

Review of: *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering: Maternal Subjects*,
Ed. Sheila Lintott and Maureen Sander-Staudt (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

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The editors of this collection begin their Introduction with a metaphor for the book: the “hidden mother phenomenon” (2). This refers to a nineteenth century strategy for photographing babies, in which the baby would sit on the mother’s lap and the mother would be draped with a cloth that would serve as the background for the photo. The shape of the mother would be cut out of the photo through cropping or matting, leaving only the baby in the picture with a draping material surrounding it. The editors argue that this practice “metaphorically reflects a willingness to ignore or downplay the importance of maternal subjectivity,” a willingness that has been prevalent in mainstream philosophy as well as elsewhere (1). They note that philosophical treatments of women’s experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering are rare—a lack that the publication of this collection is meant to help rectify. “The main claim of [the] book,” the editors state, “is that pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering yield subjective and embodied standpoints from which to consider a wide array of philosophical areas and topics” (7). They dedicate the volume to Sara Ruddick, and consider it a contribution to the body of work on the “rethinking of maternal subjects” (1).

The chapters are organized into three sections, which I’ll just list briefly to provide a sense of the range of topics addressed in this collection. The first section is entitled “Maternal Norms, Practices, and Insights,” and includes essays that, the editors state, “highlight the philosophical insights that [maternal] norms and practices can yield” (7). This section includes chapters on transracial adoption (Jean Keller), the invisibility of postpartum mothers in pregnancy and childbirth lay literature (Jennifer Benson and Allison Wolf), sensations of disgust that mothering a child can raise and how it can be used to enforce social norms (Sherri Irwin), and two chapters on breastfeeding (Christine Overall and Tabitha Bernard, and Lissa Skitolsky). The second section, “Maternal Roles and

Relations,” according to the editors, “focuses on the philosophical significance” of such roles and relations (10). In this section are chapters on a psychoanalytic analysis of mother-daughter relations (Alison Stone), on stepmothers as possible hybrid beings and “world travelers” (in the sense used by Maria Lugones) that could serve as a model for care ethics (Becky Sukovaty), on why philosophers don’t tell their mothers’ stories (Joshua Shaw), and two chapters on mothering with disabilities (Maeve O’Donovan and Christine A. James). The final section is entitled “Maternal Phenomena, Phenomenology, and Aesthetics,” which, the editors explain, “explores the phenomenology, representations, and aesthetic experiences that are encountered in and associated with motherhood” (14). This section has chapters on pregnancy as an exercise in learning to die (as prescribed, e.g., by Hellenistic philosophers) (Brooke Schueneman), on the experiences of community reactions to the pregnant body (Julie Piering), on the phenomenology of the first few months of motherhood and its implications for workplaces practices and policies (Sally Fischer), on why there aren’t many images of childbirth in visual art (Peg Brand and Paula Granger), and on gestation and giving birth as experiences of the sublime (Sheila Lintott).

In addition to the larger argument addressed in the text, that maternal subjectivity is often hidden in the mainstream philosophical canon (at least in the West), several of the chapters also speak about particular topics that are often ignored, or about things that are hidden from popular or artistic culture. There is only room here to discuss a few out of numerous examples.

Jennifer Benson and Allison Wolf, in “Where Did I Go? The Invisible Postpartum Mother,” point out that in pregnancy and childbirth lay literature (in North America), the “fourth trimester” is largely ignored, and where there is discussion of it the mother is eclipsed in favor of discussing the needs of others (the baby, the sexual partner). Very little of the numerous pregnancy and childbirth books they examine is devoted to maternal health and maternal needs in the first few months after childbirth, and what there is downplays the difficulties that are often experienced by new mothers. Benson and Wolf

argue that this phenomenon contributes to women's oppression by making it appear as if one's physiological, psychological, emotional and other challenges and needs during this period are aberrational or not important. Thus, they "call for a lay literature and a culture that affirms the existence and importance of postpartum women in their own right" (45).

