

# **Telling Truths**

## Storying Motherhood

EDITED BY  
SHEENA WILSON AND DIANA DAVIDSON



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# Networks of Relations

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## Introduction to Writing Motherhood

SHEENA WILSON

**A**S MOTHERS we summon the depths of our personal power to bear our children into the world, literally and figuratively, and in so doing we are left bare. Exposed. The place we negotiate somewhere between our sense of self, our children, and society, is the liminal space of motherhood out of which our stories emerge. These stories are not always easy to share. Often it is hard to find the words to express the complexity of what happens when our socially constructed dreams of ourselves as mothers and our aspirations for our children intersect with our everyday lived realities: mothering through separation, divorce, combined family scenarios, and step-mothering; fostering; adopting; parenting through post-traumatic stress; mothering through child behaviour disorders, learning disabilities, physical disabilities; parenting through, and parenting children with, mental health issues; parenting through poverty; parenting across cultures; parenting in the face of racial discrimination; navigating heteronormativity as LGBT mothers; surviving the death of a child, the death of a spouse, and continuing to parent; surviving the betrayals and deceptions of our womanly bodies, of infertility, of miscarriages, of eating disorders; parenting through political and environmental crises; and ultimately, if our dreams go as planned, of having the privilege to learn to mother all over again—as we love, let go, and mother our adult children.

The moment of transformation from woman to mother is different for us all. Some of us morph into mothers at the inception of the idea, the knowledge we want to or will soon become mothers.

Others of us become mothers only once we have traveled in childbirth or after we have been handed our babies by surgically scrubbed OBGYNs. Some of us become mothers when we see our child in a photograph for the first time, or once we have flown the world over to meet our infant, or toddler or teenager in a foreign orphanage, or when a social worker knocks on the door holding the hand of a child who will become our own. For some of us the transformation to mother is less immediate. Even while we labour to perform the duties of motherwork and childcare, some of us still struggle to accept ourselves as mothers. This can occur due to postpartum depression, but it also happens for many other complicated reasons. Sometimes it is because we still walk unrecognized as mothers among our family and friends: perhaps while we struggle through fertility treatments, secret pregnancies, multiple miscarriages and even stillbirths. Then there are those of us who still go unrecognized because we have passed our children to other mothers through adoption or foster care. And then there are still others who feel unable to claim our status as mothers because our mothering is linked to some adjectival descriptor—a linguistic hint—that our version of mothering is somehow occurring in the shadow of genuine mothering, perhaps because we are birth-mothers or surrogate-mothers or foster-mothers or adoptive-mothers or step-mothers or single-mothers, or divorced-mothers or depressed-mothers or transgender-mothers or lesbian-mothers or poor-mothers or welfare-mothers or some other-mother. And finally, there is the plight of almost all mothers who parent in the shadow of imagined and imposed social dictates around how mothering should be practiced; and these notions of motherhood engender shame and confusion, and create fractures amongst communities of women based on false visions of what defines motherhood.

These are the stories the contributors to this collection are authoring—bearing into being and in so doing baring themselves to us, their readers, their community, other mothers and parents. Collectively, they are telling some of the truths of mothering in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is their contribution to the body of published and publicly acknowledged women’s writing, and motherwriting. Together we are resisting

imposed definitions of motherhood and writing ourselves into the world.

### MOTHERHOOD WRITES: RESISTANCE

The stories in *Telling Truths* contribute to an ongoing dialogue of rupture aimed at displacing patriarchal motherhood and ultimately at disrupting existing narratives of what it means to be a woman and mother. Motherhood, like marriage or any other institution, is subject to regulation and discipline—largely social but also legal and criminal. Versions of motherhood condoned by patriarchy limit and contain women’s potentialities, often denying our subjectivity as thinking, acting, becoming women who exceed our roles as mothers.

Using literary license, contributing authors explore their lived realities and personal mothering experiences in ways that, when considered collectively, have the potential to expose falsely restrictive definitions of motherhood. Not every contributing writer is consciously acting according to or against particular definitions of mothering, but all of these stories complicate and break open constraining ideals of motherhood to which none of us can, and many of us don’t want to, conform.

To write is to resist being restricted into predetermined roles. It is to experiment with what in the 1970s Adrienne Rich called being a courageous mother.<sup>1</sup> What, in the 1980s, Baba Cooper called radical mothering.<sup>2</sup> What Ariel Gore called hip mothering at the turn of the new millennium. What Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels term rebellious mothering in 2004.<sup>3</sup> And what Andrea O’Reilly has described in great detail as mother outlaw (as Rich had before her), and empowered mothering, in all its modes, including feminist mothering, which Fiona Joy Green has written about extensively.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, empowered mothers, according to O’Reilly, express their identity through “work, activism, friendships, relationships, hobbies and motherhood. These mothers insist on their own authority as mothers and refuse the relinquishment of their power as mandated in the patriarchal institution of motherhood” (*Feminist Mothering* 7). Empowered motherhood leaves a space for all of us to mother as an extension

of ourselves and not as the fulfillment of a prescribed mandate.

Even to write our stories is considered, by some, a transgression. In particular, to write motherhood as creative non-fiction, the genre of this collection, might be judged a moral lapse. For creative non-fiction is a form based in experience and while its writers are empowered to use creative techniques associated with fiction to push the boundaries of how we tell truths, ultimately it is a truth-telling genre aimed at unveiling the “real.” The edges of the stories of mothers are amorphous and jagged, infringing into territories inhabited by our children. For where do our stories end and the stories of our children begin? Where do we, as mothers, end and where do our children begin? A critique that we do not adhere to in this collection demarcates territory: these stories are not our stories, they do not belong to us because by writing about our children—minors for whom we are responsible—we are somehow profiteering or robbing or damaging them. However, this critical stance is part of a long silencing tradition that removes mothers from the spotlight, denying our own central role in the narrative of family. Of course, many contributors to this collection are writing their truths under pseudonyms to protect their children and their own identities. Yet, they are still driven to share these experiences, to contribute to a collective story of motherhood that is as complex and difficult as it is rewarding and empowering. And in so doing, we build a repertoire of new or familiar choreographies.

Women’s tradition of storytelling is as long as that of men’s stories and male authors. However, the oral and unpublished and private nature of these stories has meant that we have not been able to preserve large quantities of this female knowledge and transmit it through the generations. Little of the practical realities or the more sophisticated contemplations of women’s lives have been preserved—fewer still in literary forms. Historically, if women were literate, much of what they wrote remained unpublished, private endeavours recorded in epistolary and diary writing forms. Writing—a practice seen as unfit for women was an alleged cause for madness. A writing woman: at one time, the very definition of an untamed and unruly female, and yet, women still had a need to tell their stories. Hidden stories. Private poems. Circulating unofficially, if they were shared at all. We can only imagine the

rich her-stories of the oral tradition that have been lost to us. Even from what was written, much has been lost to the archive, despite the valiant and ongoing efforts of literary historians. That said, over the last four decades, women and mothers have increasingly had the social place and privilege to write their stories.

### WRITING MOTHERHOOD INTO THE CENTRE

We are the stories we tell about ourselves. The writers in this collection are writing to create knowledge—to know themselves—as mothers. They are writing to record their mother-knowledge and mother-experiences. They write to share this knowledge with women across time and space. Their writings have the potential to disrupt what has been written about women and mothers. These women contribute to the stories already told, already written, already shared: they contribute to writing away our absence. Stories of motherhood are scant in the recorded history of world literature, where men have historically been the protagonists, and women maintained peripheral roles. To write motherhood is to reposition existing daughter-centred cultural narratives.<sup>5</sup> To write motherhood is to write ourselves into the centre of the story.

The cover image, by Montreal artist Laura Endacott, which is part of a larger project titled *Phantom Vessel*, works to re-imagine maternal space. The design of this installation piece limits movement, symbolic of the restrictions of motherhood, but it also transitions mothering from the domestic to the public sphere, where participants in the project can engage in discussion and (re)articulate the place and agency of motherhood, and parenting, in contemporary cultural life. (For more details see “Notes on the Cover Image.”) Much like Endacott’s installation project, the stories in this book explore the limits of mother-identities undergoing transition.

In “Not my Children,” Kat Wiebe, must reconsider her relationship to her very young children as a result of divorce. Wiebe explores her grief at the imposed transformation to her attachment-mothering practices as she learns to temporarily but continuously separate from her very young boys, in order to co-parent with their father.

Chris Bobel, in “The End of When,” flounders as she attempts to parent one child while drowning in the agony of losing another.

er. Her story of Gracie's unexpected death in a car accident on a school trip exposes her "searing grief" that never subsides and which leaves her angry and behaving in ways that cut "permanent holes" into Zoe, her surviving daughter.

Garrett Riggs, in "Changing Terms," tells of what it is like to transition from a mother to a father, to undergo hormone treatments, and to have family and friends and colleagues make the transition from female to male pronouns, to a new name, to new terms on school forms, no longer filling in the blank next to "mother," but identifying as "father" instead, while knowing that his ability to parent has been enriched by having lived as both sexes. He is mother and father to his boys.

Janice Williamson's collage essay, "Pivot: Fragments from Mothering Through Time," speaks to the daily morphability required of her: of what it has meant to be an academic woman whose own infertility led her to adopt and parent as a single mother and whose motherlove and motherwork is paralleled by the work she engages in as a public intellectual committed to many human rights and environmental issues. And through it all, the bonds between her own mother, herself and her-now teenage daughter resonate with the possibilities of genealogies forged by love and devotion and commitment to family and friends and community that encompass and exceed the limits of biologically determined networks.

Fiona Tinwei Lam's "The Front of the Bus," tells the story of an encounter on Vancouver city transit. She poignantly reveals what it means to mother in the face of racism and to be confronted by vicious ignorance in a public setting. In writing this essay, she calls all Canadians to account for the many silences—ongoing and historical—in this country.

Several contributing mothers to the collection explore what it means to have a child who struggles to conform to social and institutional expectations of the good child for any number of reasons, including developmental disabilities and past trauma. Janine Alcott and Karen Grove explore these issues from the perspective of biological mothers, while Susan Olding, Martha Marinara, and P. R. Newton share similar experiences as adoptive mothers.

In "Constellation," Alcott employs the configurations of the stars and the myths of ancient Greece to provide shape to her story and

that of her youngest son, as the two of them attempt to navigate a world in which they are both warriors and he, in particular, is dislocated from another time and place: a “bright but tempestuous” child who struggled to navigate the transitions between his divorced mother and father, and who even later in life flails in his attempts to conform to the high-achieving expectations of his parents and grandparents.

Grove, in “Crazy Too,” tells of being judged, along the lines of a “refrigerator mother<sup>6</sup>”; her parenting is considered to be a cause of her son’s behaviour, later diagnosed as autism. Crazy, in this story, becomes the catchall for an inability to conform to the institution of motherhood, to the educational institution, and even to the institutional demands of the child psychiatric hospital in the 1990s.

Olding’s “Push-Me-Pull-You,” Marinara’s “You Don’t Know What It’s Like,” and Newton’s “Ethiopian Incense,” all expose the challenges of mothering children with reactions and coping mechanisms as complex, unexpected and unknown as their histories—biographical and medical. Whether it is autism and other medical diagnoses, or traumas of abandonment and violence, all of these mothers share how these issues express in ongoing everyday ways, hinting at other stories about what this means for spouses and siblings and marriages and family life.

Kate Greenway writes “Ephemera” from the perspective of an adoptee, whose thirty-five-year-old unwed mother—a career woman—was still forced by the social mores of 1960s-era Canada to relinquish her baby girl. Greenway makes explicit the constraints her mother’s generation faced—not having the options other twenty-first-century single mothers write about elsewhere in this collection—as she renders explicit the fundamental losses of the adoption process: “the loss of the child, loss of the mother, of agency, biological connection, familial identity, ritual, and story.”

Lynn Gidluck, by contrast, writes of the positive gains of adoptive mothering in “Reflections on Becoming a ‘Real’ Mother.” After having adopted two daughters from China, Gidluck recounts her experiences of pregnancy and natural childbirth: her own reactions, as well as other people’s thoughtless commentary about how she will now become a “real” mother, throwing into question her

status as mother to her older daughters, and making her worry for their sense of security and place.

Eating disorders also factor into mothering and becoming a mother. Melissa Morelli Lacroix in “Nine Months to a New Me” illustrates the mental and emotional gymnastics required to healthfully nourish her pregnant body and her baby, gaining weight month after month, after only just in the previous five years having managed to lose the weight associated with compulsive eating—a personal history that leaves her body and her body image scarred.

Anne Cameron Sadava in “The Lucky Ones” tells of being re-confronted with the eating-disorders of her own youth as she is forced to watch her daughter struggle with anorexia. Cameron Sadava tells of her self-doubt and multi-layered guilt, and shares how this experience also leads to greater empathy for her own mother, who must have suffered in similar ways years earlier. Furthermore, all of this takes place just as her daughter transitions to adulthood and Cameron Sadava must negotiate and learn to parent her in new ways.

Parenting adult children is also the subject of Leslie Vryenhoek’s “Goodbye, Girl.” Vryenhoek tells of the very different relationships she has with her two now-grown daughters and she explores the difficulties inherent in transitioning from being the mother-nucleus of her family, to mothering from the sidelines—“adjunct” to the lives of her daughters, as she terms it.

For different reasons and at a different stage in her children’s lives, Sandra McEnhill too must learn to parent her daughters under shifting conditions. In “Let’s Make Glitter Cards” she takes readers on her journey through quite a different story, one of parenting after divorce, and the all-too-common but more rarely disclosed realities of parental alienation.

Mother love is forever accompanied by the fear that we will not be able to keep our children safe. Ann Sutherland in “Behind the Gate” tells of how she very nearly ran over her son as a toddler, and she explores the element of fear in our practices of motherhood—our terror at what can happen if we cannot keep our children safe.

By contrast, Bobbi Junior tells the hard story of what does happen. In “Tell Me About Today...” her teenage daughter survives a terrible car crash, paralyzed by a spinal cord injury. Junior illustrates the

complexities of surviving those first few years after the accident, and exposes how she was forced to transform her mothering if her daughter was ever to achieve maturity by making the mistakes that any teenager would, despite lacking the independence to do so without her mother's knowledge.

Genealogical ties are explored in several of these pieces. Allison Akgungor's "Needing Mom" celebrates her own mother and the role she played in supporting Akgungor and her young husband, virtual newlyweds, as they were confronted with his palliative brain cancer diagnosis. Through a genealogy of caring, Akgungor now passes on this same motherlove to her own adult daughter struggling with the challenges of a working twenty-first-century mother.

In "Nesting Dolls," Nancy Slukynski writes a generative story that explores and celebrates the women in her family: namely, her matrilineal grandmother and mother. On the way to the hospital her friend says to her over the phone, "You birth like the person you are." But, who Slukynski is—as the story reveals—is strongly linked to the stories of her foremothers that empower her as she births her eldest daughter.

In "Traces," Jessica Kluthe, too, tells of how at the moment she suspects that she is pregnant, she begins to trace back her matrilineal line to her great-great-grandmother Rosina, who was a midwife in Italy and who had delivered hundreds of babies.

In "Me, Myself and My Mother," Sonia Nijjar explores the intricate weaving of her self into her mother's self, raising questions about where the boundaries between the two have melded into one. As the Canadian-born daughter of a mother whose own childhood in India was so different from her own, Nijjar struggles to understand—to "see"—her mother, to know who she once was and who she has now become. Through this "seeing" Nijjar attempts to find some happiness in the spaces of overlap, where her mother's being intertwines with her own sense of belonging. And as these genealogies are explored, so too are ethno-cultural roots. In the case of Stephanie Werner's "Voice," these go back to the French Canadian and German matriarchs in her family, who now resonate through her and her sister's own lives and can be heard in serious and more lighthearted ways through her three daughters. In M. Elizabeth Sargent's piece, "Our Dead Fish," she

explores how humour and motherlove factor into her daughters' early encounter with the death of their pet.

Faye Hansen explores what it means to mother as an older woman, drawing parallels between another woman who made this choice, and her own situation where she is unexpectedly required to take over the custody of her grandchildren. In "Late Born: Motherhood at Sixty-Two," Hansen touches on those hard truths about what it means to have taken on her granddaughter and her granddaughter's brother; the story also makes tentative forays into the complicated feelings around what it means to be mothering your grandchildren because your own child is unable to parent.

