

## I. Introduction: The Invisibility and Marginality of Motherwork

My name is Roksana Badruddoja. I am a Bangladeshi-American woman, a queer mother to a precocious 12-year-old girl who is negotiating her “brownness” at school, and a professor of sociology and women’s and gender studies.

I speak/write to you today “worn out.” And, I also speak/write with great pain and urgency fueled by restricting definitions of motherhood – and womanhood - that I did not create (that we did not create).

Almost twelve years ago, I made a decision to become pregnant. I made a choice. And, I did so without quite understanding the unschooling that is deeply needed around our cultural imaginations of both motherhood and womanhood in this country.

However, the on-set of a high-risk pregnancy seven weeks into the first trimester changed my notions of what it means to be a woman, a pregnant woman, and a mother; my unschooling from the fantasy of normative motherhood as a shared middle class experience began at a potentially life-threatening risk to the fetus that resided within me!

In this talk, entitled “The Fantasy of Normative Motherhood & The Invisibility and Marginality of Motherwork,” I share with you an auto-ethnographic account about womanhood and motherhood - socially-constructed discourses that excise the messiness of both - and the essentialized and falsely conflated relationship between the two.

I do so from two perspectives, one from my body – raced, classed, sexed, gendered, and cultured - and one from the body of the American nation-state – also raced, classed, sexed, gendered, and cultured. Indeed, both perspectives are intertwined through intersectionality à la Patricia Hill Collins (2000).

My self-narrative is intensely embedded in the notion of being “worn out,” doing “motherwork in the age of austerity”.

What I hope to demonstrate in this talk today is that the conflation between womanhood and motherhood, including the notion of maternal ideology, has allowed mothers – an identity distinct from the category woman - to become a marginalized and invisible category and engage in motherwork in cruel and austere temporal-spatial locations, often at high physical, psychological, and economic costs.

The question then is not why those of us who engage in motherwork are “worn out”. Rather, the question is, why would we not be “worn out” by engaging in motherwork?

## II. The Fantasy of Normative Motherhood

I begin my story by arriving to my late-20s and I found myself at the doorsteps of the fantasy of normative motherhood.

I inhabited an ideal-typical life as part of the South Asian-American landscape.

I was married – to a man, and he was employed. We purchased a home in an affluent Jersey suburb. We were healthy, we made our monthly mortgage payments and paid our annual taxes on time, we were over-educated with multiple graduate degrees, and we did not extend our “Othered” religious and cultural practices outside of our private spaces.

For a moment, I believed that I had completed my mission as a Bangladeshi-American woman. What else was there left to do?

But, in fact, not only was I *explicitly* demanded to maintain patriarchy from within a heterosexual matrix, but I was also *implicitly* required to extend male privilege, white privilege, and capitalism or what I call the “holy trinity.”

I would be expected to so because my body is sexed, gendered, raced, classed in particular ways that fulfill the myth of the model-minority: I am a young, healthy, over-educated, and upper-middle class South Asian-American woman.

An intersectional status much different from the pregnant, single women of color who were used as a platform to have politicized debates about the national HIV health crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and how we, as a nation, should respond (see Zivi 2005).

Here, as I begin to think through what seemed to feel like an insatiable desire to participate in the process of procreating – conceiving and being pregnant, delivering a baby, becoming and being a mother, and engaging in motherhood through motherwork, I have become astutely cognizant that perhaps my “uncontrollable urge” had little to do with *my* biology but more so to do with the biology of a social system informed by patriarchy, paternalism, and misogyny; white privilege and racism; and predatory corporate capitalism and class.

In other words, my decision to become pregnant, carry my pregnancy to term, give birth, and raise the child from the birth were framed by essentialized definitions of what it means to be a woman in America – a “real” woman, a “good” woman, informed by the patriarchal notion of symbolic immortality à la Rousseau.

As I was approaching my thirties, I set out to search for my “biological clock.” While I was unable to uncover any “ticking,” I, nevertheless, announced to my then partner that I was ready to become pregnant, even though I was fully aware that one of the implications of a pregnancy is giving birth to a human being whom I would be fully responsible for in a multitude of ways.

My partner responded, “I knew you would come around. *All women*, at some point in their lives, want to have children. *It's natural.*”

The conflation between womanhood and motherhood coated with the stickiness of morality is clear here. Over a decade later, his words haunt me still.

I begin to suggest here that “maternal instinct” is a conceptual tool constructed in order to create and extend compulsive hetero-patriarchy and maintain ideal American citizenship and nationalism. Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) is pertinent as she argues that woman's role in society is seen as a vehicle for cultural (re-)production.

Yegenoglu helps me to re-experience a bitter memory: I am reminded of popular educational resources for expectant mothers, resources that imagined for me what I should want and feel as I become a mother.

And, the fantasy of normative motherhood, which is informed by race and class, taught me a language system for evaluating both my successes and failures as a mother and also as a woman (Lusztig 2013).

My high-risk pregnancy was accompanied by physical and psychological debilitations that impacted my work, my relationship with my partner and immediate family, and my psychological and physical selves.

Plainly, I was receiving conflicting messages, one from my body and mind and the other from popular cultural imaginations informed by the medical industry. The medical industry has successfully excised the messiness of pregnancy and birth, producing a sanitized version of motherhood (Lusztig 2013).

Barbara Katz Rothman (1990) is apt here as she points out in *Recreating Motherhood* that the complex process of human reproduction – which includes mothers, fathers, and children – has been reduced to a controlled clinical/medical event. Laura Tropp (2013) provides us with further insight as she describes in *A Womb With A View* how pregnancy moves from the hospital

into the public, only to produce branding and marketing of pregnant women. The gender-revealing parties - where the bakers are informed first - are a case-in-point.

I received the party line story of pregnancy, birthing, and motherhood! However, my body and mind were signaling to me otherwise. My lived experiences were uncomfortable and simply scary.

A question that begs to be asked then is, what was I feeling during my pregnancy?

*I wanted out!* I wanted to rip my belly apart and take her out.

It seemed to me at times that she was directly looking at me with big hollow eyes through the imaging screen, calling out at me, "Mama, it's me. Don't you recognize me?" I looked away every single time.

I felt no positive emotions when I saw her legs trying to push through the taut skin on my oval-shaped, scarred belly, trying to kick. Rather, it scared me à la Sigourney Weaver's *Alien* (1979).

In opposition to how pregnancy was imagined for me by *What To Expect When You Are Expecting*, I felt empty and alone.

I requested an intervention: a termination of my pregnancy. However, my OB/GYN persuaded me to continue forward.

Indeed, I became a reproductive threat and then an object of reform (Lusztig 2013). A common cross-cultural imagination of women.

Joane Nagel (2003) concisely reminds me here that a woman's body is required to pass down traditions to subsequent generations in order to shape ideas and feelings about race, ethnicity, and the nation.

My gendered, sexed, classed, cultured, and racialized body was controlled to extend Bourdieuan cultural capital, one that maintains the boundaries of the nation-state. While, as Zivi points out, the reproduction of “welfare moms” and mothers who are HIV-positive or infected with AIDS are often (state-) controlled in opposing ways for the very same purpose of upholding American nationalism.

In other words, I argue that race, ethnicity, class, gender, culture, citizenship, and nationalism collide in one instantaneous moment – the point of conception!

### III. Contesting Maternal Instinct & The Good/Bad Mother Continuum

Eight months later, it came time to deliver a premature but healthy baby girl.

It was not until I touched my four and a half pound daughter - the warmth of her extraordinarily flushed petite face against my sweaty cheeks and her tiny salty and slimy fingers in my feverishly hot mouth - that I felt tender emotions for her; it was *love*.

However, motherhood sanitized informed my coming experiences as far less than sweet. Hours after giving birth, I was unsure whether I wanted to nurse her.

I was uncomfortable with the idea. Perhaps I wanted to protect my own selfish desires and insecurities around my body. And/or perhaps it was a function of my own fears about my sexuality.

I posed yet another obstacle towards helping her towards subsistence. What was wrong with me? What kind of human being was I? What kind of mother was I? What kinds of woman was I?