Maeve O'Donovan notes, in "The Practical and Theoretical Challenges of Mothering with Disabilities: A Feminist Standpoint Analysis" that both feminist and disability studies literature lack adequate research on the experiences of mothers with disabilities. The invisibility of such mothers is made worse in the case of mothers with less visible disabilities, such as cognitive impairments, and even more so for "mild" cognitive impairments such as ADHD. O'Donovan examines the challenges facing mothers with disabilities, and then turns to feminist standpoint theory to argue that such mothers themselves should be able to discuss their own experiences in scholarly work, to avoid an "epistemic injustice" (according to Miranda Fricker) wherein distorted views of their experiences go without proper dissent and correction (102). The problem is that there is a bias towards "adequate reasoning abilities and able(body)-ness in our conceptions of the human person" that "exclude persons with disabilities from scholarly activity" (101). O'Donovan concludes that research *by* mothers with disabilities is needed to show that they are competent, and in some ways may have advantages that mothers without disabilities do not.

In "Why Don't Philosophers Tell Their Mother's Stories? Philosophy, Motherhood, and Imaginative Resistance," Joshua Shaw asks about something else that has been hidden, noted directly in the title. He notes that male philosophers have engaged in all sorts of thought experiments requiring them to imagine themselves in various subject positions different from their own (including bats and brains in vats), but there is little reflection in the philosophical literature by men on the experiences mothers (or women generally). Shaw suggests that even when we engage in imaginative reflection we may be automatically skewed into thinking of situations that are familiar to those we

ourselves have experienced. By reflecting on his own experiment of trying to learn about the experience of motherhood by talking to his own mother, Shaw notes that it's not enough just to try to talk to mothers about their experiences because these conversations will be different from those that women have amongst themselves. "What is needed" instead, he argues, is "further reflection on how to make the highly gendered social contexts in which mothers tell their stories more accessible to men and how to encourage men to learn from them" (149).

Finally, in "The Aesthetics of Childbirth," Peg Brand and Paula Granger ask, "why are there so few representations of childbirth in visual art?" (215). They note that there are plenty of images of mothers, even pregnant women; but there are few images of the act of giving birth in modern, Western visual culture even though such images were more prevalent in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome (220-221). Brand and Granger argue that sexism and patriarchy are major factors in the disappearance of such images from visual art. As childbirth became medicalized it became the sphere of male doctors rather than female midwives and attendants. It thus moved from a more public, communal (at least for women) activity to a private one between a woman and her doctor, away from the eyes of others. In addition, they argue, claims that people don't want to see the pain experienced by the woman and the blood and other bodily substances involved are mitigated by the fact that similar sorts of images seem acceptable in popular visual culture as long as they are associated with more male-dominated activities like war or criminal violence. They point out that patriarchy results in the hiding of many aspects of women's lives, but especially "the ones deemed unpleasant or unimportant by great literary and philosophical thinkers" (230).

This volume was inspired by a conference in 2009 at the University of Oregon called *Philosophical Inquiry into Pregnancy, Childbirth and Mothering*. Most of the chapters in the volume are fairly short, making me wonder if many of them were papers given at the conference. This length means more chapters can be included, but it also means some of the arguments are not as well fleshed

out as I'd like. For example, I would have liked further description of the practices Hellenistic philosophers used in "learning to die," in Schueneman's chapter, in order to better see how the experience of pregnancy could be similar to those practices. I would also have liked to hear more in Sukovaty's article about Lugones' view of "hybrid beings" and "world travelling" to understand how stepmothers can be thought of as such beings, and a bit more in Lintott's article about how the ambiguity of the pregnant woman's situation (blurring lines between self and other) is related to philosophical views of the sublime. These are minor concerns, however, and the volume overall is a very useful contribution to both feminist and philosophical literature (not that those always have to be separate!). Personally, I learned a lot by reading this text about what remained hidden in my own understandings of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering.