Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

(M)OTHER PERSPECTIVES

STAGING MOTHERHOOD IN 21ST CENTURY NORTH AMERICAN THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

Aoise Stratford and Lynn Deboeck

(M)Other Perspectives

This anthology examines maternity in contemporary performance at the intersection of a wide range of topics from nationhood to mental health, queer parenting, embodied dramaturgy, cultural practice, and immigration.

Across the breadth of these themes, we interrogate the cultural implications and politics of how we script, perform, receive, and define mothers, challenging many of the normalizing and patriarchal tropes associated with the mother-as-character. This book includes critical essays examining twenty-first century dramatic literature, first-hand ethnographic accounts of motherhood in practice, interviews, feminist manifestos, and artist reflections. In its deliberately curated variety, this collection seeks to resist homogeneity and offer instead a range of approaches to key questions: what versions of motherhood get staged, and why? And what do dramatic representations tell us about the role of mothers in our own fraught contemporary moment?

This collection will be of great interest to those in academia who are teaching, researching, or studying in the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies, American Studies, and Feminist and Gender Studies.

Aoise Stratford is a Playwright, Dramaturg, and Lecturer at Cornell University in the Department of Performing and Media Arts.

Lynn Deboeck is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Theatre and Lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Utah.

Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

This series is our home for cutting-edge, upper-level scholarly studies and edited collections. Considering theatre and performance alongside topics such as religion, politics, gender, race, ecology, and the avant-garde, titles are characterized by dynamic interventions into established subjects and innovative studies on emerging topics.

Performance Cultures as Epistemic Cultures, Volume I
(Re)Generating Knowledges in Performance
Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, Milos Kosic, Astrid Schenka

Performance Cultures as Epistemic Cultures, Volume II
Interweaving Epistemologies
Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, Milos Kosic, Astrid Schenka

Politics of the Oberammergau Passion Play
Tradition as Trademark
Julia Stenzel and Jan Mohr

Beyoncé and Beyond
2013–2016
Naila Keleta-Mae

Reconstructing Performance Art
Practices of Historicisation, Documentation and Representation
Tancredi Gusman

For more information about this series, please visit: https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Advances-in-Theatre--Performance-Studies/book-series/RATPS

(M)Other Perspectives

Staging Motherhood in 21st Century North American Theatre & Performance

Aoise Stratford and Lynn Deboeck

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781032303116 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032303192 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003304463 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003304463

Typeset in Bembo
by codeMantra

Contents

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the significant labor of many people who have contributed to this book. First, our thanks go to the authors whose work appears in these interviews, manifestos, ethnographies, and essays, and to the less visible labor of those scholars and artists whose interest in this book sparked a productive exchange of ideas even when they weren't able to contribute directly: Radhica Ganapathy, Virginia Anderson, Melisa Orozco Vargas, Jessica Brater, Sheila Rabillard, and Karen Bamford in particular. Collectively, these people make this book so much bigger than the sum of its parts. Second, thanks also to those who gave us something to write about in the first place: the many writers, artists, performers, activists, and scholars whose work we draw upon and discuss, and the many colleagues with whom we have collaborated and who are working alongside us in this field. Third, no book of this kind can happen without the tireless efforts of the publishing staff, and we are hugely grateful to Laura Hussey and Swati Hindwan in particular for their support and guidance. Thank you to our academic mothers (to borrow E Patrick Johnson's term), J. Ellen Gainor, Sara Warner, Alesha Doan, and Ann Schofield for their mentorship and guidance. And lastly, thank you to our entire families. To our own mothers, Averil Condren and Judie Duesterhaus—you are ever in our thoughts, and you have given us so much. And to Alec, Dominic, André, Gennie, Hugo, Gwen, Rowena, Pascal, and Jamie—without whom our own experiences as mothers would not exist. You are everywhere in these pages. We love you.

Contributors

Maisha S. Akbar, Professor of Communications Studies, serves as Inaugural Director of Fort Valley State University's Center for Social Justice and Chair of the Department of Languages and Liberal Studies, Organizational Leadership, Media Studies, and Visual and Performing Arts. Her book, *Preaching the Blues: Black Feminist Performance in Lynching Plays* (Routledge, 2020), looks at anti-lynching drama as an under-examined genre of American drama, and contributes to anti-lynching drama scholarship by foregrounding blueswoman performance, anti-lynching plays set in white households, and the production of anti-lynching drama at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Mysia Anderson is a Black feminist artist-scholar from Miami Gardens, Florida. She received her BA in African and African American Studies from Stanford University, with a concentration in gender and sexuality. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in Brown University's Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies, and her dissertation explores Black sustainability in the city of Miami through an exploration of oral history, storytelling, and performance. Anderson is also a 2022 graduate of the Atlantic Acting School's Global Virtual Conservatory. As an actress, playwright, and scholar, she tells stories grounded in African diasporic world-making.

Lindsey R. Barr is a PhD candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research focuses on gendered and racialized representations of madness and disability on stage in the contemporary American musical. Some of her published work can be found in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, *The Routledge Companion to Musical Theatre*, and *Review*. A professional dramaturg and director, her work has been seen at Baltimore Center Stage, Everyman Theatre, the Capitol Fringe Festival, and Single Carrot Theatre, among others.

Diana Benea is Assistant Professor of North American Studies at the University of Bucharest, Romania, and a former Fulbright Senior Scholar

at the City University of New York—The Graduate Center (2017–2018). Her theatre publications include *Staging Crisis in Contemporary North American Theater* (a co-edited special issue of *American, British and Canadian Studies*, De Gruyter, December 2022), as well as chapters in *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Race* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) and *American Dramaturgies for the 21st Century* (Sorbonne UP, 2021). She is also the translator of Saviana Stănescu's plays into Romanian.

