tance to the (limiting and oppressive) aspects of identity-ascription and their corollary authorizations of epistemic privilege, *and* (2) a recognition of and movement toward the personal ways in which a subject is concerned with knowing her processes of being and becoming. By reading the trope of identity as necessarily impossible to (thoroughly) know, I am not claiming that it is necessary to give up on identity. Instead, I am offering a way to re-read identity as *adopted* in order to highlight that identities, as objects of our desire, can be seen as both locations of subjection and places of potential freedom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Real (M)othering: The Metaphysics of Maternity in Children's Literature

SHELLEY PARK

MY REALITY

"You are not my REAL mother!" she screams from behind a locked bathroom door. She is seven. Although all adoptive mothers anticipate this moment, I'm not ready for this yet. What is a real mother? Am I one? What would it mean to claim this? And how do I defend my status as real without implying that her birth mom is somehow unreal, or at any rate less real than I am? Clearly, my daughter's current metaphysical schema will not readily permit the notion of multiple mothers. One of us must, according to her, be an imposter—someone who, like Descartes's evil genius, has subjected her to an illusory construction of reality.

As I sit in a stupor outside the locked door, contemplating the metaphysics of maternity, my younger daughter saunters over and plops herself in my lap. "You're MY real mother," she confidently claims while giving me a big hug. I'm not sure whether she says this to comfort me or to further annoy her sister. Probably both. And although the hug does help, her possessive metaphysical claim further confounds me.

Because we have one daughter by adoption and one by birth (as well as a set of grandparents and numerous cousins that our children have adopted), we have been tremendously vigilant about avoiding any privileging of biological connectedness over social relatedness. Hence it comes as a shock to hear both of my daughters proclaiming the metaphysical primacy of blood relations. Certainly, I have never used the phrase "real mom" to describe either myself or my eldest daughter's birth mom. Nor have I ever used (or even thought) the phrase "real daughter" to privilege my birth daughter over my adopted daughter. Yet here these phrases are in my home, functioning to exclude and include, to marginalize and privilege,

to separate and bind together. This essay emerges from my efforts to sort out for myself and for and with my daughters what is meant by the phrase "real mother." I am also engaged in attempting to transform this concept in ways that would make the metaphysics of maternity both more fluid and more inclusive.

A fluid metaphysics of motherhood would allow that maternal status is not static. As I will examine below, traditional conceptions of motherhood have assumed that genetic, gestational, and social mothering are indivisible and thus that motherhood is a stable concept and institution. Such a conception of motherhood ignores the historical realities of genetic families divided by poverty, war, and slavery. It is further contested by the now multiple forms of family created by adoption, divorce and remarriage, and new reproductive technologies such as surrogacy and in vitro fertilization. Thus, we need a conception of family in general and motherhood in particular that allows for change over time.

An inclusive metaphysics of motherhood would permit a child to have more than one real mother (and more than two real parents), an option preferable to the metaphysics presupposed by most cultural, social, and legal narratives surrounding parental status, including the private adoption narrative. As Uma Narayan (1999) notes, the private adoption narrative takes an "all or nothing" approach (85). The gestational mother has all parental claims prior to giving the child for adoption, and no parental claims after a statutory change-of-mind period has passed. The adoptive parents have no parental claims prior to the cessation of the gestational mother's rights and all parental claims thereafter. In contrast to this "all or nothing" approach, Narayan advocates a custody approach that "potentially allows for a wider range of parental relationships to be preserved." Such a reformed approach, she argues, would be preferable for gestational mothers who wish neither to assume full responsibility for a child nor to surrender all ties to that child. Such reform would also have "the virtue of privileging a child's interests above those of competing parents, treating children more as ends-in-themselves than as objects of property-like disputes between contending parents" (85).

Like Narayan, I am interested in developing a child-centered perspective on parent-child, and especially mother-child, connections in the sense of developing an account of parental status that best serves the "interests of the child." I believe, as does Narayan, that a child is best served by "maintain[ing] as many . . . parental connections with adults who wish to maintain these bonds as is . . . feasible in any given case." This is not to say that a child is always best served by having multiple, diverse, parents. It is, however, to say that this option should not be "arbitrarily foreclosed" (85).

It is not my project here, however, to debate legal policy or even informal custodial arrangements. My project here is rather to interrogate the social constructions of motherhood as these are taught to children and propose in their place an alternative metaphysics of motherhood that would permit my daughter and other children to recognize multiple mothers without having to feel divided loyalties. While this might be more easily achieved within a reformed legal environment, it can also be achieved, I argue, by a child who develops the ability to conceptually and ethically reposition herself in regard to (m)others. Thus, my project is child-centered not merely in terms of its concern for a child's well-being, but also in two additional senses. First, my emphasis here is on a child's potential to bring multiple (m)others into being *for herself.* Rather than trying to define what it means to be a mother politically, morally, legally, or socially, I attempt here to understand (and prescribe) a particular psychic configuration in a child's attitudes toward her parents. In examining what it means for a child to accept or reject some person as her "real mother," I am exploring what it means for a mother to be real-for-a-child. In this sense, whether or not I am my daughter's "real mother" is a separate question from whether I have or ought to have legal custody of her. It is also a separate question from whether or not I participate in certain forms of motherwork—although as I will suggest here, certain forms of motherwork may contribute to my becoming real to my child.

Secondly, my account aims to be child-centered insofar as I am interested not only in the well-being of a child, but in how that child's well-being can be secured, in part, *through the child's own agency.* As Robinson, Nelson, and Nelson (1997) note, within the sentimental family, the power to name reality typically accrues to parents, rather than children (91). This does violence to a child's ability to develop a sense of herself as a moral agent, as a person "with the power to shape reality" (95). This essay is, in large part, about respecting and nurturing a child's potential to shape her own familial reality.

More specifically, as my title suggests, this essay is about respecting and nurturing a child's potential to bring real (m)others into being-for-herself. I focus here primarily on children's relation to mothers for several reasons. First, the experiential context from which this essay emerges is one in which maternal, not paternal, reality is the issue. I suspect that this context is a common one for *adopted* children. At least in our current Western context, birth mothers are often known—or locatable—in ways that birth fathers may not be. It is also a common context for *young* children who often come to first understand adoption in terms of being birthed by one woman and "given up to" to "chosen by" another (usually married) woman. Additionally, the depictions of family that *all* children are exposed to at an early age often focus primarily, or even exclusively, on mother-child relations.

Although it is not my position that an emotional or social division of labor demarcates mothers from fathers, prevalent cultural meanings of "mothering" do assume this. Thus, outside of certain feminist contexts, the still widely held assumption is that mothers are (and should be) the primary emotional and physical caregivers, while fathers are (and should be) the primary breadwinners. In other words, "mothering" and "fathering" are still widely used to denote different functional and normative roles. Sometimes, although not often, it is allowed that the functional role of mother may be occupied by a man. But the role itself remains gendered, as illustrated by the ways in which prevailing social norms for "good mother" parallel the norms for "good woman" (i.e., loving, kind, emotionally responsive, sensitive to the needs of others, giving of herself, and so on). Since my project here involves examining the social construction of motherhood, I speak specifically about mothering, rather than using the more generic "parenting." Ultimately, however, my interest is in helping children resist conservative narratives of mothering in order to see their mothers—*and others*—as real. My hope, although I do not argue for this here, is that children who can learn to see mothers as real persons with independent interests (despite these culturally defined meanings of "mother") could also learn to see fathers and others as real.

I begin by examining the social and cultural meanings of motherhood as transmitted to, and potentially resisted by, children. Since my adopted daughter's notion that she must have one and only one mother is not gleaned from complex understandings of social policy or judicial decision-making, but derives rather from the social constructions of motherhood embodied in children's popular culture, I take children's literature as my point of departure.

Critical legal theorist Barbara Bennett Woodhouse (1995) suggests that stories written about and for children "provide a window on children's experience" from which we may draw conclusions about meaning (5). To be sure, the perspective on children's experience provided by children's literature is not transparent. Children's literature is, after all, written *by* adults. Thus to read such literature from a child's point of view requires that we imagine what the text means to its child reader, rather than focusing exclusively on what the author may have intended. Thus, I attempt to focus not merely on what these texts say, but also on what they "fail to say, and what they suggest by innuendo" (Rosenau 1992, 36–37). The meanings I am concerned to glean from these texts originate not in their production but in their reception by the reader (37). Sometimes, of course, children may uncritically digest the adult-centered narratives proposed by authors. At other times, however, children, including even very young children, may develop "counternarratives" as they read (or listen to) these stories (Cloud 1992, 6). In imagining what the texts here examined might

mean to children, I am aided by the counternarratives offered me, both implicitly and explicitly by my own children.[1]

The specific stories I will use here as examples of narratives (and potential counternarratives) of "real motherhood" include *Are You My Mother?*, *A Mother for Choco*, *Stellaluna*, *Horton Hatches the Egg*, and *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Three of these stories are classic parables that enjoy continued wide readership. Two are more recent publications, also much loved by children and parents. These stories exemplify constructions of motherhood common in children's literature, much of which functions as a series of (sometimes competing) parables of family relationships and children's belonging.

The first two stories take up alternate sides of the nature-nurture debate over children's needs and parental rights. *Are You My Mother?* depicts motherhood as a biological identity, assuming that a child's birth mother is, and always will be, a child's real mother. In direct opposition to this claim, *A Mother for Choco* portrays real motherhood as a social identity. From an adopted child's perspective these two frameworks are irreconcilable; loyalty to either script requires the child to be disloyal to someone in their life. Hence, as I suggest below, neither script's notion of "real" mother is adequate and the adopted child—indeed any child with multiple mothers—needs to learn to deconstruct the nature/culture dichotomy that gives rise to these notions.[2]

Stellaluna and *Horton Hatches the Egg* provide more complex narratives that help deconstruct the natural mother/social mother dichotomy, by deconstructing motherhood as a unified process. Taken together, they also illustrate the competing claims to motherhood that inform discussions about adoption, as well as non-adoptive custody disputes.[3] In these conversations, the notion of "real mother" is a contested notion that requires evaluation of several facets of maternal fitness. Here as in black feminist

1. Of course, insofar as readers participate in the attribution of meaning to a text, there may be as many different meanings as there are readers. Thus, while I suspect the meanings I examine here are not uncommon readings for the young, adopted child, I do not purport to provide the definitive readings of these texts. Nonetheless, I hope that my readings may be suggestive and useful to others whose children struggle with the concept of "real mother."

2. Although my focus here is on adoption, the adopted child's struggles regarding mother identification, as generated by the nature/nurture dichotomy, may share certain similarities with the struggles of children borne of divorce and remarriage, children with lesbian parents, and children birthed with the aid of new reproductive technologies (e.g., in vitro fertilization) and relationships (e.g., "surrogate" mother contracts).

3. Stanworth (1990) notes how new reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization and "surrogate" mothering serve to "deconstruct motherhood as a unified biological process," but this deconstruction was begun by the separation of nurture from nature embedded in (formal and informal) adoptive relationships, long before new reproductive technologies emerged. Moreover, as stories such as *Horton* illustrate, even the separation of genetic and gestational mothering was imaginable prior to its becoming technologically possible.

literature on "othermothering,"[4] we are invited to consider not only birth mothers but also others as mothers. However, serious questions arise in these narratives concerning how "other" a mothering figure can be while still claiming fitness as a "real mother." In defining "real mother" as an issue of maternal fitness, these stories, I suggest, erect a good mother/bad mother dichotomy, different from the nature/nurture dichotomy, but still problematic.

In the final section of this essay, I explore the notion forwarded in *The Velveteen Rabbit* that reality, in the sense that I am advocating, is a function of being loved. Together with feminist accounts of ontology and epistemology, this notion can be used as an entry into a useful notion of real motherhood, perceived here as an existential and fluid process that allows for multiple real mothers, constructed in relation to, rather than opposition to, each other.

MOTHERS AND NON-MOTHERS: THE NATURE/CULTURE DICHOTOMY

My eldest daughter's insistence that I am not her "real" mother stems originally from two sources: first, that she was not borne to me, and second, that she does not look like me. The notion of family belonging as a factor of birth and genetic mirroring reflects a traditional kinship narrative. This narrative has had a profound effect on adoptive relationships which, until recently, were governed by the principle that such relationships should mimic, to the greatest extent possible, the relationships of the biological kinship unit. Thus, until the open adoption movement of recent decades, placement of children practiced racial and ethnic matching, adoption records were closed, and adoptive parents were advised to raise their adopted children "as if" they were their own flesh and blood. Often this practice of secrecy surrounding adoption extended to keeping a child's origins secret from the adopted child as well. As remains current practice, birth certificates sealed this biological fiction by recording a child's adoptive parents as their birth parents (Modell 1994).

Opposition to the practice of closed adoptions has been led largely by the adult children of adoption seeking access to information about their birth parents. In some cases, adopted children may seek their birth parents because of special circumstances that may arise, such as a health crisis that requires family medical history. In most cases, however, adopted children's search for their birth families—and especially their birth mothers—stems from desires related to felt gaps in their identity formation. In

4. See, e.g., Collins (1991), hooks (1984).

order to know adequately who they are, adopted children often feel the need to know their stories of origin and the source of their unique appearance, talents, and/or difficulties.[5]

The notion that family membership is a function of biological origins and genetic inheritance is a theme both accepted and contested in children's literature. In the 1960 story *Are You My Mother?* (a book in the Beginner Books series still widely reproduced and distributed), a baby bird hatches from his egg while his mother is off in search of worms for him. Looking up, down, and all around, in search of his mother, but not finding her, the newborn bird leaves his nest and goes off in search of his mother. Along the way, he encounters many creatures—chickens, dogs, cats, and cows, as well as cars, planes, and boats—asking each in turn, "Are you my mother?" Each creature encountered responds negatively, highlighting the differences between themselves and the baby bird. ("How could I be your mother?" said the cow. "I am a cow.") In the end, however, a friendly, if frightening, earth-moving machine returns him to his nest where he is happily united with his "natural" (i.e., species) mother.

In direct contrast to the privileging of biological connection in *Are You My Mother?*, the 1992 story, *A Mother for Choco* tells the story of a little bird who lives all alone, wishes he had a mother, and eventually finds a mother bear. Like the baby bird in the earlier adventure, Choco encounters all kinds of creatures who have, at best, a marginal family resemblance to him—e.g., a giraffe who is yellow, penguins who have wings, a walrus that has big, round cheeks—and who uniformly reject his need for a mother.

> "Oh, Mrs. Walrus!" he cried. "You have big, round cheeks just like me. Are you my mother?" "Now look," grumped Mrs. Walrus. "I don't have striped feet like you, so don't bother me!" (Kasza 1992)

Dismayed by his inability to find anyone who looks just like him, Choco cries, eliciting a maternal response from nearby Mrs. Bear who comforts him with hugs, kisses, singing, dancing, and apple pie and adopts him into her family—a family already including a baby alligator, pig, and hippo. The moral of this story is clear: when Choco quits looking for someone that looks like him and begins thinking instead about all the things that his mommy would do, if he had one, he finally finds the mother he needs.

The contrasting depictions of mothers as natural versus social creatures found in these stories parallels two traditional lines of thought about motherhood. Both of these lines of thought are, however, oversimplified and ultimately unsatisfactory. The first line of thought assumes motherhood to

5. Whether this information would be necessary for adequate identity formation in another socio-historical moment is an open question. But the felt need for such information is extremely common among contemporary Western adoptees.

be a "natural" state, assuming that genetic, gestational, and social mothering are one and the same. Thus, a woman's biological connection to her offspring automatically gives her the rights and responsibilities of a mother. It is this conception of motherhood as a natural and unified process that makes it difficult for many persons, including many children, to understand why a pregnant women could decide not to mother, choosing instead to abort her fetus, or to abandon her child. Like the mother bird with her nesting and worm-gathering instinct, adult women are supposed to have a natural bond with their offspring that guarantees they will have both the desire and the ability to engage in responsible mothering activities. As the phrase "maternal instinct" connotes, motherwork is viewed as a natural, not a learned, ability or skill.

If we assume that biological and social mothering are one and the same, questions concerning children's identity formation and sense of belongingness within the family are rendered unproblematic. Like the baby bird, children who remain in their family of biological origin can easily "see themselves" in their parents. They look like, and, it is often assumed, act like their parents due to genetic connections. Hence, their "fit" in the family unit is uninterrogated. Idiosyncratic differences may be tolerated to a greater or lesser degree, but the homogeneity of the family unit is largely taken for granted.

As Elizabeth Bartholet (1993) notes, because these assumptions underlie the tale *Are You My Mother?*, the story is profoundly anti-adoption. In contrast, *A Mother for Choco* is a positive tale of adoption. Not only does its underlying metaphysics of maternity depict real motherhood in terms of motherwork, rather than biological connection, its happy depiction of the non-homogenous family opens the possibility of building genuine relations between those who are different in significant ways. A much loved story of adoptive parents—especially those who have, like myself, adopted transracially—*A Mother for Choco* depicts families as chosen, not given, and mothering as an activity that can be successfully extended to children in need, regardless of those children's "natural" origins.

A Mother for Choco thus seems a radical departure from the dominant ideology surrounding motherhood that for centuries has deemed a woman's destiny to be a function of her biology. And indeed, it is. Nonetheless, as Fineman (1995) notes, "in examining discourses about motherhood . . . underlying symbols and values are more uniformly shared than differences in discourse would superficially indicate" (220). On the surface, *A Mother for Choco* embraces an understanding of motherhood that combines norms of choice and caregiving in ways compatible with feminist values. However, a closer reading of the story reveals a conservative counternarrative in tension with those feminist values. The singing, dancing Mrs. Bear bakes an apple pie as a token of her caregiving. This act, in combination with a textual failure to develop Mrs. Bear's character in even minimal ways, gives rise to a stereotypical depiction of the caregiving mother as perpetually happy and instinctively nurturing. This stereotype of mothering could be potentially undermined here by including in the narrative a depiction of Choco's birth mother relinquishing her child as an act of care. By omitting such story elements from the narrative, however, *A Mother for Choco's* redefinition of motherhood falls short of radicalizing the concept. Instead, its redefinition of motherhood as the act of nurturing ultimately channels a potentially radical idea "into set categories approved by the existing conceptual system," thus "domesticating" a rhetoric of motherhood by choice into a rhetoric of mothering as caregiving (219–20).[6] This is problematic for both mothers and children.

My initial response to my elder daughter's insistence that I wasn't her real mother was to try to undermine her claim by way of pointing out all the maternal activities I had been engaged in both for and with her. After all, who had fed, diapered, and bathed her as an infant? Who had walked the floors with her each night when she had colic? Who encouraged her to take her first steps, say her first words, and make her first friends? Who has played, sung, and danced with her? Who has consoled her when she is hurt and applauded her many achievements? In short, who has lived with her and cared for her since she was three days old?[7] Downplaying the role of biology and focusing on social aspects of mothering also seemed a satisfactory solution to avoiding my younger daughter's one-upmanship in the form of a claim to biological connection with me that her sister lacked. Seeking to reconnect sisters, as well as adoptive daughter and mother, it was expedient to force a redefinition of mother that made me equally real to both of them, and made them equally real to me. I thus positioned myself as Mrs. Bear. Strangely, however, only my younger, biological daughter was receptive to my bear hugs.

To understand why my adopted daughter resisted my attempts to redefine mothering as a social activity, I had to read the social mothering narrative from her own, rather than my own, perspective. When I did so, I recognized that from an adopted child's perspective, *A Mother for Choco* oversimplifies the concepts of mothering and family in important ways.

First, a child's birth mother is notably absent from this narrative of social mothering.[8] "Choco was a little bird, who lived all alone." Why? Where

6. Fineman (1995) is concerned to examine the images of mothering in poverty discourse. Her general point about the domestication of the rhetoric of motherhood holds for my purposes as well, however.

