

"THREATENED PEOPLE DON'T BREED": THE MATERNAL STRIKE IN AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WRITING 1920s TO 1950

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Threatened people don't breed: the 1930s and early '40s are written in Australian literary history as a time of crisis, — a time in which the social and economic structures of the nation are up for contest, — a time in which international trends of war and revolution figure as inevitable and immediate. Reproductivity is featured by many writers as one of these historical forces, as a timeline of generative identity itself vulnerable to, indeed determined by, economic and social factors that threaten it, and this presentation is often as an invigoration of women's role as the actors or custodians of maternity. Socialist use of scientist discourses of the ordering of modernity in juxtaposition with the residues of suffragist and imperialist equations of female citizenship with motherhood encouraged women activists and writers to focus on women's ownership of reproduction as production, and as simultaneously an *a priori* sacred to the narratives of nationhood. Birth control advances allowed some white women to position themselves in control of their reproductivity, to threaten its withdrawal, and thus eloquently threaten the entire social and economic order.

This paper is asking some preliminary questions of representations of the maternal strike that I may not yet have the answers for: how far did available discourses allow this resistance as an articulated site of unity for women across both class and race, or did its articulation work as nation building in the continuing imperialist project and the containment of the threat of communist disaffection? The other question is whether or not the maternal strike ever actually happened — whether its invocation as threat or as symptomatic reading of population rates in public discourse was its only real existence, or whether some women did refuse to have children, did control their fertility in protest and response to an exploitative and war-mongering world and the answer to this is — yes, that they always have, and even as a collective strategy of disruption and resistance.

In the first years of birth control activism in Australia, especially in response to reports of falling population growth, much of women's writing and journalism spoke for birth control as part of a maternal strike against war and economic exploitation. Mary Gilmore's column in the *Worker* vocalised an early socialist position that pitted maternity against economic exploitation, defending women against accusations of selfishness from the 1903 Commission into the Birth Rate. The strike metaphor seems to appear later; in 1912, poet and activist Marie Pitt called it "The Greatest Strike in World History" and her column in the *Socialist* includes the loudest innovation of it:

Slave mart bosses may bluster as they please, medical mercenaries in the pay of fat fleshmongers may talk learnedly and threaten dire evils to prudent mothers of three or less, and suave magnates of Churchianity may prate of the sins of ease or pleasure until they go black in the face — the strike is

going, is going like a forest fire with a 65-miles-an-hour gale behind it, and it will only stop when human life has become of more importance than successful commercial exploitation of human life ... ("The Greatest Strike in World History" 2).

The maternal strike foregrounds the position of women both in capitalism and in its critique, but unlike some other socialist interpretations on the 'woman question', it presumes the agency and affect of women, especially over and through reproduction. Leading figures of the European Socialist movement, such as Anatole France and Rose Luxemburg proposed a "birth strike" to prevent the continued flow of labor into the capitalist market (Davis 213). Within this model, birth control can operate as part of a socialist resistance to the exploitation of labour, instead of as evidence of the corruption of natural processes by degrading capitalism, as it did in some arguments. The imagined withdrawal of maternal labour is a wrestling of its metaphoric power back from hegemonic discourse, in a Lysistrasian echo which privileges sexual difference as maternity, and maternity as a site, understood as resource and labour, through which women were placed in negotiation with market mechanisms of exchange. Rather than originating wholly within feminist scientific socialist theory, however, the maternal strike as a possibility has figured large in the history of much feminist thought in Australia, principally because of the sporadic but continuing assertion of maternity as a point of unity across difference. The maternal strike persisted in various humanist and peace movements through feminist deployments of it as a manifestation of opposition between maternity as the beginning or source of life and war as an evil force for death and destruction. At times both a resistance to and a re-deification of pronatalist maternity, the maternal strike manifested differently according to different writers, and is a point of connection between the more middle class, eugenist birth control movement and left thinking more generally resistant to what was understood as population control.

Even the Principal of Women Police in South Australia, in a report to the National Health and Medical Research Council in 1937, linked lower birth rates with resistance to economic depression and war, stating "A small proportion of women will say that as there is no prospect of peace in the world, they will not produce children for cannon fodder, or to join the ranks of thousands of unemployed girls and boys now wasting their youth in idleness" (Report 31-32, Siedlecky & Wyndham 72). Judith Allen's *Sex and Secrets* places the same emphasis on female agency in characterising this as family planning, declaring that in the period between 1920 and 1939, "Women achieved a record low in average fertility" (155). Birth control activists around the world invoked the revolutionary power of birth control as a disturbance, of earthquake proportions, to capitalism, war and economic exploitation. Margaret Sanger, the internationally renowned North American birth control activist declared:

War, famine, poverty and oppression of the workers will continue while woman makes life cheap. They will cease only when she limits her reproductivity and human life is no longer a thing to be wasted (Sanger 54).

Marion Piddington, the Australian birth control activist who espoused a mixture of conservative marriage-based feminism and eugenics, described abortion as part of an enforced “race destruction” that could be resisted by maternal strike, in the magazine *Health and Physical Culture* in April 1930. Piddington was horrified by the apparent increase in the rates of poor women procuring abortion, but refrained from condemning them, using strike imagery to point to depression as the cause:

Mothers are on strike, and the root cause of the strike is to be found in the determination on the part of those willing to procreate that they will not bring children into the world to perish (Curthoys 84).

Jean Devanny as an associate of Piddington’s, was as well-known for her birth control and sex education activism as her Communist work and her many published novels. Much of Devanny’s journalism and lecturing was concerned with promoting birth control, even when Party papers distanced themselves from her positions. Audrey Johnson’s book on militant women in Australia remembers Devanny’s championing of birth control as more important to her than her advocacy of women’s sexual freedom, though they were related. “She campaigned for wide dissemination of knowledge about birth control and was as willing to address meetings on that subject as on politics — indeed she considered birth control a political topic”. