own – matricentric feminism – and especially why this kind of feminism is still a vital concept, although it might not seem inclusive enough, focussing only on mothers. The concept of 'mothering', the practice of nurturing and raising a child and the daily care and caring work this entails, suffers from the same critique. O'Reilly extensively argued why 'mothering' cannot easily be replaced by 'parenting', but she did acknowledge that there is a need for new language which is more inclusive, without losing sight of gendered differences in parenting. When words are eliminated, she said, the entire concept is eliminated. But it is indeed necessary to find new words because mothering is often considered exclusionary towards trans and non-binary parents, and essentialist on top of that.

The first conference day ended with a fascinating lecture by Inge van Nistelrooij (Radboud University / University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht) on liminal spaces and embodied motherhood. She applies the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) on maternity. DST allows to see the maternal self as plural, relational and dialogical, from the moment of expectation onwards. Inge van Nistelrooij makes important additions to the original DST theory by Hubert Hermans. DST advocates continuous reflection between different positions in the self, and allows for an active positioning of the self; but the self is also positioned by moral expectations. How loud is the political voice in our own mind when we are pregnant? Moreover, Inge van Nistelrooij shared with us questions about the possibility for reflection in motherhood, considering the incessant demands and continuous interruptions by children, drawing on Lisa Baraitser's work 'Maternal Encounters'. Next to that, she stressed the fact that the maternal voice is often silenced in experiences where it should be central. Through care ethics and maternal studies, Inge van Nistelrooij talks back to Hermans' DST.

Friday started with a movement workshop by Juel McNeilly, in which we tried to feel our bodies and encounter tense points and treat them with care. This energizing workshop gave rise to personal and sometimes emotional reactions, after which we went for a relaxing lunch, during which we couldn't stop talking about all the issues we linked to motherhood and feminism.

The afternoon lectures raised even more questions, since Leonie Cornips (KNAW, Maastricht University) and Catrien Notermans (Radboud University) informed us about their research on non-human motherhood. Catrien Notermans stressed how in certain communities in rural India, kinship goes beyond the human family when cows and trees are included; how women care for their cows and treat them as family members, and how they are caring for each other and taking care of the land together. Afterwards Leonie Cornips told us how she as a social linguist researched dairy cows in the Netherlands. She shared her knowledge on the interaction of the cows with their calves, and their reactions after being separated shortly after the birth of the calf. It led to reflections about human and non-human agency, as well as human and non-human motherhood, and the importance of caring.

The second day ended with another lecture by Andrea O'Reilly, this time focusing on the concept of matricritics, which is the subject of O'Reilly's upcoming book. Referring to an article by Olivia Heal (2019) she explicitly searches for literary mother texts written after 2010 in which the mother is the central focal point, that question normative motherhood, and give space to empowered mothering - a mothering in which mothers have agency and power. By talking us through some of the works, several aspects of normative motherhood were made visible, as well as the different ways in which mothers are coping with these often oppressive aspects. Some of the texts have the potential to bring reflexivity because of their critique of normative motherhood, which might result in the mother being more truthful and at ease with herself. According to O'Reilly, subverting the norm and destabilizing it is hugely transgressive.

On Saturday we started with a panel session on belonging and politics of belonging, chaired by Tine Davids. First, she told us about her research in Mexico, where the image of the mother became more dominant in times of crisis. Mother's Day was installed in the midst of the Mexican crisis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; and during the student revolts of 1968, a "Happiest Mother" contest was organized. Motherhood, and especially suffering motherhood, was used to bind men to the state and calm women, as part of a nationalist discourse. However, Tine Davids also found proof of a double-barred discourse, where motherhood is used to exclude as well as to include women in the political arena. On the one hand the idea exists that mothers do not belong in politics, because politics are corrupted and hence bad for mothers; on the other hand, caretaking at home is like caretaking at state level, which makes mothers excellent politicians, especially in the war against corruption. Women in politics often express their political activity as based in their motherhood, which is then considered a moral concept, which can be used to make a case of belonging as well as a symbol of political resistance. Next, Anna Straatsma (WUR) illustrated this with her research on FARC-ex-combatants in Colombia. During the conflict, motherhood was impossible: to become combatants, the women had to leave their existing children with family, and during the conflict the FARC provided birth control and help with abortion. Anna Straatsma explored the meaning of motherhood in this context and after the peace accord, which led to a baby boom. For some of the ex-FARC-combatants, to finally become a mother was a conscious choice for life after a period of conflict and death, and also a way to renegotiate the meaning of belonging. However, motherhood after the peace accord turned out to be often unplanned, which left us in doubt about the revolutionary potential of motherhood in this context. Next, the question of motherhood in politics was approached in a different way by Saskia Kroonenburg (University of Cologne/Utrecht University) who enlightened us about Maria Drago, the mother of Giuseppe Mazzini – an Italian politician, journalist and activist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century –, and her role in her son's political career as well as in the invention of his ideas which led to the Risorgimento in Italy.

She highlighted that in a second edition of Maria Drago's letters to her son, Maria's political ideas had been diminished, reducing her to a mere supportive mother, and showing us what 'right' motherhood at the time of publication looked like. Just like Tine Davids, Saskia Kroonenberg's research supports the idea that motherhood can be used both to include and exclude women from politics. Gemma van der Haar (LANDac) joined the speakers in the panel to further discuss the importance of motherhood in politics, encouraging us to think beyond the idea that having children limits the agency of women.

The third day ended with a lecture of Smadar Lavie (UC Davis), who talked us through her research on single motherhood and bureaucracy in Israel. Bureaucracy, she states, is an indispensable part of motherhood, but it is oppressive and suffocating, especially for single and minority mothers. She stressed the importance of the link between gender and race, and reminded us of the issue that feminists are focused on agency, but have to accept that sometimes there just isn't any.

We spend the last day of the winter school in the remote but friendly location of ReMo, where we entered our dreams with Vid Vanja Vodušek (University of Ljubljana). Through talking about our dreams, we explored those aspects of motherhood that dazzle or frighten us, and general expectations that unconsciously influence us. Afterwards, Henny Bos (UvA) gave the last lecture of the conference about queer motherhood. She shared with us some of the results of her longitudinal research on lesbian parent families, e.g. on the division of household tasks between mothers, the influence of discrimination and the well-being of lesbian parents and their children, concluding that the kids really are alright.

This was a particular conference in a lot of ways. For many participants who attended the live conference it had been a long time since we spent time outside our family bubbles, due to covid measures. To be together in a room, have lunch together and get to know each

other was more impressive than it would have been in covid free times. Moreover, while the idea for the conference emerged from the experiences of the organizing team with their own motherhood, it was met with the expertise, experience, expectations and questions of the participants and speakers, both mothers and others. Motherhood is a very rich subject and this winter school, with participants from different backgrounds and countries, has been a beautiful starting point for a network on these issues. One aspect that returned in almost every lecture was the question of agency. Different kinds of feminism struggle with motherhood because it is considered to take agency and autonomy from the mother. However, we might be missing something here. As one of the participants pointed out, the winter school this year was quite Eurocentric. Another winter school might be focused on agency, and include non-Eurocentric viewpoints more, in order to explore the ever complex issue of motherhood.

I would like to thank Irene Arends and Emma Emily de Wit for the excellent organization, Hannah Schild for her feedback on the first draft of this report, IIRE and ReMo for making us feel welcome, LOVA for hosting and all the participants and speakers for their contribution to a magnificent conference.



## About the author

Joke Struyf has degrees in sociology and philosophy and is currently working on a PhD on feminism and the value of contemporary motherhood at the University of Antwerp. She finds inspiration in queer and crip theory, intersectionality and the embodied experience of mothering.