Clearly, my experiences with my pregnancy have had a profound impact on me, forcing me to re-think what it means to be a human, a woman, and a mother. I am not sure that I will

ever be able to reconcile my pendulum-like feelings, and what I was left with was an unanswered question: what does it mean to be a “good” mother?

I have come to realize that I have been asking the wrong question!

The question is deeply problematic because it assumes the task of being a mother as an independent and isolated positionality and that the responsibility of mothering lays on one person alone, that of the woman.

I have serious trepidations with the good/bad mother continuum because it does not reflect the realities of most women's lives and it fails to recognize the vastness of mothering practices in the United States.

Zivi argues through the good/bad mother continuum, multiple mothering narratives were invoked in the debates for both support of and opposition to mandatory HIV testing. The Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency Act of 1996 represented support while Rebecca Denison's congressional testimony in 1998 was in opposition.

I am highly skeptical of State control of women's bodies, but both camps invoked maternal ideology (good mother versus bad mother) to argue the same discourse: to ignore or not have maternal instincts undermines the bond between mothers and infants and that in turn threatens the very fabric of community.

But Karen Zivi (2005) shows us to presume that good childcare is the natural outcome of instinct, first, renders women as wholly responsible for the care and well-being of their children, and, second, it erases the practice of mothering from social and historical obstacles that constrain it, like poverty, racism, and affordable health care.

Unmistakably, the assumption here is that mothers alone are responsible for their children, and it is through the portal of mothering that the regulation of women's bodies is justified.

It is no wonder that we are worn out, doing motherwork in the age of austerity!

While I am deeply indebted to those who have helped me to allow my daughter to survive, what my story begins to suggest is the very elasticity and compelling nature of motherwork.

Collins reminds us that the range of women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many women feel about mothering reflect motherhood's contradictory nature.

My narrative highlights the maternal ideology - the selfless mother - invoked and deployed to regulate and constrain women's bodies, and my oppositional narrative of motherhood requires contesting dominant ways of thinking about motherhood and dislodging the unthinkable.

My story indeed is about being defeated, lost, and struggling while simultaneously celebrating, triumphing, and transforming. In the midst of being both defeated and triumphant, Collins urges me to think about "the personal meaning of mothering," that motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal costs, including economic ones.

#### IV. The Economics of Motherwork

While much has changed in the ways in which we are beginning to understand gender roles in parenting, including new masculinities and contemporary forms of fatherwork, the economic landscape of motherwork has not changed.

Conventional wisdom shows us that even the most ambitious women scale back at work to spend more time on childcare. But it is not necessarily true for all women. A recent study

found that women in business overwhelmingly want high-achieving careers even after they start families.

The problem is mismatched expectations between what they hope to achieve in their careers and family lives and what actually happens, both at work and at home.

Men generally expect that their careers will take precedence over their spouses' careers and that their spouses will handle more of the childcare. And for the most part, men's expectations are exceeded. Meanwhile, women expect that their careers will be as important as their spouses' and that they will share childcare equally — but, in general, neither happens.

Compounding the issue, Joya Misra (2015) finds childless women's earnings have been converging with childless men's earnings over the last several decades. Yet, mothers' and fathers' earnings have not.

Here, working moms earn much less than others with the same skills and experience (while dads earn slightly more). And employers discriminate against women whose résumés indicate that they are mothers, while they offer higher wages to men whose résumés indicate that they are fathers.

We are indeed exhausted. The American system of long hours on the job and scant provisions for public welfare makes the challenges of motherwork all the more acute.

This scenario is coupled with my memory of the United Parcel Service (UPS) pregnancy discrimination case argued this past December.

UPS offered accommodations to three categories of employees: those injured on the job; those with conditions recognized as disabilities under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA); and those who for a variety of reasons, often health-related, lost their commercial driver's certification.

Since pregnancy fits none of these categories, UPS refused to offer temporary light duty to one of the drivers, Peggy Young.

Young was instructed by her obstetrician not to lift more than 20 pounds during her pregnancy. Young went on unpaid leave and launched a lawsuit against UPS. I believe many of us would indeed claim that the UPS non-accommodation policy violated the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978. My point is that we live in an environment in which many women face motherhood and pregnancy discrimination.

