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# Resisting, But Not Too Much: Interrogating the Paradox of Natural Mothering

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# Maternal Theory

Essential Readings

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## Resisting, But Not Too Much

### Interrogating the Paradox of Natural Mothering

CHRIS BOBEL

RECENTLY, I INVITED a local breastfeeding advocate and La Leche League leader named Mary Beth<sup>1</sup> to my "Gender and the Body" class. She framed her talk around "the many obstacles to making breastfeeding work in contemporary western society." Mary Beth promoted constant mother-baby togetherness and the rejection of the shiny new gadgets that new parents are expected to acquire whether they can afford them or not, and made a compelling feminist argument for keeping baby close. Women can and should trust their bodies to nourish their babies, she said. Say no to the male dominated medical establishment. Say no to patriarchal constructions of the sexualized breast. Take it back. And she was effective. As Mary Beth presented her argument, I watched my students process the information. One student caught my attention, angst evident on her face. During the lively Q and A she finally burst out with the following:

I'm really struggling with this.... On the one hand, I am trying to fight oppression and claim my place in society, get recognized in the work force, you know get liberated. But now you are telling me that to be really free, I should go back home and take care of babies, breastfeeding them all the time. And it does sound really great. But I feel stuck. I don't know what I am supposed to do!

As she spoke, I nodded knowingly. This dilemma haunts many feminists as they struggle to define and shape their lives and is the knot at the center of feminist mothering scholarship. Mothering scholar and sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn pointed to the conflict between feminists who regard maternally-derived gender differences as oppressive and those who reclaim motherhood as a source of power and status when she wrote:

We are reluctant to give up the idea that motherhood is special. Pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding are such powerful bodily experiences, and the emotional attachment to the infant so intense, that it is difficult for women who have gone through these experiences and emotions to

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think that they do not constitute unique female experiences that create an unbridgeable gap between men and women (22-23).

My aim in this chapter is to respond to this dilemma by looking closely at the kind of attached mothering practice that Mary Beth advocates as an expression of feminism.

Mary Beth is part of an emerging social movement of women I call "natural mothers." The natural mothers give birth to their babies at home; they homeschool; they grow much of their family's produce, and sew many of their clothes. The natural mothers seem, at first glance, an anachronism, recalling a time when some women derived their identities from raising families and excelling at the domestic arts. While their contemporaries negotiate daycare, babysitters, and bottle-feeding, the natural mothers reject almost everything that facilitates mother-child separation. They believe that consumerism, technology, and detachment from nature are social ills that mothers can and should oppose.

The natural mothers constitute a counterculture that enacts a particular form of activism, a kind of "everyday activism," to use Baumgardner and Richards' term or what New Social Movements scholars increasingly find in contemporary social movements—a focus on the day to day content of personal lives, linked with issues of identity rather than economic grievances characteristic of, for example, working class movements (see Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield). Natural mothers, working at the level of the individual and the familiar, seek to change culture one family at a time. But what is natural mothering's promise for social change? Does this particular kind of mothering trap or liberate women?

#### Getting to Know Natural Mothering

In the mid 1990s, I grew to know several small intersecting communities of natural mothers. I spent over two years in the field—participating in playgroups with my toddler and attending La Leche League meetings (the international breastfeeding support organization). I joined a food coop and "Creating Stronger Families (CSF)," an association of those who chose home-schooling, homebirth, and other parenting alternatives. CSF met for monthly potlucks and "working bees" in which members assisted the host family with a house project, and held an annual weekend conference that drew families throughout the Midwest. Later, I interviewed 32 natural mothers I met during the course of my fieldwork. Through these observations and interviews, I learned that Natural Mothering merges two lifestyle practices—Voluntary Simplicity and Attachment Parenting—while taking inspiration from Cultural Feminism.

Consciously anti-materialist and anti-consumerist, Voluntary Simplicity promotes a life freed from, as one of my informants put it, "biggering and bettering."

Voluntary Simplicity, also called Simple Living, dictates a lifestyle that derives meaning from relative austerity, minimized consumption and the belief that in-

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dividual well being is entangled with the well being of society at large (Longacre). Proponents of this lifestyle reject material preoccupations and opt for recycling, and in some cases, bartering and trading in place of traditional market exchange. They seek meaning in "doing it oneself," freed from the constraints of institutions and experts.

