

Excerpt from “Privacy”

Intimate Public

The first new century since women’s “liberation” has, indeed, produced a steady flow of post-feminist celebratory laps—Hanna Rosin’s *The End of Men* and Maureen Dowd’s *Are Men Necessary?* each topped the bestseller lists—as well as a not-insubstantial number of hand-wringers about how men have been left behind, the crisis in masculinity, and so on. And yet none of my friends seemed to feel particularly liberated: one survived a violent stalker, another was boxed out of her financial services job during her difficult pregnancy and prolonged bedrest, and yet another went through a difficult divorce after realizing that her new husband expected to wield total authority over her. All of these women have graduate degrees, boundless energy and ambition, and consider themselves feminists. But the thing that really knocked all of us sideways was pregnancy and motherhood. Some of them steadied themselves by following the “rules” to the last crossed T; others, like me, could only see the oppression of sexual difference in every recommendation from the American Association of Pediatrics, the advice about how to eat during pregnancy, the debates about home or hospital birth, and the near universal insistence on exclusive breastfeeding, etc. Despite our different choices and viewpoints, differences that sometimes led to long periods of “not talking about it,” it was the only thing we could talk about. (I personally devoured and related posts on the Berkeley Parent’s Network and Park Slope Parents, and despite the hopeful, gender-neutral names, most of the posters were moms). And judging from the proliferation of mommy blogs, lactation support groups, media coverage of the mommy wars, and parent advice networks, we weren’t the only ones. These outlets became both a location of conversation and, perhaps inevitably, an extremely effective vehicle for product placements—even the parent’s networks, which eschewed sponsorship, were filled with individual posts advising this product over another. Instead of writing my book or nurturing non-mommy-group friendships, I spent an insane amount of time researching the most “natural” bottle nipples, even as I railed against the imposition of a biologically-determined “women’s work” (yes—breastfeeding). What was the matter with me? And what was this sub-culture that suddenly seemed to consume...time, money, emotional energy, self-esteem, all of it? Because though all of these conversations purported to be supportive, they almost inevitably left me feeling alone.

So I did what any self-respecting pseudo-academic does in the midst of an identity crisis—I researched. I spent years combing through studies concluding that the benefits of breastfeeding had been exaggerated (why would “feminists” do that?), critiques of the cult of domesticity (were we still in that?), encomiums to the reproductive female body (I rejected essentialist feminism, but I appreciated the appreciation), before I found Lauren Berlant’s theorization of intimate publics:

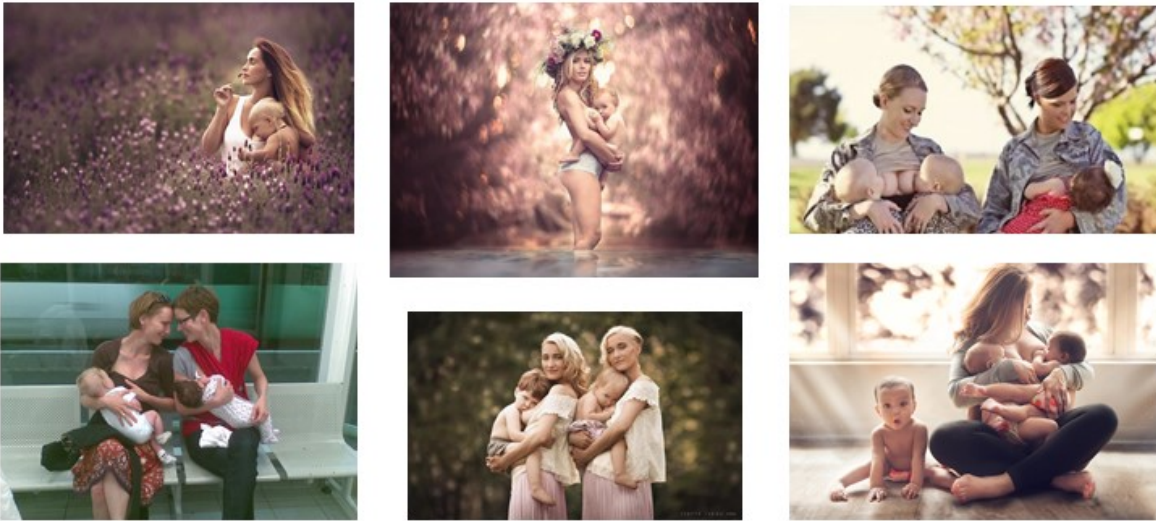
An intimate public operate when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires. When this kind of “culture of circulation” takes hold, participants in the intimate public feel as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions.¹