7. This response, whether or not verbalized, is a common response of adoptive parents to their children's first "real parents" question. See Engle (1995) for a similar narrative.

8. The erasure of children's birth mothers in parables of adoptive families, as well as other forms of blended families, is commonplace in children's fiction. See, for example, con-

did he come from? And how did he manage to survive at all in the absence of any nurturing creature? From a child's perspective, the narrative erasure of the birth mother is both implausible and ethically suspect. The erasure of Choco's bird mother, combined with the notion that a non-bird is his real mother, negates the possibility of genuine competing grounds for claims to motherhood. By positioning myself within this narrative context, I had implicitly devalued my daughter's own narrative context, a context within which her birth mother figured prominently as a key to her own identity.

Secondly, *A Mother for Choco* falsifies the experience of the adopted child, by suggesting that the child voluntarily chooses her adopted family. In reality, adopted children rarely exercise any influence over such decisions. Women who adopt in an important sense choose motherhood; moreover, they exercise the right to accept or reject any particular child offered them for adoption.[9] Adopted children, on the other hand, are "placed" within a home deemed suitable for them. Indeed, my daughter's anger could be explained, in part, as stemming from *her* inability to choose her home and family, and by virtue of this, her inability to know what has been lost to her.[10] While no child is able to choose the circumstances into which they are born, a special sense of frustration and loss attends the experience of adopted children insofar as they know that choices *were* available; they were simply unable to intervene.

Finally, *A Mother for Choco* devalues the fears and anxieties that may be related to an adopted child's sense of difference within her adopted family. This adoption parable minimizes the potential impact on children of the truly heterogeneous family. Can bears, alligators, hippos, pigs, and birds truly live together harmoniously? Can they all eat the same meals? Enjoy the same games? Speak the same verbal, emotional, or physical language? Real family relationships are complex; even in the most homogeneous families tensions may arise. These tensions are exacerbated as the family becomes more heterogeneous. In families where racial or ability differences exist, for example, ordinary sibling rivalries may become intensified and, as I have often noted, motherwork becomes more intense.

From my daughter's perspective, however, the situation is no doubt more anxiety-provoking than even this suggests. Her experience is the experience not of a truly heterogeneous family, but is perhaps the experience of being a bird among bears. It is the experience thus of being "other" among those who are (or at least appear) "alike"; related to this, it is the experience of being small and vulnerable.[11] Under such circumstances, it is less surprising that she should resist my overtures of comfort. Even a well-intentioned bear hug may appear risky to receive; in order to refrain from crushing her spirit or her potential to fly, I must ensure that I am not *over*bearing.

REAL MOTHERS AND OTHER MOTHERS: THE GOOD MOTHER/BAD MOTHER DICHOTOMY

"My REAL mother wouldn't make me do this!" She is doing her homework. More accurately, she is supposed to be doing her homework. She hates homework; she especially hates having to write vocabulary definitions. She has difficulty sitting still and difficulty concentrating. She is hungry. She needs a glass of water. She wants to phone a friend. She wants to watch TV. Her sister is watching TV, as her homework is long completed.

I am tired. Tired of the nightly homework wars. Tired of being unfavorably compared to her "real" mother. "You can do this. Just sit down and concentrate," is the best response I can conjure up. Of course, concentrating is precisely what she seems unable to do. "I want to live with my birth mom! She'd be nicer to me!" she retorts. "Sit back in that chair and finish your vocabulary definitions!" I respond, still refusing to take the bait, but raising my voice enough to live up to her accusation of my unkindness.

Later, as I tuck her into bed, trying to recoup my losses, I patiently explain to her that I am quite certain that her birth mother would also want her to do her homework. "All mothers want their children to do well at school, so that they can grow up to be whatever they would like to be." At my request, my daughter's birth mom sends a letter confirming my hypothesis and urging our child to do her homework. In separate correspondence, however, she reveals that she too had childhood difficulties in school. I begin to wonder if I am mistaken in believing that my eldest daughter can succeed in school simply by internalizing the work ethic on which I was raised. I wonder also about the value our family places on academic success—a success that has come more or less easily to myself, my partner, and my youngest daughter, but that is a struggle for my eldest child. Perhaps, because of her similar experiences, my daughter's birth mother would be better able to empathize with our child's struggles.

In the contemporary children's story *Stellaluna*, a young bat, lost by her biological mother during an encounter with an eagle, is adopted by a fam-

---

temporary stories such as *Susan and Gordon Adopt a Baby, The Day We Met You, Through Moon and Stars and Night Skies, Horace,* and *Murmel, Murmel, Murmel,* as well as classic fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White.*

9. Unlike biological mothers, adoptive mothers (and fathers) must undergo lengthy interviews and house visits and complete substantial paperwork related to their desire and ability to "have" a child. Throughout this often lengthy and invasive process, a would-be mother has significant opportunity to reflect on her reasons for wanting a child in her life and significant opportunity, even after a child is placed in her home, to change her mind.

10. This also explains, in part, why adopted children may direct rage disproportionately at their mothers. It is the sense of loss for a birth mother, rather than a birth father, that is most significantly felt. This is generally true for both young girls and young boys, once they have learned that babies grow in mother's tummies. As children age, however, and struggle with identity formation, the tension may become most pronounced between mothers and daughters.

11. For an adoption parable more sensitive to this experience of being "different," see Keller (1991).

ily of birds. There she is well cared for, but has difficulty assimilating to her new environment—an environment which requires eating worms and insects, sleeping upright, and giving up her nocturnal ways. Although her bird siblings are open to learning bat skills, Mama bird is less flexible. Coming home one day to find all of her children hanging upside down, mother bird panics, sending all of the baby birds back to the nest, but stopping Stellaluna:

> "You are teaching my children to do bad things. I will not let you back into the nest unless you promise to obey all the rules of this house."
>
> Stellaluna promised. She ate bugs without making faces. She slept in the nest at night. And she didn't hang by her feet. She behaved as a good bird should (Cannon 1993).

Importantly, Mama bird does care for Stellaluna. Yet she does so in ways that are inappropriate, indicating her failure to understand that Stellaluna's needs may differ from those of her bird-siblings. In contrast, Stellaluna's "real" mother understands her offspring's needs; thus the story ends happily, when bat mother and child are reunited.

Like *Are You My Mother?, Stellaluna* is a story that ultimately resolves the question "who is the real mother?" by identifying the biological mother as real. Unlike the earlier story, however, the resolution of this question results from a more complex narrative that depicts Stellaluna's bat mother as possessing caregiving and relational skills relevant to mothering—skills that Stellaluna's "other" (bird) mother lacks.[12]

Unlike the essentialist narrative in *Are You My Mother?* that reduces motherhood to biological connection, here biology and identity are depicted as instrumental rather than intrinsic to mothering. Biological identity is important insofar as it gives rise to similar needs and experiences, which in turn ground empathy. The story opens the possibility, however, of empathic connection across difference. While Mama bird, having no previous experience with bats, seems unwilling to accommodate Stellaluna's difference, the baby birds are more playful and willing to try new things. Even after Stellaluna is reunited with her natural mother, she and the younger birds continue to explore one another's worlds, learning both the possibilities and the limitations of their boundary crossings.