The practice of Attachment Parenting (AP), which is related to Voluntary Simplicity, addresses the concerns of parents who seek to depart from what they believe is the norm in a changing, alienating, and child-decentered culture. Family practice physician William Sears, together with his wife Martha Sears, R.N., popularized AP in their 30 books on pregnancy, birth, infancy, toddlerhood, discipline and nighttime parenting, beginning with *The Baby Book* in 1993. Now, the Sears are joined by their two oldest sons (also pediatricians) who characterize AP as "just doing what comes naturally" (<http://www.askdisears.com/faq/ap2.asp>). AP, the Sears argue, is the best way to create and maintain a bond with your children. AP facilitates healthy physical, spiritual, emotional and moral child development by placing a premium on extensive mother-child physical contact: "This style is a way of caring that brings out best in parents and their babies (1993: 2), they say. The Sears acknowledge that AP is not new, but simply "common sense parenting we all would do if left to our own healthy resources" (2).<sup>2</sup> Notably, while the practice is called Attachment Parenting and not mothering, this terminology is misleading. On the popular website AskDrSears.com, it is stated that "for the first year or two, a child is primarily bonded to his mother" and AP practices inscribe and support this bond. Mothers are attached to children and fathers and other potential caregivers operate merely in supporting roles.

Finally, as a movement that celebrates, rather than denigrates gendered qualities of nurturance and care, Natural Mothering is inspired by cultural feminism's unapologetic reclamation of domesticity and maternity. Cultural feminism, derived from Radical Feminist Theory, is also known as feminine feminism, domestic feminism, and difference feminism. It differs from more popular liberal feminist theory which regards essentialism as the source of women's subordination. Cultural feminist theory, on the contrary, names the devaluing of women's essential differences (whether biologically derived or culturally constructed) as problematic and at the root of sexism. Cultural feminists believe that women have developed their unique social orientation in the context of the domestic sphere, especially through the practice of mothering, as Nancy Chodorow famously argued. Creating a climate that celebrates rather than denigrates difference is the aim of cultural feminists. Natural mothering is seen as a concrete expression of this conceptualization. Nearly 50 percent of the natural mothers I studied explicitly identified as feminists; others expressed ideas compatible with feminist politics but did not call themselves feminists. Many of the mothers expressed frustration with a particular kind of feminism (typically seen as *the* feminism) which they saw as dictating that working outside the home was a measure of a woman's worth; they preferred a feminism that foregrounded their identity as women and resisted male standards. For example, as natural mother Grace Burton stated:

I feel that the women's movement of the 1960s robbed me of something. It did get me more pay in the workplace, and I don't mind that, but they also made me be in the workplace, and I mind that immensely.

In short, natural mothering is cultural feminist theory in practice.

So how does Natural Mothering, the product of these practices and ideologies, make sense of itself? In short, I argue that Natural Mothering is ultimately paradoxical. While it resists both technology and capitalism, it stops short of resisting patriarchy. Natural mothers accept the category 'woman' as it is socially constructed and fail to acknowledge the privilege necessary to enact their lifestyle. Thus, natural mothering's promise as a project of recreating motherhood, and by extension, society at large, is compromised (Bobel). Because it lacks a comprehensive and honest self-critique, its criticism of the institutions it resists is evaporated and its message is left open to co-optation.

### Interrogating the Paradox

This paradox demands a closer look. I found it expressed in the form of two key contradictions that each create a distinctive theoretical tension. The first contradiction centers on *choice*. The natural mothers spoke of a conscious and intentional decision to mother naturally, consistent with their identities as feminists and everyday activists for social change. One informant, whom I call Michelle Grant-Jones, is a mother of three with a B.A. in Women's Studies. Early in our interview, she admitted that "[she] might not look like much of feminist trooping around with [her] kids with no goal really before [her]" but was careful to draw a stark distinction between "stay-at-home mothers" of an earlier generation and herself. Her life, she asserted, was freely chosen and consistent with her feminism which recognizes the essential experience of womanhood, and by extension, motherhood. The distortion of this particularly raced and classed history of women's labor aside, her generational comment is interesting. Embedded in this discourse of choice lays a contradiction. Note, for example, the following exchange I had with Teresa Reyes, a biologist turned natural mother of four who shared how her plans shifted after the birth of her first baby. She originally planned to return to work and leave the baby with her husband, but something changed:

I just felt I had no choice.... I suppose I was a little surprised, because after she was born it was not an option for me to leave her.

Still other mothers responded to my query, why natural mother? with the response: "I just knew." I heard repeatedly how, when the mothers were faced with a decision, they simply followed their instincts and intuition. When I pushed them to provide a rationale for their choices, they paused and looked away wistfully, "I don't know. It just felt right to homebirth, to extend breastfeeding, to keep baby in bed with us" they told me in various iterations. Their mothering practice

relied on a particular embodied knowledge. But, of course, this begs a question: if knowledge is derived from the body, from a body regarded as natural and unmediated by culture, and if behavior is actually driven by instinctual impulse rather than reasoned response, is this choice? The natural mothers told me in no uncertain terms that they could NOT mother in any other way. Hence, the last rational choice they made was the choice to embrace an ideology of "nature knows best," an ideology shaped by biologically determinist and historically and culturally gendered understandings of women, mothers, and families. Simply put, natural mothering was the "choice" that chose them.

The second contradiction revealed in the discourse of natural mothering centers on *control*. The natural mothers believe they have wrested control of their personal lives from institutions and experts claiming to "know best." For example, natural mothers push birthing practices, patently resisting the obstetrical medical establishment. Natural mothers were shopping local food coops, buying in bulk, and buying shares in Community Supported Agriculture before major "natural foods" chain stores brought such natural, local and whole foods into the trendy, overpriced current in the mainstream. This suggests that natural mothers *do* (or at least *did*) exist on the margins, trailblazing, pushing institutions, and as a result, raising awareness. Natural mothering is radical in the very real ways it questions features of family life in an advanced capitalist society.

But if mainstream culture is rejected, does something else fill that void? The mothers spoke passionately of the importance of "taking mothering back" from institutions and "experts" and simultaneously waxed, with a blend of awe and resignation, on the futility of resisting *nature*. Over and over again, I heard stories of the mothers' abiding faith in nature, which served as a model and resource to them. Stacy Thurer McReardon, aspiring writer and mother of four, shared that when she learned to stop, in her words, "tweaking things," she adopted a philosophy of letting nature run its course and she was much happier for it. Ingrid Kitzinger, a mother of three, referred to childbirth as something you don't really control, something "that just happens to you." Clearly, this is a narrative of respecting omnipotent nature. But when the mothers spoke of nature, they spoke of a monolithic and static concept, predating humankind, which remains pure and unadulterated. To them, nature is the perfect model for human behavior because it is separate from and unpolluted by human manipulation. This view, of course, is problematic; it denies the many ways in which nature is indeed culturally constructed and thus dynamic. But to these mothers, the "fact" of nature's separation from culture is what renders it so appealing and powerful. Furthermore, the mothers told me, listening to nature led them to tune into the powerful mother-child bond. This relationship, they maintain, fuses mothers and children virtually into a single entity, extending the relationship developed during pregnancy. In this view, maternal self-sacrifice is not at the root of contemporary mothers' difficulties; rather, a culture that casts mothers and children in opposition in direct affront to "nature," is the root of personal and social dysfunction.

Among the serious repercussions of the merged mother-child identity at the

heart of natural mothering is the way it marginalizes fathers. When I pressed the mothers to say why they, as women, were the designated stay at home caregiver, practicing what Sharon Hays calls "intensive motherhood," explanations based on biological difference surfaced. Primarily due to the importance placed on breastfeeding, mothers seldom shared infant feeding with fathers or other potential caregivers. Over time, these feeding norms established caring patterns that persisted throughout mothers' and fathers' parenting careers. When the mother is positioned as the singular food source and furthermore, when nursing becomes the primary means of comfort for baby, mothers are quickly constructed as irreplaceable.<sup>3</sup> Based on a deeper understanding of the paradoxes of natural mothering, I turn to a brief discussion of this particular style of parenting's potential for social change.

### Can Natural Mothering Fulfill Its Promise?

Most of the natural mothers viewed their lives as strategic missions to effect social change. For example, Grace Burton claimed passionately: "I've decided that absolutely everything I do is political." But the expression of this politicization varies among the mothers. While some natural mothers participate in public activities, such as "nurse ins,"<sup>4</sup> most strive to effect social change through their daily practice of mothering outside the mainstream. But, I ask, can natural mothering reform society, one family at a time, or is it simply a form of narcissistic retreat devoid of impact beyond the empire of the individual family?

Sociologist and mothering theorist Barbara Katz Rothman conceptualizes American motherhood as "resting on three deeply rooted ideologies—capitalism, technology and patriarchy (26)." Katz Rothman argues that the effect of the three ideologies has been to split motherhood apart, forcing it into a series of dysfunctional dualisms such as mind and body, public and private, personal and political, work and home, production and reproduction and masculine and feminine, and I add to this list: nature and culture. Natural mothering, I argue, ably resists two of these three institutions: capitalism and technology, challenging the bifurcations that these institutions forge. But at the same time, its discourses of choice and control, deeply paradoxical at their core, fail to resist the third institution: patriarchy. The mothers' surrender of agency to so-called instinct and a romanticized view of nature reifies an essentialist construction of womanhood. Theirs is a politics of accommodation. Like maternalists of earlier eras who used their femininity to pressure men to take them seriously as moral role models and to exercise some authority, at least in the domestic sphere (see Cott; Epstein; Ryan), the natural mothers push boundaries of their role while embracing specific features of it; they "bargain with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti). Deniz Kandiyoti uses this term to convey the complex set of "rules and scripts regulating gender relations to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated" (286). That is, women, given their context-bound existence, strategize within their particular constraints, enabling them to resist

where and when possible. Natural mothering, a lifestyle that is simultaneously rebellious and obedient, represents precisely the kind of negotiation within male-dominated and -defined circumstances that Kandiyoiti theorizes.

Because natural mothering accommodates patriarchy, its potential for social change is compromised. But this is not the only reason, I venture, that the movement is limited. The privilege necessary to enact this particular lifestyle constructs natural mothering as the domain of the few, especially because natural mothers themselves seem blind to this privilege. Consider, for example, my conversation with natural mother Jeanette Zientarski who spoke of mothering as "changing the world." She argued for an instinctual basis for her natural mothering much like the intuitively derived practice beyond the scope of rational choice I discussed earlier. When asked, "why isn't this kind of mothering instinctual for everyone?" she met the question with silence. Recall that the natural mothers "just know" what is in the best interest of their children—mothering this way is driven by feeling, by gut level awareness. Thus, intellectualizing their "choices" is impossible, they told me, implying that my question was the wrong one, that I just didn't get it. But how can it be that some mothers operate on instinct while others do not? There must be a deeper explanation, and so, I turn to the characteristics of the natural mothers themselves.

All the informants were white and all appeared to be heterosexual; 88 percent were married; 87 percent owned homes; 75 percent of the husbands were white-collar professionals. 81 percent of the mothers had attended college and 69 percent had completed a degree (many of them advanced degrees). Fifty-three percent had significant and often extended travel experience, including living abroad, Peace Corps and missionary work. Obviously, this demographic does not reflect the general American population. These privileged women have access to resources as wives and homemakers, enjoying the prestige that accompanies their class, race, and sexuality. Since beginning my research on natural mothers, I've learned that the population is a bit more diverse than I first encountered. "Hip Mamas" (typically women in their 20s and early 30s with a political and or Punk edge who identify with icon of "the next generation of mothers" mother-writer Ariel Gore, lesbian mothers, and working class mothers also number among the women. But, on the whole, the natural mothers still enjoy what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural capital."

Because most natural mothers are white and college educated, they are less likely to come under attack for their alternative "choices." Imagine a poor woman of color spotted publicly breastfeeding an older child—she is vulnerable in a way a woman of more social privilege is not. A mother receiving state aid does not have the option of waiving vaccinations while an economically secure mother with private insurance does. An immigrant woman known to use herbal remedies to treat illness may be scolded by her child's pediatrician. At the same time, a more privileged mother may meet similar resistance, but her decision will not be seen as a consequence of her assumed ignorance or her "backward" culture. In sum, natural mothering is a parenting lifestyle not possible for everyone.

But it is not only the necessity of some measure of privilege that undermines the force of the movement to effect social change. The absence of an analysis advanced by the movement itself is noted, including the relative blindness the mothers have to their own cultural capital. This blind eye became apparent to me when I asked the mothers to describe the "typical natural mother." Their answers ranged from "people suspicious of popular culture," "Moms attuned to the sense of the natural," and people with "a strong sense of self." No one cited race, class, or sexuality characteristics as meaningful. This silence was profound and raises serious questions about the viability of a movement that does not fully see itself.

As I've shown, while the natural mothers resist technology and capitalism, they fail to challenge patriarchy. Natural mothers work to extract meaning and power from the maternal role, marshalling tremendous creativity and resourcefulness, and framing their choices with pride and a hope for social change. As homeschoolers, homebirthers, and natural health care consumers, they turn their backs on the mainstream. In so doing, they ask important questions about our parenting holy grails. But at the same time that the natural mothers live on the margins and swim upstream, they capitulate to definitions of womanhood and motherhood written in the service of patriarchy. There is not a project of rebelling against the expectation that mothers foreground their children's needs. There is not a project of challenging fathers to roll up their sleeves and provide more instrumental care (as both Nancy Chodorow and Sara Ruddick prescribed). Furthermore, because natural mothering fails to see the fundamental place of privilege in enactment of the lifestyle, it is vulnerable to cooption. Natural Mothering resists, but not too much.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This is a pseudonym as are the names of the informants I will discuss later in the paper.

<sup>2</sup>Of course, AP is not contained in the affluent "first world." Meredith Small for example, takes great care to point out the historical and global practice of AP, demonstrating the anomaly that is Western-style parenting with its premium on independence and mother-baby separation.

<sup>3</sup>This, of course, is neither a new observation nor an original argument. Over 30 years ago, Michelle Rosaldo pointed to women's childbearing and lactation as impairing their mobility and thus, dooming them to domesticity and subordination.

<sup>4</sup>An activist tactic through which mothers publicly breastfeed their children in protest of policies which ban or otherwise undermine breastfeeding (see Harmon).

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