Berlant goes on to explain that the intimate public of “women’s culture” proposes identification “via modes of sentimental realism that span fantasy and experience and claim a certain emotional generality among women,” even as the participants and their stories “demonstrate diverse historical locations of the readers and the audience, especially of class and race.” It was clear to me, after being submerged in new motherhood, that this was a sort of intimate public within an intimate public, but that it was the core of 21st-century “women’s culture”—women might have cracked the glass ceiling, but we were still burdened with gendered baggage, the weight of which was obscured by the essentializing model of white, middle-class, stay-at-home motherhood. And this intimate public functioned exactly the way Berlant theorized: it “cultivate[d] fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real—social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life.”² Commiserating about breast pumps veiled over the difference between pumping in an executive office and pumping in a bathroom stall or a janitorial closet; complaining about clueless fathers took the place of confronting the fact that maternity leave, however much we hold it up as a panacea, results in a sometimes intractable gendering of household duties. The realities of second shifts and mommy penalties were layered over by questions about the

¹ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

² Berlant, *Complaint*, 5.

best stroller attachments, or advice for airplane travel with toddlers. BabyCenter.com, another online forum, is rife with posts that end with variations on “You got this, mama!” (I’ll save an analysis of the overuse of “mama” as a way to indicate a hip competence for another exasperated rant). And all of this girlfriend relatability doubly obscures the total absence of poor women in this intimate public—motherhood is universal, and so, then, are its imperatives, imperatives rendered almost non-negotiable by their paternalistic peddling by the “authorities”: the American Association of Pediatrics, the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, , the WHO’s “Baby-Friendly” Hospital Initiative (in my experience, “baby-friendly” translated to a higher likelihood of being harassed by a lactation consultant), the Maternal and Child Health Division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, etc. To varying degrees, these institutions propagate ideals without acknowledging their costs and their burdens, and the disproportionate pressure they put on women across social spectrums. This is an intimate public in service of the hegemonic status quo.



The top-page results of Googling “intimate public motherhood” are primarily idealized breastfeeding photos, some unexpectedly sexualized (center), given breastfeeding advocates’ insistence that it is *not* sexual.

But what was it about “modes of sentimental realism” that allowed these fantasies of motherhood to persist? What I started to notice was that, in the midst of a fairly polemical diatribe about the irreplaceable bonding conferred by breastfeeding or the terrible cruelty of sleep-training, most posts backpedaled with some half-hearted acknowledgment of choice: “it’s your choice, but...,” “but you

have to choose what's right for you," and "even if that means choosing 'good-enough.'" What is implicit in these comments is that choices are moral, and that we belong to a community that supports the reification of choice, even as it judges the purity of those choices. And that morality doesn't validate difference—economic, racial, biological—it just feels sympathy for it, as though it were something to be suffered through on the way to "an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world."³ If men are supposed to be irrelevant and the patriarchy is dead, then why are we still skulking around in private forums, that vehicle of public intimacy? If choice was supposed to be our liberation, then why are we bludgeoning each other with it? Or, worse, why hasn't choice actually liberated us from motherhood's inherently essentializing ideologies?

Here's the explanation I've come up with: our sentimental Republican Mother married founding patriot Neoliberal Choice, and they live in Home-Sweet-Privacy. Or, since allegory can be annoying, I'll try out an historic approach: it is political, systemic, and deeply internalized.

Second wave feminism introduced women's health as a political issue and, for some, natural motherhood represented a way to reclaim the maternal body from a largely male medical establishment. But by the beginning of the 21st century, it became a widespread imperative—and one that the medical establishment embraced, both as a good faith response to, and as a more market driven co-opting of, the dissent voiced a generation before. As we near the 20-year watermark of the new century, this imperative has started to crack: many new mothers question the gendering of labor that natural motherhood demands, the moral weight that it imposes, and the supposed "scientific consensus" that drives its widespread enforcement. But the larger question is how a movement that started with earnest feminist dissent morphed into what many women feel to be an "undue burden."⁴ This essay argues that this absorption of demands for female autonomy into the persistent structure of sex inequality is a pattern that began with the Revolutionary-era privatization of female political participation, a pattern that repeated itself during both the first wave campaigns for suffrage and the second wave campaigns for reproductive rights. That is, we keep asking for equality, and we get maternity and the private sphere.

³ Berlant, *Complaint*, 5.

⁴ This term makes its most significant appearance in abortion case law, beginning with *Pennsylvania v. Casey*.

In lieu of the enfranchised female citizen, the Revolutionary era's Republican Mother became the model of the ideal American woman, and sympathy⁵ her regulatory mechanism. This privatized her political influence; thus, privacy and maternity, from the revolutionary generation on, were the dominant characteristics of her civic profile. And whether or not a woman was a mother, the private, sympathetic influence granted to the Republican Mother established the boundaries of female political participation. But these characteristics weren't constitutionally enshrined—continued disenfranchisement obviated the need. It does not seem an accident that just as campaigns for suffrage began to gain real momentum, the right to privacy was proposed, by Brandeis and Warren, as being located at the intersections of the First, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Ninth Amendments, as read through the 14th Amendment, thereby providing legal protection for the traditional public/private binary in the face of increased pressure by the suffrage movement. And, significantly, suffrage was only achieved when proponents pivoted back to maternity as the central argument—as mothers, women had particular moral capacities and responsibilities that were not shared with men, and they could not fulfill these responsibilities without an ability to directly influence political decisions. So, under the mantle of motherhood, women got the vote.

Fifty years later, second wave feminism was handed the same compromise: not autonomy and equality, but a more limited control over maternity. Woman's rights were constitutionally protected, via *Griswold and Roe*, not through the 19th amendment or an equal rights amendment, but through the right to privacy—a pivot that Catherine Mackinnon has famously called “an insult got up as a gift.” The metastasis of the natural motherhood imperative in the 21st century only underscores the extent to which women's rights have been tied ever more securely to the founding values of Republican Motherhood: the sanctity of the private sphere (maternity leave and home birth), the mother-child bond (breastfeeding and attachment parenting), and the exercise of communal sympathy in place of public political action (mommy blogs, lactation consultants, homebirth “communities,” pediatric advice). Continuing to understand pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity as the underpinning of sex equality, privacy as its legal guarantee, and sympathy as the apogee of its expression represents an iteration of—not a departure from—the founding inequalities of a patriarchal republic.

⁵ Though “sympathy” and “sentiment” are sometimes used interchangeably in analyses of this mode, we might understand the difference to be aesthetic vs. affective; thus, sentimental texts were intended to evoke sympathy. Glenn Hendler provides a good introduction to the distinction in *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Raleigh, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

What I'm saying is that natural motherhood is a bait and switch in the fight for economic equality. We keep asking for equality, and we keep getting motherhood. And we self-regulate, setting loose our sympathy on our sisters like a pack of police dogs. Or at least strict chaperones. It may be the end of men, but the ideology of traditional motherhood doesn't appear to have noticed.