What I offer here is that we live in unresolved historical and contemporary moments suspended between two ideas: birth is both natural and pathological as argued in *The Motherhood Archives* by Irene Lusztig.

The question remains then, what can be done to turn things around? What are the solutions to "I am so tired"?

#### V. Solutions to "I am so tired"

The practice of motherhood and the labor of care, the emotional work involved in mothering as a result of the intensive care-work that takes place is ignored.

Collins (1994) describes the invisibility of "motherwork" as the unacknowledged labor that mothers do, including care-work. Ann Crittenden (2010) writes, "Many childless women under the age of thirty five believe that all the feminist battles have been won..." but "...once a woman has a baby, the egalitarian office party is over" (88). And Andrea O'Reilly (2014) argues, "women's studies has not...recognized or embraced a feminism developed from the specific needs/concerns of mothers...mothers, arguably more so than women in general, remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism."

Clearly, there remains an absence of productive language that can be mapped on to

motherwork that does not excise the messiness.

The language system of evaluating our success rests on our morality, that we are the moral guardians of the human race and the fate of humanity is up to us (Lusztig 2013). I find this language unproductive and simply unacceptable; maternal ideology is untenable!

We must make mothering important by exploring the lived, everyday experiences of motherwork - from maternal well-being and mental health to parenting strategies to family relationships - and the ways in which it is perceived by women as they labor.

How do we begin to do this? How do we make mothers precious and motherwork important?

The narrative I share with you provides a space in which we must begin to critically argue that those who engage in motherwork need a feminist movement, a theory of our own, a language of our own.

O'Reilly gives us hope here. She states, "we need a feminism - in both theory and practice - specifically for mothers" or "matricentric feminism".

And this includes Sara Ruddick's (1995) "maternal practice", where the term "mothers" is not limited to biological mothers but, rather, refers to anyone who engages in motherwork.

O'Reilly is clear. She argues that feminist theory and women's studies have grown and developed as a scholarly field, it has incorporated various and diverse theoretical models to represent the specific perspectives and concerns of particular groups of women from global feminism to queer feminism to third wave feminism to womanism.

However, feminist theory and women's studies have not recognized and embraced a feminism developed from the specific needs or concerns of mothers.

In similar vein, Collins criticizes white feminists for only challenging the views of white male scholars' depiction of motherhood from a white perspective, which did nothing for Black women and other women of color.

O'Reilly's notion of "matricentric feminism" or mother-centered feminism allows us to imagine the notion of "feminist mamas." O'Reilly writes, "what needs to be emphasized is a feminism that positions the needs and concerns of mothers as the starting point in theory and activism on and for women's empowerment."

To be clear, O'Reilly is not suggesting that matricentric feminism should replace traditional feminist thought. Rather, in challenging gender essentialism, O'Reilly reminds us that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman.

Following in O'Reilly footsteps, Martha Joy Rose (2014) – the founder of the Museum Of Motherhood (M.O.M.) - calls for a "sociology of motherhood" or "mother studies". Rose argues, "There is currently no organized area of study in the academy that explores the 'Sociology of Motherhood,' or an intellectual interdisciplinary exploration of motherhood, fatherhood, and family."

A dire state of affairs indeed!

This alternative cultural imagination of motherhood, I would vehemently argue, must include a centering of Collins' notion of "othermothers".

Othermothering is a woman-centered and class-sensitive way of doing motherwork and understanding the family. It is beyond the traditional feminist call for taking control from the oppressor.

I do believe it is imperative that we develop an ideology that supports shared responsibilities of childcare given the narrative I have shared with you today. The social and

economic realities of women's lives calls for community based childcare, an arrangement that is different from the white family ideal. Such a creative form of family that Collins offers us will help us to both challenge and negotiate the oppression we experience in our motherwork.

We simply cannot afford to continue to do motherwork in the age of austerity because as Collins points out, motherhood can serve as a site where women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting themselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in women's empowerment.

If we are able to shift feminism to include matricentric feminism and begin to work towards establishing this feminism as part of academia, the field of "mother studies," then I believe we can begin to reimagine and recreate motherhood and make motherwork count as irreplaceable and precious.

We can begin to reconceive motherhood, and reconceive we must if we are to restore motherwork to its proper status!