Naomi McIlwraith celebrates her biological mother for the love and knowledge that she has shown all the children that she has helped raise—both those babies she birthed and the many she has fostered. "Sleep Little One, Sleep" celebrates McIlwraith's Métis mother as an Indigenous wise woman, a powerful matriarch in her family and community. Likewise, in telling her mother's story, McIlwraith shares the story of her foster-sister Jill, another Indigenous woman whose legacy is to live "at the very margins of an affluent society where bitumen and banknotes lubricate the ball bearings of a global economy, and yet she and her children—her family—are left struggling for minimum subsistence." And in all of this McIlwraith invokes the injustices enacted by historical Canadian governments as well as the ongoing polemics of government legislation and the foster care system in Canada.

"The Estrangement," by contrast, tells quite another story of what it is to be the child of neglect and to dislike your own mother. Now a mother herself, Natasha Clark chooses to block her mother on Facebook not because of "resentment or grudges" but because she doesn't like her: "without an umbilical cord bridge, our paths would never have crossed."

Beth Osnes' "Mud Bath" tells of the beauty and the trials of foster mothering, as she reflects back on a special shared trip taken with her then teen-aged foster-daughter who had been cutting herself. As Osnes brings her daughter to life through story, she also exquisitely illustrates that all our children are complicated human beings, none of whom can be captured by one moment or tragedy. None of us are merely one story.

Julie Gosselin, in “Nevermom,” examines the role of step-mother, a social role that is historically linked to very negative attitudes and images of motherhood, but is increasingly common in our twenty-first-century North American context, where blended families are part of the new normal. Gosselin tells of the joys and pain of forging relationships with her step-daughters over many years, of loving them, and of mothering them as step-mother—a type of motherhood that even at its best goes largely unacknowledged. And then, she pushes this story one step further by sharing what happens when a woman mothers children to whom she has no biological or legal link and then her relationship with their father ends in divorce.

In “What I Need is a Wife,” Marita Dachsel takes up this oft-reiterated punchline and explores both what it might mean to live in a polygamous relationship and what it says about our culture that in the twenty-first century we still associate the burden of domestic labour with the role of wife.

Pam Klassen-Dueck’s “(Mis)Conceptions: A Meditation on Red” artfully explores the complexities of being a Manitoba Mennonite farm girl cum academic woman studying feminist history and motherhood. She writes of bell hooks and Adrienne Rich and Sara Ruddick and Madeleine Grumet and H  l  ne Cixous and confesses to feeling guilty for wishing she could be “in the mommy club.” She writes of ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology) and splendour and agony and longing: “It’s all so much beauty for a Manitoba Mennonite farm girl.”

Sara Graefe’s “Out in Mommyland” illustrates how the possibilities of reproductive technology have changed her life and the lesbian community. She shares how she is paradoxically both outed and invisible, “abruptly plucked from my tight-knit social circle in the queer community, and unceremoniously dumped onto the strange, other-worldly planet of Mommyland.”

In “Snow Day,” Robin Silbergleid writes of mothering as a single parent and an academic woman, choices that would not always have been technologically, economically or socially available to her. She writes about how “snow days ask you to stop and take notice. As a woman trying to get pregnant, I live too often in the future rather than the present, the blank screen of the negative

test.” And on the particular snow day in question, she contemplates both the current complexities and all the potentialities of mothering on her own.

Diana Davidson, in “Traps, Stars and Raising Men,” considers what it means to suddenly find herself co-parenting through divorce, with new and unexpected responsibilities. Pushing beyond her grief and loss to build a leprechaun trap with her son, she navigates other traps—actual and rhetorical—as she answers his hard questions about love and divorce in ways that will best allow him to become the type of caring, thoughtful, feminist man she dreams for him to be. Building something with her son also includes freeing herself to build a new independent life while she mothers him.

Nichole Quiring, in “Rush Hour,” writes about the plight of the working mother: rushing, running late, not there for her child when crises take place. The subtext is also her discontent with a neoliberal world and the demands of her lifestyle, which allow her the luxuries associated with an independent income—designer handbags and silk blouses—but relegate her child to the care of another woman for too many of his waking hours.

Jean Crozier, in “You Didn’t Take Any Pictures of Me,” provides us some insights into mothering in poverty, both in the moment, and what the longer term ramifications of this experience can be for children and families. Furthermore, this story highlights the very important reality that poverty is not a static condition and mothering and single mothering are often at the root of many women’s economic difficulties.