By deconstructing the notion of the "bad" child, this story is comforting for children and educational for parents. It teaches us that children's nonconformist behavior may be neither good nor bad, but simply an expression of their needs and abilities. It suggests that parents need to be flexible;

12. From the beginning, we are assured that Stellaluna's biological mother is a good mother, who "loved her soft tiny baby," crooning to her and clutching her to her breast each evening, as she went in search of food.

children's active resistance to and/or inability to follow household rules may indicate a difficulty with the rules rather than a difficulty with the child. Unfortunately, the story deconstructs the good child/bad child dichotomy by erecting the good mother/bad mother dichotomy. This dichotomy also features prominently in the Dr. Seuss classic, *Horton Hatches the Egg*.

In *Horton Hatches the Egg*, Horton the elephant is charged with caring for the egg of a Lazy-Mayzie bird who flies south to frolic for the winter. Horton suffers many trials and much ridicule for his troubles, but is ultimately rewarded when an elephant-bird that hatches from the egg identifies him (and not Lazy-Mayzie) as her mother. In contrast to *Stellaluna, Horton* advances the notion that real mothering can transcend significant differences. Although it requires extraordinary care and Horton is belittled, ostracized, and exoticized for it, Horton learns the skills necessary to faithfully nurture the egg that he promised to care for. In exchange for his willingness to become bird-like, the hatchling emerges with elephant traits. As the bird with "ears and a tail and a trunk just like his" flies toward Horton, an astonished crowd cheers in approval.

As Mahoney (1995) suggests in discussing legal rights to frozen embryos, and *Horton* exemplifies, such cases are "not . . . about who *is* a [natural] parent," but are instead about "who has a right to become, or not become a parent" (41).[13] The crowd surrounding Horton cheers precisely because Horton has earned the right to become a parent. As the book concludes:

> And it should be, it *should* be, it SHOULD be like that.
> Because Horton was faithful. He sat and he sat. (Seuss 1940)

This seems right. And yet the obvious distinction between good and bad mothers underlying the Horton parable is troubling. Unlike Stellaluna's loving, caring, genetic mother, the elephant-bird's genetic mother is, as her name clearly indicates, a lazy, neglectful, untrustworthy, irresponsible "other" with no legitimate claim to her offspring. After all, she abandoned her maternal responsibilities for no apparent reason other than the desire for an extended vacation, and she broke her promise to Horton that she would "be back in no time at all."[14] Horton, the gestational/social mother,

13. Mahoney suggests that frozen embryo cases are unique in this sense. Custody cases, she claims, are about who *is* a parent. However, it is part of my argument here and below to suggest that custody disputes should be treated somewhat analogously.

14. As Marlee Kline (1995) notes in her discussion of the construction of First Nation women as "bad mothers," judges (and others) blame mothers for their difficulties without seeing the roots of those difficulties in colonialist and imperialist practices. Lazy-Mayzie is here constructed in a way that makes it appear that there is no good reason for her to abandon her child. It is an interesting exercise to have children try to imaginatively flesh out the

on the other hand, is self-sacrificing to a fault, willing to give up his friends, his natural environment, his freedom, and ultimately "his" child as well.

> "But it's MINE!" screamed the bird, when she heard the egg crack.
> (The work was all done. Now she wanted it back.)
> "It's my egg!" she sputtered. "You stole it from me!
> Get off of my nest and get out of my tree!"
> Poor Horton backed down
> With a sad, heavy heart.
> (Seuss 1940)

Indeed, like the "real" mother in the story of Solomon, it is his willingness to give up the child that proves, in part, his status as the mother.

On a surface level, the story of Horton is both funny and heartwarming. Yet, from a foster or adopted child's perspective, this tale has a disturbing underlying message. It suggests that those who grant temporary or permanent custody of their offspring do not care about them, while simultaneously raising the fearful hope that their birth mother may return for them. It also raises completely unrealistic expectations regarding their adoptive parents.[15] Am I, like Horton, willing to suppress all of my wants, desires, and abilities for my children? At what price do I become real? Frankly, sometimes, like so-called Lazy-Mayzie, I too feel I need a vacation.

In her essay, "A Different Reality," Caroline Whitbeck (1984) develops a feminist ontology that "has at its core a conception of the self-other *relation* that is significantly different from the self-other *opposition* that underlies much of so-called 'Western thought'"(51). The self-other opposition, she argues, is closely aligned with other dualistic oppositions such as culture-nature, productive-reproductive, knower-known, lover-beloved, and theory-practice. These dualisms, she suggests, are rooted in the hierarchical practices of patriarchy and the competitive practices of individualism that ignore human vulnerability and human development. They can be undone, however, by engendering practices that entail the "(mutual) realization of people," practices exemplified by the rearing and education of children.

At the core of Whitbeck's proposal for an interactive model of reality is

contexts that may explain Mayzie's behavior. Certainly, adopted children need to be encouraged to see their birth mother's actions *in context* in order to resist patriarchal, classist, racist, and/or colonialist thinking. This is an important site of political struggle for adoptive parents, who have a somewhat unique opportunity here to enable children to critique ideologies of motherhood. See also Marie Ashe's (1995) discussion of the construction of bad mothers. As she notes, even mothers whose behavior is clearly (and inexcusably) abusive need to have their behavior understood within the context that helps to produce such behavior.

15. As Kline (1995) says, "women are designated as caregivers and the caring is never sufficient" (Kline 1995, 152).

a "self-other relation that is assumed to be a relation between beings who are in some respects analogous" (62). In such relationships, we do not see the other as opposite, although we may be distinct and different in some respects (60). Horton's elephant-bird metaphorically captures this self-other relation in ways readily understandable by children, by depicting Horton and "his" hatchling as similar enough to mutually recognize one another despite their equally obvious differences. This mutual recognition is made possible by Horton's responsible maternal practices.

While the self-other dualism between Horton and the hatchling is transcended, however, the self-other dualism between Horton and Mayzie is not. Starkly contrasted as responsible (good) and lazy (bad) mothers, Horton and Mayzie have no basis for mutual recognition. The result is that the hatchling must choose one and only one mother, rendering the self-other relation in this story a dyadic one. As Whitbeck notes, however, the dyadic relation of self and other may undermine a truly interactive model of reality. The relation sought "is better expressed as a self-others relation, because relationships, past and present, realized and sought, are constitutive of the self, and so the actions of a person reflect the more-or-less successful attempt to respond to the whole configuration of relationships" (62).

