

# Mothering Mythology in the Late Twentieth Century

## Science, Gender Lore, and Celebratory Narrative

BY PAMELA COURTENAY HALL

*Cet article explore le mythe de "la mère naturelle" comme un exemple de la mythologie maternante qui prévaut en cette fin de siècle dans la culture nord-américaine.*

### Introduction: the myth of the natural mother

"The myth of the natural mother" as it has developed in western cultures is not a myth in any simple sense. It is a complex and heterogeneous array of beliefs, stories, images, and perceptions connected to an equally heterogeneous array of mothering practices, social institutions, knowledge projects, and ideologies. The myth involves the representation of mothering as natural to women, essential to their being, an engagement of love and instinct that is utterly distant from the world of paid work and formal education.

It is a myth that I think most people in advanced industrial societies would not admit to believing—certainly not wholesale. And yet features of the myth are all around us. They percolate through most mother's experiences of mothering. They often cast agonizing shadows into many women's decisions not to have children. And they serve as an implicit justification for the staggering lack of publicly-funded parenting support and education that still characterizes most western industrialized societies.

The myth of the natural mother is never told as a single story. It is communicated in shades and pieces, and it is a gradual, multi-stage, multimedia phenomenon. Threads of the myth are interwoven into literature, art, film, advertising, and of course, daily life, where it is encapsulated most tellingly in that magical incan-

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tation, "Mommy will make it better." Features of the myth are particularly prevalent in children's stories where mothers are seen taking care of children as naturally as birds fly. The recent inclusion of fathers in the scene hasn't changed the fundamental message.<sup>1</sup>

At its core, the myth of the natural mother involves the belief that women are *naturally* mothers—they are born with a built-in set of capacities, dispositions, and desires to nurture children; hence, mothering comes *naturally* to women. Accordingly, mothering is assumed to have the following characteristics: First, mothering is believed to be instinctive, not learned. The most important dimensions of mothering thus require attunedness to instinct rather than education. Mothering is also considered to be primarily an engagement of love, not work. More precisely, it is presumed that the work of mothering primarily involves love (thought of as an unsocialized emotion), dedication and intuitive understanding

more than it involves labour, skill, and knowledge in the economically and scientifically significant sense of these things. Another key assumption about the work of mothering is that it primarily involves instrumental activity rather than interpretive activity. In other words, children's emotional and physiological needs are a pre-given objective reality to which the mother can respond well or badly in ways readily assessable by outside observers.<sup>2</sup> (This feature of the myth can come into tension with the idea that mothering is instinctive, if instinctiveness is taken to entail that mothers know their children's needs better than others can know them. But the range of this idea of maternal epistemic authority is often limited to knowing when the baby is hungry and predicting diaper changes.)

Mothering is also considered to be primarily an individual engagement between mother and child rather than a largely social one. In other words, mothering is carried out primarily in private space; the mother and child are most fundamentally a single interactive dyad, only secondarily involved in interpersonal networks located in socio-cultural space.

A related feature of the myth is the belief that mothering is about bonding. A mother's "bonding" with her child from the moment of birth is seen as crucial to the child's well-being in infancy and later in life. Bonding is perceived to happen most deeply with one person, which should be the mother, and to happen most effectively through breastfeeding (or at any rate, through full-time, 24-hours-a-day care).

Lastly, mothering is considered essential for women. Mothering is

thought to be the fulfillment of maternal drives or dispositions that are deeply (biologically) a part of all women's natures (and not, or not as fully, a part of men's).

The problematic nature of these beliefs has been well-explored in feminist literature, including their historical origin in capitalist patriarchy; the gender, class, race, culture, and ability bias of the picture of mothering that they enforce; the essentialism involved in the arguments associated with these beliefs; their replication patterns; their impact on women's lives; their contribution to the persistence of sexist, heterosexist, classist, racist, able-ist structures in western societies. (See e.g. Everingham; Johnson; Nakano Glen *et al.*; Rich; Rothman; Thurer).

