

REVIEW ESSAY

Mothering, Diversity, and Peace Politics

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The most popular uniting theme in feminist peace literature grounds women's peace work in mothering. I argue if maternal arguments do not address the variety of relationships different races and classes of mothers have to institutional violence and/or the military, then the resulting peace politics can only draw incomplete conclusions about the relationships between maternal work/thinking and peace. To illustrate this I compare two models of mothering: Sara Ruddick's description of "maternal practice" and Patricia Hill Collins's account of racial-ethnic women's "motherwork."

Sara Ruddick has devoted nearly a decade to her philosophical analysis of mothering as a social practice and how it might plausibly serve as a foundation for a feminist peace politics. The culmination of this project is her book, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Ruddick's ground-breaking work is a welcome and important contribution to both feminist theory and the literature on women and peace. Few scholars have specifically addressed the political and epistemic implications of maternal work. None have suggested that maternal activities give rise to unique ways of thinking. Within contemporary feminist epistemology, Ruddick's analysis of maternal thinking constitutes a radical and new claim.

While I support Ruddick's efforts to capture maternal practice conceptually by pointing to the similarities among maternal practitioners, I believe the differences among mothers are equally as philosophically interesting and ought to be addressed more deeply. The ultimate challenge to Ruddick's account of maternal thinking is that, while she mentions the diversity among mothers and its influence, she never accounts for its implications in her argument. For maternal thinking to offer criticism of military practices, we need to know much more about the many locations from which mothers speak. My analysis

of Ruddick's construction of maternal practice shows that the move from maternal practice to a feminist peace politics is more complex than Ruddick presents it to be. Any effort to develop a feminist *maternal* peace politics must recognize and allow for the diversity among mothers before it can claim to provide a common critical perspective.

In *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick honors maternal work but also attempts to transform it. Ruddick believes there is a real basis for the traditional association between women and peace. She argues that those engaged in mothering work have distinct motives for rejecting war, distinct abilities for resolving conflicts non-violently, and a unique perspective from which to criticize military thinking.

Ruddick's account of mothering in *Maternal Thinking* has two central components: (1) the theoretical development of what she calls "maternal thinking," which she grounds in maternal practice and explains in terms of what she calls the "practicalist conception of truth" (PCT); and (2) the case for her claim that maternal thinking can ground a feminist peace politics, based on Nancy Hartsock's version of feminist standpoint theory. Here, I confine my comments to Ruddick's practicalism in Part 1 of her book.

Ruddick's reliance on the PCT in the first part of her book helps her to describe the work mothers do and how this work shapes maternal thinking. The practicalist conception of truth—the idea that truths arise from practices—is nothing new. Ruddick reports that her practicalism is rooted in the work of writers such as Habermas, Winch, and Rorty, whose views of truth derive from one reading of what Wittgenstein may have meant by "facts of living" and "forms of life" in his discussion of language as an activity.¹ Social constructivists interpret Wittgenstein's "forms of life" as social activities and argue for the existence of many truths, each arising from a particular social context. Ruddick, describing herself as following these practicalists, presents mothering activity as a form of life (Ruddick 1989, 128). She regards mothers' work as a function of a social practice rather than as a consequence of biological destiny. For Ruddick, "mothering" designates a conscious social practice that gives rise to its own way of thinking. On her view, the PCT holds that "distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of practices" and that "there is no truth by which all truths can be judged nor any total and inclusive narrative of all true statements." Instead, distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of their respective practices (Ruddick 1989, 13).² Practices are "collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims" (Ruddick 1989, 13-14).

Ruddick defines the practice of mothering in terms of three activities: (1) preservative love, the interest in preserving and protecting the life of a child; (2) fostering growth, nurturing a child's developing spirit; and (3) social training, or training a child to become acceptable to the mother's social group.