In adoptive relationships, a complex configuration of relationships is essential to a child's developing identity. Thus maternal practices must be aimed at ensuring children acquire the "virtues necessary to engage in the key practices of mutual recognition" with a variety of others (67). However, as Whitbeck suggests, following Jean Baker Miller (1976), developing these skills in others doesn't entail self-sacrifice of those engaged in this practice (68). The erasure of self is as destructive to self-other relations as is the erasure of others. In my own case, this means that I would be ill-advised to be as self-sacrificing as Horton. Instead, I must engage in maternal practices that enable my daughter to see both of her mothers—in addition to a variety of others—as real, even when we don't live up to the socially constructed ideal of "good" mothers.

BECOMING REAL: TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

"Mom, when I said I hated you earlier, I didn't really mean it. Sometimes words just come out of my mouth before my brain thinks." This is comforting. I am glad to hear she doesn't hate me; I am also glad for her developing ability to engage in candid self-observation. I reassure her that I know she doesn't mean such things, at the same time gently cautioning her that, just like her, I am capable of having my feelings hurt. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Mom, but I really want to live with my real mom." Here it is again. I'm not hurt this time; the words aren't spoken in anger. Yet, it is not a straightforward statement of desire, either. It is a test and I'm not sure how to respond, because I'm not sure precisely what the question is. Would I give her up? (No.) Would I let her

go visit her birth mom for a weekend or a few weeks? (Yes, but this is not solely my decision.) Will I allow her to love her birth mom without retracting my own love for her? (Yes.)

I decide to choose the last question, as it is the easiest to answer. "I know that you miss your birth mom and you would like to spend more time with her. That's OK. I know you love me too." "I do love you, but you're not my real mom," she explains. I try a different angle. "Am I fictional?" I inquire playfully. She giggles. So do I. And on this evening, she initiates the bear hug.

In the classic children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit,* a young boy loves a stuffed bunny into being real. The bunny, who loves the boy very much, nonetheless yearns to be like real rabbits. Having encountered real rabbits on an outing with the boy and having been made to feel inadequate because of his obvious stitching and inability to hop, he inquires of his friend the skin-horse, how he might become real. The skin-horse, the nursery stable philosopher of the story, explains:

> Real isn't how you are made. . . . It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. . . . It doesn't happen all at once. . . . You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. (Williams 1995)

On the basis of this theory, reality is a function of being seen lovingly by another. As Marilyn Frye (1983) reminds us, love is too often equated with servitude (73). This is not the sort of love I have in mind, nor is it the sort of love that the boy has for the bunny. From an adult's perspective, a stuffed toy is just an object to be put on a shelf and admired or to be exploited for one's own enjoyment until it is no longer good for either. Certainly, this is the point of view of the boy's nanny, who throws the threadbare bunny in a cupboard, and the boy's doctor, who demands the bunny be thrown into the trash because it may carry scarlet fever germs. From the child's point of view, however, the bunny is, or more accurately becomes, beloved. The boy imagines the bunny as having its own desires and powers, as a being capable of exploration and adventure, indeed, as a being capable of independent existence. And in perceiving the bunny as real, he makes it so.[16]

The loving eye (Frye 1983) both recognizes and enables the other's independence, both sees the other as real and contributes to the other's reality. Such recognition is rarely immediate; it requires, as the skin-horse suggests, considerable time and patience. Indeed, as Lugones and Spel-

16. In this story, the stuffed bunny becomes real (i.e., a live biological bunny) with the intervening help of a magic fairy. I have omitted this part of the story here, as it is the bunny's becoming real-for-the-boy that is of interest. The boy accomplishes this without intervening assistance.

man (1983) suggest, receiving recognition from another, especially where that other is significantly different from yourself, may require one to "be patient to the point of tears." One also needs to learn to accept criticism from the other(s) whose recognition we seek (26). This is why those who are brittle, sharp-edged, or fragile may never become real.

If we take seriously the notion that reality, in the sense of reality-for-others, is a function of being seen lovingly, it follows that a real mother is one whose child does not see her primarily with reference to his interests. A primary task for a mother who would be real-for-her-child is, thus, to nurture non-arrogating perception in her child.[17] The arrogant perceiver sees the world as revolving around him. As Frye notes, his vision organizes everything as either "for him" or "against him" (67). Accordingly, the child who sees with an arrogant eye will see a "real" mother as one who serves him and his wishes exclusively and expediently; any blood-relative or guardian who does not is cast as a non-mother or "bad" mother. The sad irony here is that a real mother, on this conception, fails to be a real person; she is merely an appendage of the perceiver who cannot imagine her as having separate interests from his own.

As Maria Lugones (1989) suggests, a child needs to learn the skills of a "world-traveler," in order to see others, including his own mother, through "loving eyes."

> As a child, I was taught to perceive arrogantly. . . . I also learned to graft my mother's substance to my own. . . . I thought that to love her was consistent with my abusing her (using, taking for granted, and demanding her services in a far reaching way that, since four other people engaged in the same grafting of her substance onto themselves, left her little of herself to herself). . . . (276–77)
>
> To love my mother was not possible for me while I retained a sense that it was fine for me and others to see her arrogantly. Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother's world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world. (280)

Traveling, as an adult, with her mother to her mother's "world," Lugones finally sees her mother as "a creative being" (290). Thus seeing her, Lugones is able to identify with her, to see her in Whitbeck's terms as an "anal-

17. This form of motherwork doesn't replace the form of maternal work that Ruddick (1989) refers to as "preservative love" (the maternal work necessary to preserve a child's physical survival), as exemplified by the birds, bats, and elephants of children's stories who incubate eggs, gather worms, insects, and fruit, and worry about their children hanging upside down. It is better depicted as a form of what Ruddick terms nurturance and/or training, although she does not directly address this form of motherwork in her discussions of such.

ogous being," thus overcoming the self-other divide that previously separated them.

Lugones suggests that world-traveling must be a mutual activity in order for both self and other to become real. Distinguishing her notion of loving perception from Frye's notion that loving requires seeing the other as an independent being, Lugones claims that she and her mother cannot love one another in this independence:

> We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding, we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking. So traveling to each other's "worlds" would enable us to *be* through *loving* each other. (280)

I am skeptical that the mutuality demanded by Lugones and by Whitbeck is always possible, although it certainly is desirable. Thus, I think that we need to countenance the possibility that in daughter-mother (or daughter-mothers) relationships, as in any self-other (or self-others) relationships, loving may not occur in all directions. You may be more willing or able to travel to my world than I am willing or able to travel to yours (or vice versa). When this happens, as I think it frequently does,[18] you know and love me better than I know and love you. Thus, I become more real (or become real more rapidly and/or fully), in the context of this particular relationship, than do you.[19] In extreme cases of asymmetrical loving, I may be real, while you are not real at all.[20]

There is a ring of paradox to this claim. Ordinarily, we speak of someone as a "real friend" for example, when we feel they know us and love us well. On the account I am suggesting, someone may possess these epistemic and moral virtues while failing to be a real friend; their reality does

18. Consider the relationship of parents to an autistic child or of adult children to a parent stricken with Alzheimer's. Consider also the relationships of friends and lovers to those who are alcoholic, drug-addicted, or just plain abusive. These and other asymmetrical loving relationships are not uncommon.

19. As Lugones notes, "knowing can be done in greater or less depth, as can the loving" (Lugones 1989, 284). If reality is a function of being seen lovingly, then reality too admits of degrees.

20. Our reality here is always within a given context. Someone may be very real, as so-and-so's friend, or mother, or lover, yet fail to be real within another relational context (e.g., as a secretary to a CEO). There is no such thing on this account as unsituated reality. To say that reality is situated is not, however, to say that it is merely a matter of perspective. Within a given relational context, we can say truly or falsely of people that they are (more or less) real.

I agree with Haslanger (1996) that "a change in my thinking, *by itself*, cannot make my body, my friends, or my neighborhood go out of existence, nor thankfully can a change in anyone else's" (Haslanger 1996, 85). However, my thinking (or failures to think) in conjunction with the actions (or omissions) intimately linked with such thinking, can bring (or fail to bring) someone or something into existence insofar as that being is defined in terms of its relation to me. "Mother" and "daughter" are examples of such relationally defined entities that depend on the embodied thinking of the participants to such a relation.

not depend on their own actions so much as it depends on ours. Thus, if we fail to possess the virtues necessary for mutual recognition to occur, they cannot become real. To reduce this air of paradox, however, we need to note that when we speak of someone as a "real friend," what we ordinarily mean is that they are a *good* friend; they do the sorts of things that we expect of friends. If, however, I do not reciprocate—I fail to travel to your "world," by listening to your stories, visiting your home, meeting your family and friends, discovering your hopes and fears and dreams, and responding to your needs as appropriate—then, as Lugones suggests, I am alone in your presence (289). You are not real at all. Like the woman who remains in an abusive relationship, your acts of self-sacrifice, while marked as virtuous within the phallocratic moral scheme, result in a literal sacrifice of the (your) self.

This asymmetry of loving is common in mother-child relationships and is one reason that some feminists have rejected motherhood as both an institution and a practice.[21] Certainly, in mother-infant relations, caregiving is largely non-reciprocal, because abilities to know and to love and to act based on this knowing and loving are radically unequal.[22] Even with older (minor) children, non-mutuality may occur as children may know considerably less about our (work, social, and emotional) "worlds" than we do about theirs. This is because a mother's worlds, of necessity (even if she is not a particularly virtuous mother), include much of her children's world(s) in ways that the children's world(s) do not encompass their mother's.[23] In some cases, of course, the child's world and the mother's world are virtually identical—especially in cases where the mother lives in and through the child's world. But in these cases the mother is apt to be self-sacrificing. Hence, here as in other cases, mothers are less real to their children than their children are to them.

To note these reasons for asymmetry in mother-child relationships, how-

21. See, for example, J. Allen (1984). Rejections of the institution and practice of motherhood are also related, of course, to the ways in which motherwork supports and reproduces patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and other forms of oppression. I don't think this is necessary, although I admit that it is frequently the case.

22. While mother-infant relations are largely non-reciprocal relations, it is important to note that infants can and do initiate relationship and, in limited ways, attempt to know their mother. See Whitbeck (1989) regarding this point.

23. This claim assumes that a mother is also a legal guardian, i.e., that the children live with her and that she is charged with understanding and meeting at least their basic physical, emotional, and other developmental needs. Where mothers are not legal guardians (e.g., birth mothers whose children have been adopted or divorced mothers whose children live with their fathers), the situation is more complex. Even non-custodial mothers may, however, be privy to more information about their children's lives than their children are privy to about their mothers, assuming parents speak with one another about their children. Also children are less likely to self-censor themselves than (most) adults; hence even non-custodial parents will often know more about their children's emotional lives than their children know about theirs.

ever, is key to learning how to become a *real* mother to our children. As hooks (1984) notes, children of post-industrial cultures are rarely exposed to the occupational world of parents and other adults (143). Similar points apply to the non-work worlds typically inhabited by adults only. Contemporary Western parents frequently isolate ("shelter") their children from the adult worlds of politics, finances, law, culture, sex, and even spirituality. (In many churches, for example, children are ushered into nurseries or Sunday school while the adults participate in more solemn rituals; similar practices of adult-child segregation may also take place at weddings and especially funerals.) Under such circumstances, it should come as no surprise that our children may know little about us. To be real to our children, we must resist such isolationary practices.

In many cultures, parents are also reluctant to reveal their emotional lives to their children, with unfortunate results. As a mother claims in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club:*

> For all these years, I kept my mouth closed so that selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long, now my daughter does not hear me. . . . All these years, I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly, now my daughter does not see me. (67)

In contrast, the mother in Tan's later novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* does share her stories with her daughter. Here reciprocal caring is achieved.

These points apply to making non-custodial, as well as custodial, mothers real. On the account of maternal reality I am advancing here, my reality as a mother is not in opposition to my child's recognition of her birth mother as also real. Indeed, the motherwork necessary to develop non-arrogating perception in my (our) child provides the foundation for a child's ability to bring multiple others into reality. My (our) daughter cannot do this alone, however.[24] To know and thus love her birth mother well, her birth mother must also be revealed to her. This may occur through her birth mother's self-revelations if her birth mother is willing and able to tell her stories, share her life and dreams, and so on with our daughter. In many cases, however, as in my own, a birth mother may be reluctant to become real. The reasons for this may be several: she may feel that I do not wish her real to our daughter, she may feel that persons in her current household do not wish her real to our daughter, or she may, herself, be unready to be real to our daughter. In order to understand her reasons and

24. It is difficult to know whether to use the phrase "my daughter" or "our daughter" here. On the one hand, "my daughter" sounds possessive, which is not my intent. On the other hand, "our daughter" indicates, on the view I am advancing, that her birth mother has made her real (i.e., sees her with a loving eye), a fact about which I am uncertain.

respect them, I must also travel to her "world(s)" as best I can, even if only imaginatively. And I must teach my daughter to also become such an imaginative traveler.

