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### **maternal encounters: the ethics of interruption**

Lisa Baraitser, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, 185pp.,  
ISBN 978-0-415-45501-5, £14.95

Motherhood is a profound and distinctive experience. Those who have been through it try not to say too much, but wait for friends, daughters, sisters to 'join the club'. New grandmothers talk about their daughters 'coming into focus' again. New mothers talk about a new more intense 'being in the world'. Yet theoretical accounts of motherhood tell us strangely little about maternal experience. In fact the mother herself is elusive, abstracted and eclipsed by powerful conceptualisations of mother–baby, nature–culture and intersubjectivity. In *Maternal Encounters*, Lisa Baraitser seeks to provide a theoretical account of the maternal that centres the mother. She explains:

Instead of borrowing from the mother metaphorically to help us to understand something of our relations to others ... I want to return to the mother-child relationship itself to probe the complexity of a specifically maternal ethics as less to do with an unstinting commitment or caring attentiveness towards another, and more to do with the way that otherness is always at work, structuring, infecting and prompting human subjectivity. This implies understanding not only the ways that otherness figures in the developmental trajectory of the child, but also crucially in a mother's own developmental process too. This would go some way towards recuperating something for a mother out of her often bewildering encounter with a child, which could then be used to shore up the notion of a specifically maternal subjectivity. (p. 28)

The chapters of the book take the form of a series of meditations on different dimensions of maternal subjectivity: alterity, transformations, interruptions, love, and stuff. The chapters are like jazz improvisations. They begin with familiar refrains – concrete fragments from the life of a mother that are immediately recognisable: naming and being named by a child, witnessing a tantrum, being moved to tears by seeing your child asleep or on stage; finding oneself without enough hands to hold baby, and toddler and fold the buggy. The reader is then taken into exploratory territory, and familiar maternal practices are illuminated through the work of an 'eclectic' crew of theoretical 'protagonists' including Kristeva, Clement, Irigaray, Benjamin, Butler, Levinas, Badiou, Applebaum, Laplanche, Neu, Latour and Scarry. In true jazz style, Baraitser brings us back down to earth with humour and humility, reminding us of the familiar ditties, which no longer seem so simple.

I was particularly engaged by two chapters, which in different ways capture the extraordinary and ephemeral character of maternal subjectivity. In Chapter 4, *Maternal Interruptions*, Baraitser uses the words of her stuttering child to animate the temporality of mothering. Drawing on David Applebaum's idea of

'The Stop' and Catherine Clement's work on 'syncope' she helps us to recognise within mothering a proliferation of the kind of experience from which 'newness' can emerge. In Chapter 5, *Maternal Stuff*, Baraitser switches her focus to spatiality. Here, we are invited to think of the encumbered maternal body, weighed down with bottles, bags and buggies, yet connected through these objects to the wider environment and the ethical imaginations of those others who design curbs, teats and toys. Object relations are revisited audaciously through Latour's actor-network theory, Heidegger's 'tool-being' and Elaine Scarry's idea of the ethical object. The result is a vision of the mother as enriched by her burden, brought into 'a new kinetic experience' in which she 'experiences her own viscosity' and 'internal sentience ... through an encounter with objects, be they artefacts, the tool being of motherhood or the mundane street furniture she stumbles on' (p. 150).

There is something defiantly feminist about this book. Baraitser is attentive to the mother as a subject in her own right, determined to keep her in view, convinced that she is involved in something creative and exciting. Her maternal subject is not determined by ideas of lack or intergenerational desire, but is a much more creative creature; desirous, distracted and made anew by the intense and incessant experience of mothering. The version of the maternal that Baraitser promotes is phenomenological, and she encourages us to glimpse insight, foregrounding immediacy, with meaning established retro-actively.

*Maternal Encounters* is an exciting book and I hope that it finds a broad audience: it is feminist theory at its best, intense, and resonating with lived experience. It certainly makes an important contribution to the developing interdisciplinary field of maternal studies and it deserves to make waves in several disciplines. Reading the book as a mother was also a touching experience, inciting me to re-imagine my maternal practices outside of familiar feminist frameworks of drudgery and dysfunction, discovering the artist-mother-revolutionary just waiting to be noticed.

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**On having an own child: reproductive technologies and the cultural construction of childhood**

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Karnac, London, 2008, 199pp., ISBN 978-1-85575-5451, £19.99pb

This fascinating book asks perhaps the most significant question for feminist studies of reproduction (but one that, strangely, as the author points out, has not received much critical attention): why do people want 'an own child'?