A primary feature of the PCT is that it prohibits any "privileged" practice from judging all other practices. On Ruddick's practicalist view, thought does not transcend its social origins. "There is no truth to be apprehended from a transcendental perspective" (Ruddick 1989, 15). For Ruddick this means that

[t]here is no truth by which all truths can be judged nor any foundation of truths nor any total and inclusive narrative of all true statements: instead distinctive ways of knowing and criteria for truth arise out of practices. (Ruddick 1989, 13)

The criteria for truth are perspectival, relative to the practices in which they are made.

The PCT has limited critical power. But to have *limited* critical power is not the same as having *no* critical power. If there exists "no truth by which all truths can be judged," then the only criticism which can be made of participants in a practice—maternal thinkers, for instance—is *self-criticism*. Ruddick puts it this way:

It is sometimes said that only those who participate in a practice can criticize its thinking. . . . When mothers engage in self-criticism, their judgments presuppose a knowledge of the efforts required to respond to children's demands that those unpracticed in tending to children do not have. *Maternal criticisms are best left to those who know what it means to attempt to protect, nurture, and train, just as criticism of scientific [or] psychoanalytic thinking should be left to those who have engaged in these practices. . . . There are moral grounds for critical restraint. People who have not engaged in a practice or who have not lived closely with practitioners have no right to criticize.* (Ruddick 1989, 26; my italics)

Maternal practice under Ruddick's PCT is primarily descriptive. Its normative power is limited to its participants and those familiar with the practice.

Ruddick's practicalist approach helps her outline what counts as maternal activity, but Ruddick's outline of what mothers do presupposes that we know who these mothers are. The context of maternal practice is extremely influential to the kind of thinking in which mothers will participate. Not all mothers nurture, protect, or socialize their children in the same way or under the same circumstances. As Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes, "No standpoint is neutral because no individual or group exists unembedded in the world" (Collins 1990, 33). There is no singular standpoint that can be labeled "the maternal standpoint."

I identify two maternal voices in Ruddick's text. The first is her own voice. It reflects her personal experience of being a mother, of being mothered, and of observing mothers. The other is a "nearly universal" voice in which Ruddick

makes broader claims about maternal practice. In her own voice, Ruddick acknowledges that her writing on mothering unavoidably reflects who she is. She explains candidly that her ideas are drawn from her personal experience of mothering in white, middle-class, capitalist, Protestant, patriarchal America, and from her own experience of being mothered in a heterosexual nuclear family (Ruddick 1980, 215). In her own voice, Ruddick sets the social context of her writing in a "technocentric, property-oriented culture ambivalently obsessed with the bonds of biology" (Ruddick 1989, 54). In this personal voice, Ruddick's claims about mothering are empirical, although rather impressionistic, observations of particular mothers in particular social and cultural circumstances. Although she mentions the Madres movement in Argentina, some literary mothers, and a few mothers she knows personally, they provide examples of maternal practices, but are not necessarily extendable to mothering in general.

In her other voice, Ruddick makes the claim that because all children demand preservative love, fostering growth, and social training, mothering universally consists in meeting these three demands. Ruddick insists that her own experience as a mother has much in common with the experiences of (all?) other mothers. Ruddick's second voice is easily recognizable in her initial thoughts on maternal thinking, where she sets out the similarities that count as the identifying marks of all maternal practice.

The demands of children and the interests in meeting those demands are always and only expressed by people in particular cultures and classes of their culture, living in specific geographical, technological, and historical settings. Some features of the mothering experience are *invariant and nearly unchangeable*; others, though changeable, are *nearly universal*. It is therefore possible to identify interests that seem to govern maternal practice throughout the species. (Ruddick 1980, 214-215; my italics)

Although it may be possible to identify characteristics that "govern maternal practice throughout the species," it is fair to ask whether Ruddick succeeds in doing so with the characteristics that matter most for her project. The difficulty for Ruddick lies in distinguishing those features of mothering that are "invariant and nearly unchangeable" (i.e., long gestation period, prolonged infant and child dependence, and the physical fragility of infancy) from the changeable though "nearly universal" features of mothering (i.e., the identification of childbearing with child rearing, delegation of child care to biological mothers and other women and the social subordination of women to men) (Ruddick 1980, 228).³

Preservative love, nurturing, and social training are the three "nearly universal" but changeable features that define maternal practice for Ruddick.⁴

Yet Ruddick treats these three activities not as “nearly universal” but as though they were straightforwardly universal. They “govern maternal practice throughout the species.”

Ruddick’s position is confusing here. While she seems to recognize the diversity of mothering, acknowledging that maternal work is shaped by race, ethnicity, class, culture, and sexual orientation, she also insists that all mothers are involved in the same “forms of life”—preservation of life, nurturing, and social training. As a result, she presents all mothers as being cut from the same pattern, while mentioning frequently but in passing that they are from different kinds of cloth.

Ruddick does not clearly distinguish when she is speaking from her own experience and when she is speaking in the other, broader voice of maternal thinking. Because her two voices sound as one, Ruddick’s mothering is constructed along—her own—white, Anglo-American, middle-class, lines.

Maternal practice is vulnerable to Elizabeth Spelman’s (1988) criticism of the general treatment of women in Western feminist theory. Spelman argues that important differences among women have been eclipsed by feminist theorists’ desires to focus on “womanness” rather than the diversity among women. For Spelman, this leads

to the paradox at the heart of feminism: Any attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about the differences among us, and vice versa. Is it possible to give the things women have in common their full significance without thereby implying that the differences among us are less important? (Spelman 1988, 3)

I believe Ruddick’s project suffers from a similar paradox. While she acknowledges the differences among mothers, these differences are eclipsed by her search for a unified description of “maternal thinking” that will work as a critical tool for her peace politics. Ruddick’s construction of maternal practice around a common set of activities results in descriptions and criteria that reflect the experiences of the dominant (her own) race, ethnicity, and class. Even when Ruddick later abandons her practicalist construction of maternal thinking and accounts for maternal thinking as part of feminist standpoint theory, differences among mothers remain invisible within her governing theory. To translate Spelman’s general conclusion to Ruddick’s specific problem, any attempt to talk about mothering in terms of something *all* mothers have in common undermines attempts to talk about their differences.

The “nearly universal” activities that Ruddick presents as central to maternal work do not allow her to raise or to address questions that emerge from differences among mothers. Ruddick’s failure to address these points invites the following challenges:

Would racial-ethnic mothers describe their interests in meeting children’s demands in Ruddick’s terms? Do Ruddick’s “nearly universal” activities accurately describe or capture the actual work of racial-ethnic mothers? Is the maternal thinking that arises from racial-ethnic mothers’ work the same maternal thinking Ruddick describes? Do the answers to these sorts of questions match or challenge Ruddick’s analysis of maternal thinking? Can the maternal interest in meeting children’s demands be broadly stated to include these women’s experiences? Is it more appropriate to fashion new descriptions that reflect the circumstances of racial-ethnic mothers’ work? Would these mothers define their children’s needs differently? Would they identify more specific, practical, and achievable demands to meet? If an alternative list of demands more accurately captures the circumstances of racial-ethnic mother’s work, then the foundation of Ruddick’s argument—the “nearly universal” features of mothers—becomes a casualty of Spelman’s paradox.

The challenges I’ve just raised question whether Ruddick’s account of the characteristics she finds in these particular practices legitimately generalize to *all* maternal activities—to maternal practice in general. To answer these challenges we need only present a convincing alternative model to Ruddick’s broad characterization of maternal practice, one that speaks to a particular group of mothers.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins’s discussion of “motherwork” provides an excellent instance of theorizing about mothering from a clearly identifiable location. In “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood” (1992) Collins bases her argument on the premise that when no neutral standpoint exists from which to theorize, attention to the locations from which theory is done becomes crucial.⁵

Collins uses the context in which contemporary African American mothering occurs as the location from which to theorize—a location that she believes “promises to shift our thinking about motherhood itself” (Collins 1992, 5). As a result of “shifting the center” and theorizing from an identified location, Collins produces a description of maternal practice that is tangibly distinct from Ruddick’s “nearly universal” version.