In either case, a non-dyadic self-other relationship is necessary in order to bring multiple mothers into reality for our daughter. In the case of open adoptive (surrogate, foster, or other complex family) relationships, two (or more) mothers must mutually collaborate and co-operate in order to help a child adopt a metaphysics of maternity that permits that child to freely countenance multiple mothers. This requires that the mothers see their child lovingly, but also that they see one another lovingly. In cases where the possibility of open relations, and thus mutuality, is foreclosed by law or by the choice, death, or disability of one or more parents, it remains imperative that the custodial parent(s), in loving their child and recognizing the complexity of that child's identity, cast a loving eye also toward the child's birth (or other) mother, thus seeing her too as a being analogous to, albeit different from, themselves. It is only under such circumstances that a child can freely, and without fear, bring multiple mothers into being-for-herself.

Some Maternal Worries

In this essay, I have suggested that we need, and in particular that children need, a concept of "real mother" that is more fluid and inclusive than that typically offered children in the literature that they read, while they develop this notion. Traditional (patriarchal) conceptions of mothers that reduce them to their biological capacity to procreate or, alternatively, that stereotype them as self-sacrificing caregivers, set up false oppositional dichotomies of "natural" versus "social" mothers and/or "good" versus "bad" mothers. These conceptions of mothers as found in children's literature and elsewhere have been rightly criticized by feminists as oppressive to women. Here I have tried to suggest that such notions may also be oppressive to children, leaving them without the rich array of genuine family relationships that might otherwise be available to them. I have thus advocated that we assist children in deconstructing these patriarchal notions of motherhood, as part of the process of nurturing a child's positive potential to bring multiple (m)others into being-for-herself.

A child's ability to do this—especially if that child is adopted or a member of another type of nontraditional family unit—is, I believe, an important component of a child's ability to secure her own (psychological) well-being. Nonetheless, one might worry whether the view of maternal reality I have advocated here *is* good for children.

Indeed, a primary worry about my account may be that the analysis of

"real mother" I have offered is idealized and thus very difficult to achieve. Is the position I am advocating based on a moral-metaphysical framework that is alien to children? Does it therefore prioritize adult capacities in relationships over what children are normally capable of? Might my view therefore have the result, contrary to my intentions, that many children have no real mother? These are serious interrelated worries. As it is my intention here to open the possibility of a child having multiple real mothers, it would indeed be a serious flaw in my proposal if it rendered it impossible for children to have any mother at all. I do not think this is a general result of the view that I have proposed, however, for the following reasons.

First, I do not think that the position advanced here *is* alien to children *as a potential practice*. Certainly, the ability to *articulate* this view of maternal reality may require some degree of philosophical sophistication—in the same way that the ability to articulate the principles of grammar may require some degree of literary sophistication. But just as children can learn to speak grammatically without having the ability to analyze sentence structure, children can, I believe, learn to recognize and respect others without having the ability to analyze the philosophical foundations of their practice.

Certainly, young children's play indicates the early capacity for imaginative world travel that brings others into reality-for-themselves. Like the young boy who makes the velveteen rabbit real by loving it, most children's worlds are rich with companions and possibilities. Indeed, it is the adult world that instructs them that the dolls and animals they cherish "are just toys," and that the friends whom we can neither see nor hear "are just imaginary." We also teach them that animals "are just pets (or meat)" that unknown others "are just strangers," and that people who can't distinguish between fantasy and reality "are just crazy." Once they have internalized *our* truths about reality, we then criticize them for their self-centeredness, wondering why they insist on believing that the whole world should bend to their wishes. Often, it is we, however, who have diminished their world by teaching them to see with an arrogant eye.

As this suggests, the difficulty in achieving the metaphysical/moral maturity required for bringing others into being-for-ourselves may be a result of a particular sort of social acculturation prevalent in, although not exclusive to, the post-industrial, Western world. Given this social conditioning, it is true that many children may fail to reach the level of epistemic and moral maturity I prescribe here. As I have earlier suggested, our children are often kept isolated from both the joys and struggles of the adult worlds of work, politics, and spirituality. We also isolate them frequently from our intellectual and emotional worlds. This makes it difficult for our children to travel to our world(s). In this sense, the position I advocate

here is, indeed, difficult for children to achieve. This should not, however, be interpreted as an incapacity unique to children *as children*. To present barriers to children's epistemic and moral development and then conclude, having examined children under such non-optimal conditions, that they are incapable of such development is to undermine children's agency formation in ways similar to the ways in which women's epistemic and moral agency has been historically undermined (cf. Frye 1983, 46–47). As Hughes (1996) notes, and we would do well here to remember, philosophers have often denied autonomy to women on the same grounds it has been denied to children: lack of rationality, capriciousness, and vulnerability (Hughes 1996, 16).

This is not to imply that the experiences and abilities of women and children are homogeneous. To be sure, some degree of cognitive and emotional development, and linked to this, some degree of neurophysiological development, may be necessary to achieving the position I here advocate. Thus, it is true that infants, children with delayed cognitive development, and children with particular types of chronic neurological, perceptual, or emotional impairment may not have (and in some cases may never have) real mothers in the sense I have explored in this essay. However, this regrettable fact is a function of their adverse circumstance and not of my theory. And the fact that we find this regrettable indicates that we do indeed hold that the ability to recognize (m)others in ways that make them real is an ability conducive to one's own psychological well-being.

Finally, while I acknowledge that some children, such as those described above, lack the epistemic and moral potential necessary to create mothers real-for-themselves, my view does not entail that they thereby lack mothers of any sort. Such children may have (and in an ideal world, all would have) one or more women (or men) in their lives who love them and care for them. And these adults may be considered parents by the persons and institutions (e.g., other family members, neighbors, friends, teachers, and courts of law) that confer reality, in alternative senses, on them. As I indicated at the outset, my project here is not to define what it means to be a mother politically, morally, legally, or socially. It is rather the more limited project of understanding and nurturing a child's capacity to bring her mother into reality.

I conclude, then, by answering the questions with which I began this essay: What is a real mother? A real mother can be defined many ways. However, a real mother-for-a-child is someone whose child has acquired the skills of loving perception and thus who can see her as real, even when that mother does not "fit" the notion of "good mother" as this is defined by the phallocratic conceptual scheme. Am I one? Yes and no; I am in the process of becoming. To claim this is not to set up an unattainable ideal that I may

never reach. It is simply to note that becoming a real mother, in the sense that I have been investigating here, is an existential process, not an essential state that can be defined by some set of necessary and sufficient conditions.[25] How do I defend my status as real without implying that my daughter's birth mother is unreal or less real than I? I don't (any longer) defend my status, but instead attempt to develop for my child and myself a network of real relationships in which she can be beloved and learn to love in return. Because I love her, I want her to have all the mothers she needs and this requires that she develop the epistemic and moral virtues necessary to bring us into being.

25. In this sense, becoming a real mother is a process akin to the development of self, as discussed by Ferguson (1989).