Yet despite these problems and despite the growing social support for mothers in the workplace, the myth of the natural mother persists. In this article, I begin with the question, "Why call it myth?" and try to uncover some of the epistemological features that have enabled this myth to persist into the late twentieth century.

My own perspective on motherhood is influenced by my experiences embracing the myth of the natural mother for my first several years as a mother despite strong tensions between this myth I had absorbed and the facts of my maternal heritage. My mother, Mary (Rozich) Courtenay, had returned to work as a secretary in the mid-1950s against a swell of criticism from the people around her. But she had seen her family's welfare threatened by frequent lay-offs and strikes at the automobile factory where my father worked, and she was determined to do what she knew was best for her children, both materially and by her example. Her own mother, my grandmother, Katerina (Karabogden) Rozich, was a Croatian peasant who missed only one day as a farm labourer to birth her first baby, after which she worked every day in the fields with her baby swaddled beside her.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these women could afford the intensive, infinitely en-

gaged nuclear mothering that patriarchal science and back-to-nature romanticism have recommended in this century. It took me some time to discover that neither could I. And yet I still feel its tug ... to which I respond with thoughts on privilege, sharing, social parenting, and cherishing. These are still in progress.

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#### Why "myth"?

Feminists have been deconstructing beliefs about mothering for decades using the handy epistemological category of "myth," and for good reason. "Myth" means more than "false belief," and more than "ideology," though it includes both of these within its layered array of meanings. And this is just what is needed to describe the depth, the hold, the complexity, and the problematic nature of what goes on in the myth of the natural mother. In at least some of its various forms, it is a myth in the richest sense of the term. It is "a symbolic text which presents a *story* which in turn transmits values, norms and patterns essential and fundamental for a given culture" (Mach 58; emphasis added).

The myth of the natural mother does not consist of any one particular text nor any one particular story; rather, it takes shape in a host of them. But it functions in a way that illustrates what Barthes has identified as "the very principle of myth: *it*

*transforms history into nature*" (1972 129; emphasis added). It transmits a set of norms whose origin has become lost in the myth's pre-history. The norms thus come to be seen as "natural" rather than constructed by historical circumstances.

#### The phenomenon of gender lore

Such mystification of authority is typical in the proliferation of myths. But it is amplified in the case of natural mothering, as in contemporary western "gender lore" generally, by its mode of popular transmission: the vague remembering of references to scientific studies uncritically read and namelessly called in as authoritative (discussed in Robeck). Here is a mothering-focused example: "I read this study somewhere, I don't remember where, that said that babies who are breastfed are more secure in their social relationships later in life than babies who aren't."

A quintessential example of gender lore I have encountered in my own teaching and research is this: "I read a study somewhere, I can't recall the source, that said the part of the brain where the emotions are is more developed in women than in men." Claims of this sort are key to the production, dissemination, and resilience of essentialist thinking about mothering and about gender roles generally.

I think that what is really going on in the phenomenon of gender lore is a casual but nevertheless ritual dance. Widespread enculturation processes—in the home, in schooling, in literature, in television, in film, music, and art—antecedently make many people believe and want to believe that the gender differences which surround and constitute them are innate, and that the sexist structures they have grown up with are okay. But another strand of western enculturation—respect for the authority of western science—makes us want to have scientific evidence for the things that we believe. Hence the impetus to make reference to scientific studies to sanction our beliefs ... however fleeting, vague, and unin-

formed the references may be.<sup>4</sup> Gender loring can thus be interpreted as a form of ritual devotion to myth, even though it is not recognized as such in the cultures where it is practised (that is, in scientific patriarchal western cultures).

But this “gender loring” is only the tip of the iceberg of the epistemological problems that lie within the myth of the natural mother: the body of scientific knowledge it so vaguely draws upon is itself formed and hardened around concealed gender biases. The creators of the various knowledge discourses that inform the myth of natural mothering have engaged in tremendously gender-biased research. For decades (and in many cases still today), child-care experts systematically ignored, devalued, and silenced the voices and knowledge of the people most centrally engaged in the phenomenon they were studying—mothers! (Margolis). For an even longer span of western history and also continuing today, sociobiologists and their precursors have uncritically sought justification for sex roles and gender hierarchies in human patterns unwittingly projected onto primate societies then reflected back into the notes of ethnologists (Tester). This is dominant culture become ethnological discovery become ethnological discovery.

Yet another ongoing effort within science which contributes to gender entrenchment: many brain research scientists have uncritically sought interconnections between sex hormones and brain development without attending to questions of directionality of causation (i.e., are female humans *born with* brains that are significantly different from male humans, or are such statistical gender differences in brain morphology—if genuine—the *result* of years of differential training and habituation, hence differential growth? And where prenatal, are such differences genuinely related to significant differences in functional capacity later in life, beyond the sex-specific capacities of procreation and breast-feeding?). The discourse of brain-sex

research seems also to be strikingly silent about related problems in phrenological escapades of the past (Rooney; Longino; Hankinson Nelson, etc.)

As a result of its problematic “knowledge” basis, the discourse of natural mothering also qualifies as “myth” in the thinnest sense of the

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term. It contains stories that need to be questioned, stories whose lack of questioning has harmful consequences in two areas: it hinders informed ethical evaluation of social policies affecting women, children, families, daycares and schools; it leads to alienation, frustration, co-optation, or unwitting diversion in many women’s lives.

Finally, the discourse of natural mothering is myth-like also in the sense that it inspires many mothers to endure hardships and accomplish goals that would be difficult to achieve without such inspiration. Yet the obstacles and tasks that mothers face would be less imposing if the myth were not so strongly in place to begin with, both in their lives and in their societies. Such flickering empowerment/disempowerment may well be a distinctive feature of feminine calls to heroism in patriarchal myths.

#### **Myth as celebratory narrative**

I considered using the term “ideol-

ogy” in place of “myth” to refer to the complex of beliefs, stories, and images that revolve around mothering as natural. But I think that “myth” is a more adequate and accurate term. It is a richer concept, and I think it accomplishes something that “ideology” doesn’t readily seem to. “Myth” suggests that natural mothering operates most deeply at the level of celebratory narrative—of stories passed on in celebration of traditions whose meaning and significance may be larger than life, but remain nevertheless inchoate, not understood, not spoken. The term “ideology” also suggests such subliminal or subterranean levels of influence and communication, but it does so without the full-bodied storiedness of “myth,” and without the strong suggestion that what is passed on is culturally invested with the spirit of celebration (however ambiguous attitudes to mothering may be; however materially unsupported women’s efforts at mothering may be).

These features of storiedness and celebration are crucial to understanding why the myth of the natural mother is still around. From storybooks to magazine ads, portrayals of mothering communicate to girls and young women that this is your purpose, this is your call to significance, this is what will make your life complete, and it will all come as naturally as falling in love. These messages aren’t conveyed by direct means. They are carried by stories and images that capture a child’s imagination and connect with all the other pieces she has picked up about the role of mothering in her life and society. Whether her response will be to embrace the myth or to reject it will depend upon many factors in her life, including class, culture, and family circumstances. But it is hard to live in a western industrialized society without having been touched by this myth in some way.