Collins’ construction of “motherwork,” based on the lives of particular groups of mothers, generates a different and more specific list of mothering activities than Ruddick’s does. Collins argues that survival, identity, and empowerment “form the bedrock of women of color’s mothering” (Collins 1992, 7).

According to Collins, the physical (and psychological) survival of their children is central to daily activities of these mothers. Unlike the survival of most children born into white middle-class communities, the survival of most racial-ethnic children cannot be taken for granted. Disproportionate rates of infant mortality, poor medical care, crime, and drugs require the daily attention of these mothers.

The second activity of Collins's motherwork is teaching children how to retain their identity in a dominant white culture, without "becoming willing participants in their own subordination" (Collins 1990, 123). Collins's mothers regard self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity as central to their children's well-being (Collins 1992, 21-29). Collins's motherwork means helping one's children develop a meaningful racial identity within a society that devalues their history, work, culture, and customs. Unlike white middle-class children, the children of these mothers must overcome the frequently negative portrayal of their identities by the dominant culture.

Finally, Collins's motherwork is structured by racial-ethnic mothers' struggle over the definition and control of their caring labor, to empower themselves so that they may meet the needs of their own children and their communities. There is a struggle against economic exploitation and usurpation of their labor to meet the needs of the dominant culture for service employees: nannies, hospital aides, housekeepers, cooks, and the like. These mothers' activities also include the struggle to empower themselves to control the choice to become mothers and to be able to retain the children they choose to have.

Collins regards the physical separation of racial-ethnic mothers from children as the "basis of a systematic effort to disempower racial-ethnic communities . . . designed to disempower racial-ethnic individuals" (Collins 1992, 16). In addition to the evidence Collins cites in support of this demand on the work of African American mothers, there is also analogous evidence in the history of institutions such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, social service agencies, welfare departments, and the policies of these agencies, which affect the fates of Native American, Latina, African American, and Asian American children.

Working from a particular, identified location, Collins constructs a model of maternal activity that is significantly different from Ruddick's general account. It is easy to imagine that working from other particular identified locations—such as the experiences of Native American, lesbian, Latina, Asian Americans—would also produce a series of convincing alternative models of maternal activity.

What implications does the construction of a convincing alternative model of maternal activity have for Ruddick and her construction of a feminist peace politics?

Ruddick describes maternal practice as defined by preservative love, nurturing, and social training. Collins describes racial-ethnic motherwork as defined by survival, identity, and empowerment. Ruddick's investigation of maternal practice is fueled by her desire to identify *common* features of mothering useful in the construction of a feminist peace politics. Collins's project, although it implies a response to contemporary feminist writings on motherhood, is primarily an attempt to explore new approaches to theorizing about motherhood by using identified, particular locations.

While both of Ruddick's voices speak in terms of mother's commonalities, Collins speaks about specific mothers working in specific communities. Because Collins's construction of maternal practice begins from a particular location, it is incapable of generating categories as broad as Ruddick's. Casting the maternal definitional net wider from the theoretical location of white middle-class women to cover all women does not make sense. Likewise, casting the maternal net from Collins's specific theoretical location to all women makes no sense. The definitions of survival, identity, and empowerment can not be broadened to include more privileged mothers without losing the contextual perspective that Collins wants to keep by studying racial-ethnic mothers on their own terms.

Are these two views compatible? I argue that we should resist the urge to reconcile them merely for the sake of comprehensiveness. It is tempting to place Collins's narrower claims into Ruddick's broad categories, but doing so disregards the purpose of Collins's project and obliterates the features of racial-ethnic mothering that Collins makes visible. Placing racial-ethnic mothering within more broadly constructed frameworks would allow it to be swallowed up and negated in the vastness of what Susan Bordo calls "the view from everywhere" (Bordo 1989, 20).