Lynn Deboeck is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Theatre and Lecturer in Gender Studies and the Honors College at the University of Utah. Her research interests include gender performance, the representation of maternity and motherhood in Western theatrical traditions, advances in pedagogy, and feminist directing of live performance. Most recently, her chapter "The Momboy: Maternal Tomboys on Stage" was published in 2022 in *Reclaiming the Tomboy: The Body, Representation and Identity* from Lexington Books; and her chapter "Between the Lines: Trauma in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*" was published in 2023 in *Transformations of Trauma in Women's Writing* by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Suzi Elnaggar is an Egyptian-American freelance dramaturg, performance scholar, and theatre-maker. She was a 2021 Kennedy Center Dramaturgy Intensive Fellow and works as both a developmental and production dramaturg. She holds a Master of Arts in Theatre Studies from Baylor University, where she researched the work of Heather Raffo through the lens of trauma studies. Her research interests include recontextualizing Greek tragedy, post-colonial theatre contexts, theatre of social change, and work that centers around SWA/MENA (Southwest Asian/Middle Eastern and North African) experiences. Her scholarship and practice center community, collaboration, and context.

Melissa Flower Gladney is a theatre director, performance artist, and dramaturg specializing in physical theatre practices. She has trained with SITI Company and SCOT (Japan). Melissa's works include *Pangea* at BLUEorange Gallery, *Memory in the Time of the Refugee* at Dixon Place, *things missing/missed* at Undermain Theatre, and *Transitions* published in the Emergency INDEX by Ugly Duckling Press. She has acted as assistant literary manager at the Alley Theatre. Melissa holds an MA from the University of Houston and is currently pursuing her PhD in Theatre and Performance at City University of New York.

Michelle Hayford is Director of the Theatre, Dance, and Performance Technology Program at the University of Dayton. Michelle holds a PhD in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. Her creative scholarship utilizes theatre as community and civic engagement. Michelle's *Undergraduate Research in Theatre* (Routledge, 2022) and *Performing Arts as High-Impact Practice* (with Kattwinkel, Palgrave, 2018) situate the rigor and creative praxis of our discipline as fundamental to a liberal arts education

and the research profile of our institutions. Michelle is an applied theatre practitioner who advocates that the revolution for sustainable and equitable theatre practices must start in academic undergraduate theatre.

Roberta Suzette Hunte is an Assistant Professor at Portland State University's School of Social Work. She is affiliate faculty in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Black Studies. Hunte is a community engaged Black feminist scholar, whose academic interests include sexual and reproductive justice, cultural work for social change, and how Black, Indigenous, Latina and Asian/Asian American, Pacific Islanders navigate institutions: particularly construction, maternal healthcare, and higher education. Her research-based artistic collaborations include theatre piece *My Walk Has Never Been Average* and short film *Sista in the Brotherhood,* both informed by her research with Black tradeswomen; and devised theatre piece *We Are BRAVE*.

Christina Hurtado-Pierson is a lecturer at Pomona College and a current doctoral student at Stony Brook University. She is a dramaturg and historian focusing on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American performance. She received her MFA in Dramaturgy from Columbia University.

Sarah Johnson is currently an Assistant Professor of Dramaturgy and Head of the MFA Dramaturgy program at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research focuses on intercultural theatre, new play development, and dramaturgical methodologies. Her writing has been featured in *Asian Theatre Journal, Theatre Topics*, and multiple edited volumes. She works professionally as a dramaturg with theatre companies across the country. She serves as the Performance Review Editor for *PARtake: The Journal for Performance as Research*.

Shawna Mefferd Kelty advocates for and works predominantly in new play development. Her heart absolutely sings when she gets to collaborate in bringing new worlds and stories into being. She is a director-dramaturg, associate professor/chair of Theatre at SUNY Plattsburgh, union member, yoga instructor, and doula. She loves teaching, discovering, and collaborating with her students in the classroom and in productions. She is the drama editor of *The Saranac Review* and the immediate past president of the Mid-America Theatre Conference. She is the human companion to cat scientist, Dr. Beatrice Waffles, and is one amazing auntie.

Daphne P. Lei is Professor of Drama, University of California, Irvine. She is internationally recognized for her scholarship on Chinese opera, Asian American theatre, intercultural, transnational and transpacific performance. She is the author of *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Uncrossing*

the Borders: Performing Chinese in Gendered (Trans)Nationalism (University of Michigan Press, 2019), and coeditor (with Charlotte McIvor) of *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Interculturalism and Performance* (Bloomsbury, 2020). Lei is the 2022 ASTR Distinguished Scholar.

L. Bailey McDaniel is an Associate Professor with the Department of English at Oakland University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Drama, African American Literature and Drama, Gender Studies, and Literary Theory. Her book *(Re)Constructing Maternal Performance in 20th c. American Drama* investigates how race-based notions of maternal performance become sites of resistance to cultural and political hierarchies. She has also published article-length works on playwrights Cherríe Moraga, David Henry Hwang, Arthur Miller, Danai Gurira, Philip Kan Gotanda, and August Wilson.

Jessie Lee Mills is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Pomona College. She is a director, deviser, and filmmaker. She received her MFA in Directing from Carnegie Mellon University and is a John Wells Fellow.