Sheena Wilson’s piece explores the near-universal distress of rushing to the doctor with a sick preschooler, but in this case against the particular backdrop of congested traffic in an oil refinery community. “Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World” links the personal with the political in a tense and evocative moment that parallels her desperation, as she struggles to help her small son suffering from an asthma attack, with our collective suffocation in a culture defined by oil production and a boom-and-bust economy. As an academic mother concerned with our environmental future, she provokes readers to question how this storied instance links the local to the global and connects past, present, and future, ending the collection with the hope that the social, political, economic,

and environmental winds of tomorrow will shift, “blowing in new directions.”

## CONCLUSION

*Telling Truths* aims to creatively expose the lived realities of mothers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as the authors explore how the expectations that others place on us or that we have internalized for ourselves often bump up against the realities that each woman faces as she tries to mother and discovers that her mothering is inextricably linked to the position she occupies within her specific socio-cultural context—her class and income level, marital or relationship status, age and generation relative to the time period (decade) of mothering experiences, cultural background and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, level of education, the environment and the setting—urban or rural. And of course, the child she is raising. Mothering takes place within a complex web of social, political, economic, and even environmental relations.

However, the truths revealed in this book cannot possibly encompass all the complexities of motherhood nor speak to all the potential mothering identities. Motherhood, as the stories in this collection reveal, is not one thing to all people. And one mother is not the same parent to each of her children. To the best of our ability we have presented a diversity of voices, but the reality remains that some groups of women and mothers have more education and greater economic stability—ultimately greater ability—to speak their truths. It would have been wonderful, for example, to include the voice of a teen-mother, especially considering the ways this particular story of motherhood is currently being glamorized and repositioned by reality television. Alas, we received no submissions from any teen-mothers. For similar reasons, it might not have been possible to include a story about mothering in poverty, which is why we were so pleased to have Crozier’s retrospective on being a working-poor mother. There are many other missing stories of other mothers beyond what could be included in any one book. As you read the stories we were able to publish, remain aware of the silent stories, those experiences of mothers who do not have

access to power. Listen for their stories—stories yet for the telling.

Stories of motherhood are important. They allow all of us to contemplate our place in the world. As mothers, we construct ourselves every day in relationship to our children, based on ourselves and on their reaction to us, based on our circumstances, doing the best we can with the knowledge we have at the time. Likewise, our children and partners are intricately involved in co-constructing themselves, our families, and our communities. Together, as writers and readers, as mothers and parents and communities, we are rewriting and rereading and reinventing what it means to mother and parent our children at this moment in history. Baring ourselves. Bearing witness. Mothering stories, like all stories, help us create knowledge, preserve knowledge, and transfer knowledge across generations.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For more on courageous mothering see Rich's *Of Woman Born*.

<sup>2</sup>In *Politics of the Heart*, Baba Cooper writes about radical mothering, advocating that children be involved in the resistance against cultural matriphobia that disrupts relationships, particularly mother-daughter relationships (238).

<sup>3</sup>On rebellious mothering, see *The Mommy Myth* by Douglas and Michaels. For Hip mothers see Gore in *Breeder*.

<sup>4</sup>For more information on feminist mothering see Green in *Mother Outlaws* and more recently *Practicing Feminist Mothering*. To understand any of the aforementioned mothering terms in context, see O'Reilly's many publications, specifically *Mother Outlaws* and *Feminist Mothering* (4).

<sup>5</sup>In *Textual Mothers* Podneiks and O'Reilly explain the project of mapping the “shifts from the daughter-centric stories (those which privilege the daughter's voice) that have, to be sure, dominated maternal traditions, to the matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives that have emerged over the last few decades as the mother's voice—in all its rhythms and ranges” (2).

<sup>6</sup>According to Rebecca Jo Plant, Austrian American child psychiatrist Leo Kanner first used the term in 1942 (185). Bruno Bettelheim also critiqued mothers of autistic children, and ultimately this was

part of a cultural climate of mother-blame that “attributed childhood autism and schizophrenia to frigid and inconsistent mothers (13). For more information on the cultural context, see Plant’s *Mom: the Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*.

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