Treating survival, identity, and empowerment as variants of Ruddick's protection, nurturing, and training, is to regard the different experiences of racial-ethnic people as though they were evidence for theories that have already been carved out along white middle-class lines.⁶

A variation on this theme is the way some Anglo-American feminists recognize the unique positions of racial-ethnic peoples, but then negate them by using them only as further evidence for their own more general theories about women. Moves toward universalization of women's experience are usually followed by attempts to place the experiences of racial-ethnic women into broad categories for interpretation. Frequently, these categories are based on the experiences of—and/or tailored to the interests of—dominant groups. The categories structure debate and so make it difficult for the authors to free themselves from old definitions or to embrace alternative treatments of identity. This approach often leads to an insulting intellectual "division of labor": white middle-class women come up with the theories, leaving women of color to provide lively narratives and entertaining experiences to support them.

Both racial-ethnic mothers and white mothers may share their anger over the horrors and wastes of their government's preparations for war, but their critiques of dominant/military ways of thinking will be different because of their obviously dissimilar relationships to white men and political power structures. Unlike women of color, white women, as wives and mothers or as secretaries occupy a political "spectator's seat" that gives them a distinct political relationship with white men. White women's "spectator's seat"

accounts, in part, for their lack of attention to the racial aspects of the positions they often critique (Hurtado et al. 1989).

In U.S. society, white middle-class mothers may share more with (white) abstract masculinity/military thinking than Ruddick's analysis leads us to believe. To the extent that white mothers participate in the dominant culture, they benefit from the racial-ethnic hierarchy from which their race as a whole benefits. These privileges do find their way into feminist critiques. Their existence is proof of an overlap between the white middle-class feminist views and white dominant ways of thinking. Even liberal whites, as bell hook notes, "cannot recognize the ways in which their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression they wish to see eradicated" (hooks 1989, 113).

The place of most white women in the dominant culture gives them a distinct outlook that shapes their selection of peace issues and approaches to militarism. What counts as threatening, warlike, or peaceful is often described in ways that do not reflect the concerns of most women of color. Barbara Omolade, for instance, explains how mainstream peace activists frequently, "want people of color to fear what they fear and define peace as they define it, [and] are unmindful that people of color and their lands have already been and are being destroyed as part of the "final solution to the color line" (Omolade 1989, 172). Many women of color have not gotten involved in the mainstream peace movement because, as Zala Chandler argues, "the average African American person does not have the time to worry about the dangers of nuclear war when the mere survival of the African race in the United States is an issue. . . . [I]n too many instances black men, women, and children can be killed at any point, in any place in these United States by either civilians or those in uniforms" (Chandler 1989, 30).

Peace is not just the absence of violence to the white middle class, nor is it simply resistance to nuclear war and war machinery. For many persons of color the holocausts have already started in their neighborhoods and on their streets where the threat of war is indistinguishable from the threats of poverty and institutional violence.⁷

The paradoxes at the heart of mothering, like those at the heart of feminism, are not easily resolved. If maternal practice is to function as a stable foundation for a feminist peace politics it must do more than just consider the differences between maternal practice and military practice. It must also explore the relationship between militarism and race and class privilege. If discussion of maternal practice does not address the variety of relationships different races and classes of mothers have to institutional violence and/or the military, the resulting peace politics can draw only incomplete conclusions about the relationships between maternal thinking and peace.

NOTES

A longer version of this article is forthcoming in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*.

1. Wittgenstein's discussion of "forms of life" can be found in Wittgenstein (1968, sections 19, 23, 241).

2. It is not clear to me what role "truth" plays in Ruddick's discussion of practices. She could have just as easily borrowed Alasdair MacIntyre's definition, which appeals to "standards of excellence" instead of truth in its explanation of practices. What I think Ruddick is trying to establish here is that each practice gives rise to its own particular standards. If what she is really concerned with is a moral evaluation of military practice by maternal practice, it would have been just as easy to speak in terms of maternal practice giving rise to standards of moral or political evaluation rather than "truths." See MacIntyre (1981, 175).

3. I am now fairly certain that Ruddick's distinction between the universal and nearly unchangeable and nearly universal and changeable is made in order to give her three demands nearly universal standing. "Although the view that children require training seems nearly universal, there are marked disagreements among individuals and culture and human nature, moral values, and the extent to which mothers, rather than teachers, priests, fathers or even government officials are responsible for training" (Ruddick 1989, 103).