Daniella Vinitski Mooney is a scholar and conservatory trained actress through the NYU Experimental Theatre Wing and the Royal Academy in London, as well as through York University. She is also an award-winning director for devised work and multi-media. Her areas of expertise include experimental and classical theatre, as well as new work development. Daniella most recently dramaturged for PlayPenn and has taught regularly for the University of Pennsylvania. Her book project, *The Immersive Theatre of GAle GAtes*" (Routledge), is a descriptive narrative of the Brooklyn-based theatre company. Daniella holds dual Canadian/US citizenship and currently resides in Toronto.

Shondrika Moss-Bouldin is the co-founder of Soulploitation Creative Works (www.scworks.tv), a multi-media arts company. She has earned all her degrees (BA, MA, PhD) in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. She is a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC). She is currently working on her book, *Staging Lydia* (Northwestern Press). She received a Fulbright award to study in South Africa, and she attended the Mellon School at Harvard University. Recently, she has been awarded several grants to create dance therapy workshops centering Black women's healing (healsistaheal.com).

Tamar Neumann is a PhD student at Texas Tech University and the Executive Director of the Omaha Fringe Festival. She is a writer, dramaturg, theatre critic, and mother. Her writings have appeared in *AisleSay Twin Cities* and *The Reader.* Her research focuses on Fringe Festivals, motherhood and theatre, and Critical Adoption Studies as applied to theatre. She currently teaches writing at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Nicole Hodges Persley is an Associate Professor of American Studies and African and African American Studies at University of Kansas. She has received numerous awards for teaching and mentoring and is a professional actor and director with credits in theatre, film, and television. She completed her PhD in American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California and is an alumna of Spelman College. She has written about Hip-hop Theatre, African American theatre, Sampling, Jay-Z, and Suzan-Lori Parks. She is the author of *Sampling and Remixing Blackness in Hip-Hop Theater and Performance* (Michigan), *Hip-Hop in Musical Theater* (Methuen), and co-author of *Breaking it Down-Audition techniques for Actors of the Global Majority*.

Teresa Simone is a doctoral candidate in Theatre at Florida State University and a PEO Scholar. She worked with the educational theatre Stories That Soar from 2003 to 2013 as an actor/director, devising original theatre from stories written by children, to increase their literacy skills. As the Education Director, she worked intimately with diverse communities to create theatre telling their own stories. Teresa trained at the Dell'Arte International School for Physical Theatre. She also trained with Augusto Boal, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Cornerstone Theatre, and others. Teresa has several publications forthcoming, including a dissertation about the Natchez Confederate Pageant.

Megan Stahl is an educator and scholar who specializes in theatre of the MENASA diaspora, feminist plays and performances, and musical theatre. She is an Associate Professor of Theater at Boston Conservatory at Berklee, and she holds an MA and a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from Tufts University. Her articles and reviews have been published in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Annual*, and *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*.

Aoise Stratford is a playwright, dramaturg, theatre scholar, and lecturer at Cornell University. She works primarily on the Gothic, and on postcolonial and feminist drama. She has published in *Theatre Survey*, *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, Modern Drama, Frontiers*, and *The Dramatist*. Essays on feminist playwrights Dorothy Hewett and Liz Lochhead are forthcoming in *The Routledge Anthology of Women's Theatre Theory and Dramatic Criticism* and her essay Married to The Monster appears in Routledge's *Monsters in Performance*. As a playwright her work has seen more than 100 productions around the United States and internationally.

Kristyl D. Tift is a performing artist, writer, director, educator, and scholar. She holds a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Georgia and an MFA in Acting from The New School / Actors Studio Drama School. She is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Vanderbilt University. Her research interests include African Diaspora Theatre, Queer Theatre, Feminist Theatre, Acting Theory, and Performance Theory.

In 2022, her article "Queering the Politics of Black Respectability: Plays of the Revolutionary Theatre" was published in *The Black Theatre Review*. Other publications include articles and book reviews in *Frontiers*, *New England Theatre Journal*, *Continuum*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. She is working on her first book: *A Conditional Embrace: Black Queer Feminism in Performance*.

Jacqueline Viskup holds a PhD in Theatre Studies, with a Feminist Studies doctoral emphasis, from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research and practice focus on community engagement through the performing arts. She currently serves as Community Arts Program Manager for the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

Alison Walls is Artistic Director at The Court Theatre, New Zealand. She holds a PhD from the Graduate Center, an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, and an MA from Victoria University of Wellington. Her publications include a monograph on nineteenth century French literature; articles in *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, *Language and Literature*, *Studies in Musical Theatre*, *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, *Theatre Journal*, and *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*; and a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*. Alison has taught Theatre and Performance Studies in the United States, China, and New Zealand.

Introduction

Mothers on Stage, in the House, and Behind the Scenes

Aoise Stratford and Lynn Deboeck

To-Do List

Make a list (check)
Check bus schedule, if there is one
Find that flyer about the school food pantry
Feed those who need feeding
Care for someone else's body
Buy band-aids
Confront and battle the existential crisis that is the invisibility of maternal labor
Read bedtime story …

Once upon a time, in the eleventh century, a Scottish noble killed another Scottish noble in battle and subsequently married his widow. The woman in question, Gruoch, was mother to a son, Lulach, from her first marriage. However, perhaps because of fertility issues or because bearing children in eleventh-century Scotland was sometimes easier said than done, the new couple had no children of their own despite what appears to have been a long and stable marriage. After a time, the noble killed King Duncan who ruled the land, thereby becoming the new king of Scotland. His stepson, Lulach, became heir to the throne, and when the new king was killed by an English and Scottish alliance, Lulach ruled in his place. But not for long. Lulach's unlucky mother—a widow again—soon lost her son in battle, and a new king, Malcolm, was crowned. And then she died, perhaps of grief. And that was the end of that.

If this sounds familiar, it's because the noble was the subject of one of Shakespeare's best-known and most maternally obsessed plays: *Macbeth*. Mothers, births, wombs, babies, children, midwives, breast feeding, maternal loss, fertility, parenting, surrogate parents, and anxiety about family are everywhere in *Macbeth*. Macbeth's nemesis, McDuff, is famously delivered by C-section, being from his mother's womb "untimely ripped," and therefore exempt from the witches' prophecies (V.viii.15). His wife, Lady MacDuff, is violently unmothered when she loses all her babies "at one fell swoop" to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003304463-1

Macbeth's bandits (IV.iii.218). And most significantly of all Lady Macbeth is both pointedly *not* a mother, insofar as the absence of an heir is at the very heart of Macbeth's problem, and pointedly a *potential* mother, insofar as Macbeth suggests (and hopes) that she is ruthless enough to "bring forth men-children only" (I.vii.72). And yet Lady Macbeth herself complicates this fraught duality by going so far as to identify herself as already a mother, saying "I have given suck and know how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (I.vii.55). This babe, however, is nowhere in the play and readers and theatre goers are left to assume that the child is either deceased, missing, illegitimate and raised in secret elsewhere, or—if Shakespeare stayed true to the history—the product of a previous marriage and therefore politically complicated and arguably in the way of the patriarchally centered plot. Motherhood is fundamentally essential to the story, and systematically erased from it; mothers are everywhere, and nowhere.

This book is not about Shakespeare. Yet perhaps precisely because *Macbeth* at first glance appears to be well beyond the typically marginalized genre of women's drama (should there be such a thing) and even further beyond the even more marginalized genre of drama about motherhood, *Macbeth* is a good place to start. Indeed, the ease with which we might initially overlook the maternal in *Macbeth* underscores the persistence and prevalence of a particularly thorny critical question in theatre and performance studies: how does the complicated visibility of mothers on stage respond to and shape their hugely significant but often overlooked presence in the social and political fabric of the world? If we take as a given the fact that theatre history is an ongoing part of world history, what might we learn about social and political constructions of the maternal if we address the subjectivity of mothers on stage with the same rigor with which we have long studied the supposedly universal subject position of "man"? How might we understand maternal conflict and labor and power and performance in new ways by taking up this critical question and bringing it to bear on drama and the world *right now*?

The twenty-first century has seen a growing urgency around issues of gender and racial parity, LGBTQ+ rights, and disability. This urgency prompts a widespread call for reform to practices and pedagogy in the theatre. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have raised questions about the ethics of casting, how to decolonize syllabi, what to do about intimacy in the rehearsal room, and when to use trigger warnings for audiences. We have reached a point of reckoning regarding inequity in the arts—in terms of both compensation and representation. The Asian American Performers Acting Coalition (AAPAC), as one example, has compiled statistics on racial representation in New York theatre and found that while strides toward equity have been made, they are still small. Angel Desai, steering committee member of the organization, points out that "the population of white people in New York, according to the last census is maybe around 33, 35%, but the numbers of white people on stage last year was 65%."[1] *The Count 2.0*, published by The Dramatists Guild in 2018, found similarly small gains in terms

of gender in the last decade, reporting that male playwrights still get more than twice the number of professional productions that female playwrights do, though, as Marsha Norman has noted, women typically account for more than half the audience.[2]

Continued disparity speaks to the tenacity of the white-male subject position in theatre, prompting ethical questions about the kinds of roles women have access to in terms of gender's intersection with race, sexuality, body type, age, ability, and class. Lucy Kerbel, noted feminist and theatre director from the U.K. who has worked on projects such as The Act for Change Project, highlights the fact that women as seen on stage represent a very narrow spectrum when it comes to age, body type, and ethnicity.[3] This rings true for American theatre as well, with which British theatre has long had a mutually influential relationship. Mothers, then, we might speculate, must occupy a very narrow band of representation on stage.

Statistics and observations like these reflect inequities in society at large, but also demonstrate how mothers are often further disadvantaged by being left out of the data entirely. In addition, the very sacrifices mothers make in almost any job end up impacting their compensation and perpetuating exploitative situations. On stage, behind the scenes, and in the social world that the theatre seeks to address, "mothers sacrifice pay for jobs that are compatible with motherhood."[4] According to a recent *Forbes* article about the impacts of COVID-19, one survey "showed that the vast majority of women questioned did more cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare and education during lockdown than before, forcing them to de-prioritize paid work more frequently than their male counterparts."[5] Since long before the pandemic, the very structure of the theatre-making in America has typically been formulated in ways that preclude caregivers who need to find childcare, or need to be available for children in the evenings. COVID both impacted jobs across the theatre industry and exacerbated the situation for mothers. Additionally, the reality of pregnancy itself can disrupt or break performance contracts and throw reproductive women out of work.