#### **Getting beyond the myth**

Despite decades of challenges, the myth of the natural mother contin-

ues to be reflected in Canadian and American social and economic institutions, including wage standards, evaluations of economic productivity, education policy, taxation and insurance policies, divorce settlements, and reproductive technology regulation (or the lack thereof) (Griffith and Smith; Johnson; Katz Rothman, etc.). It is most blatantly present in the lack of public funding

first of all issues of bodily, family or cultural survival (Collins; Nakano Glenn *et al.*; Wong). This is particularly so for many women living in poverty; for many indigenous women, including those whose mothering traditions were violently interrupted by residential schooling (Ing); for many women of minority races and cultures living with racism; for many immigrant women coping with cul-

in these directions, because the white middle-class ideology of mothering as women's obligatory full-time biologically ordained role and source of fulfillment (performed in the context of a happy home and securely employed husband) remains a strong though now often subterranean contributor to the forces that keep child care facilities out of workplaces, public funding out of early childhood education, parenting education out of the schools, and most people in western societies out of communally and socially engaged forms of parenting.

But this doesn't mean that we have to burn every thread of the myth of the natural mother as an utterly worthless and pernicious legacy. Because on a suitably complex understanding of love, of individual, of bonding and of instinct, mothering as widely cross-culturally and historically experienced *is* about love and bonding between individual mothers and children in ways that are not simply learned, and in ways that run deeper for being lifelong, for being intimate in number, and for being outside the reign of institutional structures. Plato's vision in *The Republic* of state-run, anonymous parenting is a vision that should be resisted. Nevertheless, we do need to get beyond the myth of the natural mother far enough that our hidden cultural messages about mothering neither communicate the idea that mothering is essential for women nor obscure the fact that mothering is very much about work, very much in need of social support, and centrally about contributing to there being children and young adults in the world, now and in the future—a staggeringly important thing once you stop to imagine a society without young people.

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*Pamela Courtenay Hall and son, Matthew. Photo: Alice Hall*

for child care, in the persistence of nuclear over social or communal conceptions of parenting, in the persistence of the property model of what it is to "have" a child, in the guilt or worry or regret that many mothers of young children feel over having to work, in the pressures felt by many "stay-at-home" mothers to refrain from seeking outside employment while their children are young. Stay-at-home mothering is an institution created by the combined forces of capitalism and patriarchy, sustained by the myth, and funded by class and race subordination. But for anyone locked in the myth's embrace, these problems are hard to see.

Yet they are important to see. The myth of the natural mother involves a dominant culture set of discourses that revolve around issues of personal fulfillment for women ... while for many women, mothering issues are

tural transition (Shu); for many women living with disability; for many lesbian women dealing with homophobia; for many women living with abusive partners or lack of child support, etc. The personal fulfillment discourse needs to reckon with these social realities, as with the fact that a million and a half Canadian children live in poverty—that's one in every five children under the age of 18, the highest level of child poverty in Canada since the Depression of the 1930s (Callwood).

We need to work towards the redirection of material, financial, and social resources to families in need, and towards the structural and communal socializing of parenting, so that the welfare of children and the support structures for parenting are no longer restricted along nuclear family lines. The de-centring of mothering discourses is crucial to progress

script entitled "The Greening of the Myth of the Natural Mothers." *She is the mother of two young children, Matthew and Stefan.*

<sup>1</sup>The inclusion of fathers is certainly a good thing, but about this, two things need saying. First, it is important that the increased focus on active fathering not translate into greater energy for compulsory heterosexism and for the devaluation of single mothering and shared lesbian mothering. How to deal with this problem? By including not only fathers in the expanded stories that are told about "mothering," but partners of both genders and of all kinds of relations, including kin and social parenting. Second, as active fathering gains more press and more practitioners, it is important that we ask, what myths about fathering are coming into being? And what impact are they likely to have on children, on fathers, on mothers, *et al.*, and on social structures?

<sup>2</sup>Mothering as interpretative activity is the central focus of Everingham.

<sup>3</sup>There is a growing literature on motherhood in marginalized and oppressed groups. The conditions under which African women lived during slavery reflect some of the cruellest conditions imaginable for mothering (Shaw). These histories are important to tell and to reckon with. They also constitute important points from which to critique dominant-culture practices and institutions.

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps "gender loring" is not the best term for this: it would be helpful to have a term that makes (fleeting) reference to science.

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