4. See Petersen (1983, 62-70). bell hooks has argued that emphasis on the maternal is shortsighted because the word "maternal" is too closely tied to women's behavior and men will not identify in ways traditionally seen as feminine. For these reasons, she argues for "parenting" as the proper term for child care work. See also, hooks (1984, 133-47).

5. I am extremely grateful to Patricia Hill Collins for sharing and discussing her unpublished work with me. For clarity and to maintain the distinctions between Ruddick's and Collins's views, I use the term "motherwork" to refer to the maternal labor of racial-ethnic women (described by the themes of survival, power, and identity). I use the term "maternal practice" to refer to the work of the mothers Ruddick describes, whom I take to be primarily white women.

6. Zinn and her colleagues (1986) identify a number of problematic approaches to race and class in the writings of white middle-class feminists working in the social sciences. Ruddick's description of maternal practice has elements of Zinn's first and third categories. The first problem, what Elizabeth Spelman and others call the "additive" approach, argues that once the essential woman is identified, one can account for diversity by giving her a little color and adjusting (fine-tuning) her economic status accordingly. This additive approach can never give us an accurate picture of all women because it theorizes about all women from the same location. Politically, additive approaches typically establish a common feminist agenda and describe variations on that agenda as "special interests." As a result, female subordination is treated as the unifying and universal enemy of women. Racial and economic issues are treated as secondary. Ruddick's approach also focuses descriptively on the aspects of life, values, customs, and problems of women in subordinate races and classes, but fails to follow through. After describing differences, it fails to explain the sources of real and perceived differences or to explore the challenges these differences present to the initial set of beliefs.

7. See Brown (1981). It is also worth noting that for some nuclear war is not a distant threat. For the people of the Western Shoshone Nation whose ancestral lands have been used by the U.S. government since the 1940s for nuclear testing the war has already begun.

Historically, the Shoshone Nation is the most bombed nation on earth. See *For Mother Earth Newsletter*, no. 5 (August 1992). Published by American Peace Test, P.O. Box 26725, Las Vegas, Nevada 89126.

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Book Reviews

Rocking the Ship of State: Toward a Feminist Peace Politics. Ed. Adrienne Harris and Ynestra King. Boulder: Westview Press, 1989.

Exposing Nuclear Phallacies. Ed. Diana E. H. Russell. New York: Pergamon Press, 1989.

Lori Gruen

For weeks after I first saw *Terminator 2* I was troubled by a paradox in the thoughts and behaviors of one of the lead characters. Sara Conner was portrayed as an extremely angry and violent woman whose extremity was driven by her love for her son, for humanity, and her desire to avert even more violence and nuclear annihilation. The paradox of her loving choice to use incredible violence was particularly apparent in a sequence of scenes which begins with a dream Sara has in which an earlier incarnation of herself and her child are peacefully playing in the park while she desperately tries to warn them of the impending destruction. She is unsuccessful, the nuclear blast hits, and when she awakens from this dream (which she has had many times), she grabs as many weapons as she can carry and heads off to assassinate the person (a black man) who will eventually build the machines that will take over the planet and destroy humans with their own nuclear weapons. Despite the flurry of automatic weapon fire, she misses, and barges into the house to shoot him at point-blank range. She is about to kill him in front of his wife and child, when she suddenly stops and begins to cry.

Although this paradox, best described by Audre Lorde in another context as the problem of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, is submerged beneath the spectacle of expensive special effects, it nonetheless raises some interesting questions about women, peace, and nuclear war. Can violent means bring about peaceful ends? Do women have a special obligation to stop nuclear war? Are women inherently more opposed to violence than men? As Adrienne Harris asks in "Bringing Artemis to Life: A Plea for Militance and Aggression in Feminist Peace Politics," her contribution to *Rocking the Ship of State*, the collection she edited with Ynestra King, "Does the opposition of peaceful woman and war-making man solidify rather than

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