Recognizing the need for supporting mothers on stage, behind the scenes and behind the pens of these narratives, organizations are fortunately slowly emerging to address these concerns. In addition to institutionally backed initiatives such as The Kilroys and the Lily Awards, along with more grassroots communities of theatre moms facilitated by social media, the American theatre landscape now also has fellowships and awards for parents in the arts, as well as places like SPACE on Ryder Farm and organizations like PAAL (Parent Artist Advocacy League). So too other countries and theatre communities have recognized the necessity and power of groups that work in support of mothers. MAMs (Mothers Artist Makers) in Ireland started as a conversation over coffee between mothers who were theatre-makers and found that "the isolation of the primary carer from other creatives was the common ground we all stood on," and six years later it is an organization with several hundred members both nationally and internationally including

Americans.[6] MAMs also advises the use of family-friendly best practices, which they introduced at the 2017 Theatre Forum Conference, that include "Sympathetic Scheduling, Children in the Work Space, Family Friendly Staff Training, [and] Childcare." A fifth best practice, entitled "Ask the Question …" is explained in this way:

> AFTER you have contractually agreed to employ anyone, ask them this question: 'Is there anyone in your life whose care you are responsible for and is there any way we can assist you to facilitate this while you work for us?' This is the game changer. It will radically change the experience of the carers working for you who often hide the challenges they face, fearing their commitment will be in question. It will improve their attitude, output and ability to work creatively.[7]

The needle is starting to shift, but in many respects broader feminist attention to mothers is still much needed in order to support these efforts. Somehow, the category "mother" has yet to transcend reductive homogeneity and has thus remained parenthetical in the struggle for wider cultural inclusivity and parity.

Part of the problem, then, is to resist homogeneity. As feminists, theatre scholars, practitioners, students, and engaged audience members, we have a responsibility to broaden the ways in which we use the term motherhood and to think more deeply about how we identify the labor of mothering, or motherwork.[8] We can enrich our experience of reading, watching, making, and writing about theatre when we focus our attention on the representation and labor of a wider variety of maternal identities, especially those often overlooked, such as queer mothers, mothers-to-be, immigrant mothers, and others who perform motherwork while not being visible as mothers themselves. The question of who is included in the discourse around motherhood is undoubtedly a political one, with important sites of intersection for disability studies, queer theory, performance studies, and Black feminism. The chapters in this book aim to use these contemporary lenses to approach recent representations of motherhood on stage in an effort to widen the scope of the discourse.

In addition to the need to harness a range of critical lenses in the service of examining motherhood on stage, there is a pressing need to privilege the voices of mothers and treat those voices as authoritative about their own experiences. As useful as Lady Macbeth is for raising key questions about gender tropes, reproductive politics, and the centuries-long erasure of mothers from narratives about power, the text in which she exists does little to validate her identity as a mother. However, the number of people who identify with this position and/or its labor is staggering, making the voices of mothers an indispensable part of our cultural narrative. Mothers are not merely objects to serve others, nor should they "function only to provide the limits of the male subject, which help to complete his outline," as Sue Ellen Case's landmark

feminist critique of theatre makes clear.[9] Rather, they are subjects with identities that inform their stories and their actions. This is not just a question of what those stories are, but also of who tells them and how. The inclusion here of a number of ethnographies, interviews, discussions, collaborations, and manifestos aims to set these accounts on equal footing with theoretically situated chapters analyzing dramatic work by other writers, thereby offering a feminist intervention into traditional hierarchies of knowledge which tend to systemically privilege the work of non-mothers (who can often have easier paths to degree completion, and tenure).

Importantly, there is also a growing body of dramatic work fueling scholarship as well. We are starting to see an increase in the number of plays and performances that center the experiences of motherhood and directly address many of the big and under-explored issues of maternity. Subjects such as abortion, pregnancy loss, post-partum mental health, adoption, single parenting, and infertility—to name a few—are now finding their way onto American stages. Such performances address concerns that directly impact an entire population of people, validating their experiences and making this the right time for a book such as this one, which holds analysis of these plays and performances as one of its primary objectives.

There are, in fact, far more plays worthy of this attention than can be covered here. The fact that this volume includes not substantive analysis of plays like Molly Smith Metzler's *Cry It Out*, Diana Son's *Satellites*, or Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline*, to name just a few, suggests a need and opportunity for more research. A collaboratively sourced list of plays for further reading is included in this volume, but even that is not exhaustive. Nonetheless the variety of texts, themes, formal concerns, and engagements with social issues that are considered in this book suggests, we hope, the breadth of possibilities. Plays such as *Grounded* offer a nuanced look at how a maternal subjectivity can clash with military structures, goals, and values. Lisa Loomer's *Expecting Isabel* tackles the complex experience of infertility when motherhood is held out as a standard that one is expected to achieve. *Eclipsed* raises the complicated issue of mothers and their children as commodities for larger patriarchal causes, while Suzan-Lori Parks's Red Letter Plays look frankly at mothers in the context of themes such as incarceration, homelessness, and medical intervention. The number of adaptations and re-imaginings of *A Doll's House* alone, as you will see in coming chapters, reflect our communal preoccupation with the role of the mother and the standards by which society holds "her" accountable. Thus, alongside the manifestos and ethnographies, this book offers timely analyses of these contemporary American plays from several critical perspectives.

This book then, like motherhood itself, is not one thing. Rather, it is mindfully composite—an amalgam of pieces that together are larger than the sum of their parts. What connects them is the shift in focus to the centrality of motherhood itself, in all its complicated variations. To draw on *Frankenstein*, another tale in which mothers are everywhere and nowhere, we are taking

up Mary Shelley's warning of two centuries ago, to beware the erasure of mothers, mothering, and motherwork. The terrain of the maternal is sometimes frightening, often messy, and always complicated, and it infuses—and is infused by—a myriad of other social forces. Our work, then, is to embrace that messiness, not to erase it, or dress it up with a nice demure bow.

The contributions in this book are strategically different, but they are grouped in ways that we hope will draw attention to the many intersections, variations, commonalities, and mutually productive contradictions that help to shape the field of mother studies.

In Part One, entitled "Rescripting Reproduction and the Pregnant Body," the chapters included address the complex negotiations surrounding fertility, the invisibility of maternal potential, and the theatrical labor of performing the reproductive body. Lynn Deboeck's chapter explores the currency of pregnancy in Lisa Loomer's *Expecting Isabel*, and the resulting social value ascribed to the reproductive potential of women. Tamar Neumann's chapter scrutinizes the narratives surrounding birth mothers in a wide range of contemporary plays. Sarah Johnson documents an act of reproduction-as-dramaturgy and dramaturgy-as-reproduction in her piece, making clear the benefit maternal thinking has on the theatrical craft and introducing dramaturgical context for the plays *Grounded* and *Gloria*. Both Roberta Hunte and Michelle Hayford look at reproductive activism. Hunte's chapter offers an insightful analysis of devised work and performance activism through an account of the piece We Are BRAVE, which addresses issues of abortion, reproductive justice, medical racism, and the realities of transgender pregnancy. Hayford's chapter, which starts with drag performance and ends with a call to action in academia, traces connections between queer performance, pregnancy, gender identity, pedagogy, ethnography, and activism in rich and complex ways. In this way, this part interrogates reproduction and pregnancy as both physical and political states of being with chapters exploring a variety of ways in which this pre-maternal state finds representation and expression on stage.

Part Two, "Maternal/Theatrical Legacies," builds on the issues of the first part by thinking about rescripting in a different way: through legacy and feminist interventions into narrative histories. Chapters by Alison Walls and Suzie Elnaggar look at two different adaptations of *A Doll's House*. Elnaggar's chapter, which explores Heather Raffo's Noura, examines how assumptions about maternal responsibility, marriage, and child-rearing are culturally contingent. Wall's chapter offers an insightful feminist critique of Hnath's *Dollshouse Part 2*, looking at what this play reveals about which assumptions we have moved past since second wave feminism, and which ones we have not. Aoise Stratford's chapter argues that Suzan-Lori Parks's Red Letter Plays are part of a Feminist Gothic genealogy that stages social anxieties about controlling maternal power, through tropes of monstrosity, the uncanny, and fear. Daphne Lei's chapter is a poignant analysis of *Snow in Midsummer*, Francis Ya-chu Cowig's reimagined version of the thirteenth-century play by Guan Hanqing, *The Injustice Done to Dou E That Moved Heaven and Earth*. This

chapter looks with an eco-feminist eye at the tropes of natural, unnatural, and supernatural motherhood in order to probe the relationships between motherhood, gender violence, social justice, and climate change. All of these chapters specifically address the complicated legacies that maternal representation and expression have handed to future generations.

"Motherhood/Nationhood" is the title of the third part of chapters. The chapters in this part build on concerns raised in some of the earlier chapters to ask more directly how performances articulate a connection between motherhood and citizenhood. The chapters here consider this intersection from a variety of angles. Jacqueline Viskup's chapter explores the clash between military and maternity in two plays: *Grounded* and *Welcome Home Jenny Sutter.* The implications of birth as citizenship are at the center of Melissa Flower's *Transitions*, a manifesto and performance piece. Diana Benea's chapter picks up similar issues in its look at undocumented motherhood in Quiara Alegría Hudes' and Erin McKeown's *Miss You Like Hell.* A troubling look at mothers as victims of, and complicit participants in, the violent architecture of war grounds L. Bailey McDaniel's chapter on Danai Guirira's *Eclipsed*; while motherhood's relationship to cultural and religious traditions grounds Megan Stahl's exploration of Rohina Malik's *Unveiled.* This part of chapters follows several threads that encounter the seldom contemplated intersections of motherhood and nationhood, thinking through citizenship, loyalty to the state, biopolitics, and motherwork as national service.

The last part of this book considers, and is appropriately titled, "Motherhood as Theatrical Labor." We step back from motherhood as a state or identity represented in performance to look at the ways in which the labor of motherhood informs, supports, and complicates the labor of theatre-making. This part starts with Teresa Simone's chapter on dance moms, which continues the exploration of the national implications of motherwork to look critically at the labor of putting children on stage. Kristyl Tift considers the intersections between the labor of making maternal performance and the performance of maternal and care-labor in her analysis of her own original play, *No Further.* Christina Hurtado-Pearson and Jessie Mills reclaim Jewish mother tropes as tools for productive labor in the classroom and rehearsal room, while Shawna Mefferd Kelty's manifesto offers better practices for harnessing the overlap between a doula's work in the delivery room and a director's work in the rehearsal room. Conversation between mothers, itself a performance of labor in various ways, anchors the remaining two pieces in this section: Daniella Vinitski Mooney interview with PAAL (Parent Artist Advocacy League) founder Rachel Hewitt, and a transcript from the 2022 ASTR Field Conversation on Black motherhood in which Janinya Martin, Myisha Anderson, Maisha Akbar, Shondrika Moss-Bouldin, and Nicole Hodges Persley discuss supporting and validating motherwork. The chapters that make up this part look to understand mothers at the borders of practice and representation and to ask how representation is informed by the lived experiences of the mothers who embody characters or remain invisibly in the wings.

As feminists, we hope that all the pieces in this collection will serve to build meaningful bridges between the representation of mothers on stage and the ways in which we might come to understand how those representations shape and are shaped by social expectations and lived experience. There is much richness to be mined from maternal tropes in twenty-first-century theatre and performance, and we invite everyone to participate in the mining. As Rachel Spencer Hewitt's interview in Part Four suggests, communal responsibility is one of the bests tools we have in the task of ensuring that mothers are visible, welcome at the table, and still have resources left when the time comes for them to contribute. So yes, motherhood is messy and complicated, but it is also beautiful and meaningful. We—as those engaged in the widely varied labors of motherwork, as scholars and practitioners, and as people who are ourselves often complicated and messy—offer the articles, manifestos, interviews, and ethnographies included here not as a place from which to start this important labor so much as a place from which to continue the conversations we are certain are already out there. After all, there is much remaining on the to-do list.

Mother's To-Do List

Kiss bumped elbows
Fetch water
Confront and battle with the existential crisis that is unseen maternal labor (again)
Feed those who need feeding
Encourage discussion
Find alternatives to *Macbeth* and *Frankenstein* for the next bedtime story
Save the world

Notes

1 Racial Representation in Theatre, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OJebZfI2wE, 1:55-2:17.
2 I have written about this data more extensively elsewhere, see Aoise Stratford, "Why Numbers Count: Looking at Producing More Women?" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2020), 109–113.
3 Lucy Kerbel. *All Change Please: A Practical Guide to Achieving Gender Equality in Theatre*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2017.
4 Staff and Mortimer 2012, 3.
5 Cox Josie, "New Research Shows Covid-19's Impact on Gender Inequality and Mothers' Mental Health," *Forbes* (July 30, 2020), https://www.forbes.com/sites/josiecox/2020/07/30/covid-19-gender-equality-mental-health-working-mothers-flexible-working/#d3594201e4a5.
6 mamsireland.wordpress.com.
7 Ibid. ("5 Family Friendly Practices").
8 This term is widely in use and theorizes a number of ways in which labor is connected to motherhood, whether that labor is conducted by mothers or not.
9 Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, New York: Routledge, 17.

Part One

Rescripting Reproduction and the Pregnant Body

To-Do List

Do a pregnancy test
Book appointment with OBGYN/Midwife/Healer/Mama-mentor
Navigate the treacherous political landscape of our reproductive bodies
Feed those who need feeding
Let out seams of favorite skirt/pants/saree/kilt/pjs
Find the courage to talk about miscarriage experiences with others
Lift up the mothers around me

DOI: 10.4324/9781003304463-2

1 Illuminating Solidarity

Performing Mothering at the Intersections of Identities as Sexual and Reproductive Justice Activism

Roberta Suzette Hunte

In 2013 Western States Center, an advocacy organization working to strengthen and increase democratic participation of marginalized communities in the Pacific Northwest, embarked on a campaign to center the voices of communities of color in Oregon's reproductive politics. The Center, in partnership with pro-choice groups locally and nationally, joined efforts to bring the voices of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, and Pacific Islander-led organizations into conversation with mainstream/white and cis-dominant groups around abortion access and reproductive health more broadly. To begin, they invited people of color-led organizations and community members to participate in a year-long consciousness raising initiative on reproductive justice called Building Reproductive Autonomy and Voices for Equity (BRAVE). I was a member of the initial cohort.

Catherine (Kate) Ming T'ien Duffly[1] and I approached Western States Center to offer a cultural intervention to their work that included some form of public storytelling based on narratives from BRAVE members. The legislative campaign that the Center organized focused on comprehensive reproductive care for all people in Oregon. This included secure access to abortion and contraception, and perinatal and postpartum medical care for people despite immigration status or gender identity. Our task was to craft a piece that made the personal, political. They wanted the piece to be used at three gatherings of their members and affiliates. The piece was to spark discussion among their stakeholders and potential collaborators.[2]

From 2016 to 2017, Kate and I collaborated with a community cast of women of color and trans men to devise *We Are BRAVE*, a 60-minute performance based on story gathering workshops put on by Western States Center and students from our respective universities: Reed College and Portland State University. *We Are BRAVE* drew on participants' personal experiences and dealt with issues of abortion, histories of reproductive oppression and justice in the U.S., domestic violence, medical racism around birth, and transgender reproductive health.

The cultural work of *We Are BRAVE* was to (1) dramatize key issues of political concern for people of color, (2) engage Western States Center's community partners in a deeper discussion around these issues, and (3) organize

DOI: 10.4324/9781003304463-3

audiences for direct action to impact reproductive healthcare legislation. The piece depicts mothering as part of an intersectional collective movement for reproductive justice. SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective defines reproductive justice as the right to have a child, to not have a child, to parent the children you have in safe and sustainable communities, and to have bodily autonomy. The project engages questions of equity for those who mother as aligned with, in solidarity with, and/or overlapping with issues regarding trans bodies, queer healthcare, and medical racism. *We Are BRAVE* positions maternal and mothering (redefined as inclusive of masculine, androgynous, feminine, and other gender expressions and identities) as part of a larger conversation about health equity, bodily autonomy, family formation, and environmental safety. Positioning the performance of mothering within the larger theoretical and political framework of the reproductive justice movement moves conversations around the maternal from those of individual choices toward collective issues around bodily autonomy for all.

Loretta Ross, a SisterSong founder and one of the foremost reproductive justice thinkers, says that focusing broadly on reproductive oppression rather than narrowly focusing on abortion rights is critical to the formation of a new movement that can truly help communities of color thrive.[3] Reproductive oppression is the sexual and reproductive control and exploitation, of women's, girls', and individual's bodies. Reproductive justice provides an intersectional lens that seeks to address the myriad ways that race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality intersect in people's lives based on their social location. Storytelling helps us unearth how reproductive oppression manifests in our day-to-day lives and how we resist. It also makes space for other narratives of reproductive justice where people's full humanity is respected.

Our method drew from personal narratives and actors who embodied much of that source material. The Combahee River Collective[4] in their Black Feminist Statement assert that understanding embodied experiences of oppression is a vital contribution to identity politics: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." They go on to state that identity politics and embodied experience are critical facets around which to organize in order to address the structural, cultural, and institutional forces that impinge upon the lives of women, women in the developing world, and working people. Identity is explicitly and implicitly woven through personal stories. In our stories we can find opportunities for solidarity across our varying sociocultural identities of race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and so on.

Black Feminist performance scholar Joni L. Jones writes about engaging identity through embodied performance, where actors embody some of the identities of the lived experiences they portray. She says: "(1) identity and daily interactions are a series of conscious and unconscious choices improvised within culturally and socially specific guidelines, and (2) that people learn through participation."[5] Embodied performance is a way for actors to

walk in another's shoes, and for audiences to empathize more deeply with experiences and identities that they may or may not fully understand. It was a critical part of our devising processes as the narratives of actors were woven throughout the final script.

As a cohort member of BRAVE, I was captivated by the opportunities for personal story sharing that occurred throughout our meetings. An example of this was an abortion fishbowl exercise where four members of our community sat in a circle with an empty chair as the fifth spot. The larger group of 30 plus BRAVE members sat in a circle around them. The people in the center were multiracial and multigender. They had agreed to share their abortion story with the group. The empty chair was for a member of the group to share their story if they felt moved. I still remember those stories. They were deeply personal and shared themes of domestic violence, inconvenient pregnancies, relief from having an abortion, grief at disappointing family, pride in oneself for being independent, love of self, love of children, and cultural pressures. In that circle we saw each other more fully as people. Around this circle I came to understand more fully why abortion was necessary for reproductive care. I remember an older Latinx member of the group who shared the experience of driving her friend to an abortion. Doing so challenged her religious beliefs and her father's wishes. She supported her friend and did not talk about it for years. Some participants carried shame around aspects of their experience, some liberation. Some already had children, some went on to have children at a better time. Some remained childless, firm in their choice. The intimacy and authentic complexity of this fishbowl exercise was central to my thinking in our devising process.

We put out a call with BRAVE members to collaborate on a devised theatre piece based on a compilation of narratives from the participants. Fifteen people participated in the piece throughout the crafting of the performance. Among the production team there were college students and fellow faculty who wanted to learn about reproductive justice: Kate, Jasmine, Aziza, Julianna, a dramaturg, and devising coach; Western States Center cohort members: myself, Marina, Owen, Carina, Charley, Marilou; and Trystan Reese and Yee Won Chong, two trans justice activists. We met as a team to workshop a script. Throughout our script creation and rehearsal period, we sought to create a culture that centered lived experience and in community sought to connect those individual experiences with institutional power structures that influenced them. Each participant brought into conversation their unique knowledge and way of thinking based on their experiences of reproductive justice with the unique embodied knowledge of the other members of the group.

We began our devising process with an emphasis on visual storytelling through movement. We asked actors to reflect on what came up for them when the term "Reproductive Justice" was used. They shared phrases that were analytical such as "bodily autonomy," "support systems," "access to care," "get rid of judgment and societal criticism," and "I never thought it

would be me." We wanted to create captivating images that reflected actors' embodied choices as opposed to analytical thinking. We gave groups short amounts of time to create a tableau, or picture, in reference to the prompt. As a collective we discussed what we liked in each tableau. Some images were used in the piece as they were initially created. We also took shapes from images and combined them to create impactful visuals. Movement and tableaus were used throughout the final production as a means of moving between scenes.

One example of a tableau on reproductive oppression had one actor assuming a backbend bridge position with another actor standing alongside them holding up their waist. Reproductive oppression is not just an inability to access the reproductive healthcare that we need. It is also the feeling of being bent against one's will and forced into an uncomfortable or untenable position. The process of having actors embody constriction or bodily autonomy or reproductive liberation helped our group develop a shared understanding of the themes of our piece.

Charlie, a Latinx mother and movement artist, guided us through movement-focused exercises. One exercise had participants walk toward each other and turn abruptly when faced with an obstacle. It was a chaotic image of forward movement met with an obstacle, changing direction, meeting an obstacle, and turning direction again. We tried a version of this to symbolize moments of choices, obstacles, or barriers that people are met with around their reproductive care. As a participant creating that image, I remember feeling anxious, frustrated, confident, adventurous, and alone.

Tableaus enlivened the academic content of some of our scenes. To bring historical context to our discussion of reproductive justice and oppression, we dramatized elements of a timeline that was originated and compiled from a toolkit created by BRAVE.[6] Ensemble members performed a series of tableaus depicting historical moments of reproductive oppression along with advances toward reproductive justice. Tableaus followed the themes of reproductive justice. To represent bodily autonomy, for example, we included an image of the Stonewall Rebellion, referencing the activism led by transwomen of color against police harassment of LGBTQIA+ community; the enslavement of Black people and forced breeding; unnecessarily medicalized birthing practices; and sterilization abuses. To depict the right to not have children, we highlighted the Hyde Amendment, which restricts Medicaid funds from being used to cover abortions. To depict the right to have children in a safe and sustainable environment, we dramatized the barring of Asian women's immigration to the U.S. through the Page Act; Thomas Beatie as the person who initially raised the public profile of transgender pregnancy; and contemporary movements for social change, including the Black Lives Matter and No Dakota Access Pipeline movements. By including social movements, we sought to illustrate some of the ways reproductive justice moves into conversations about land, genocide, police brutality, and healthy environments. Failure to saliently address these issues makes families vulnerable throughout their life course.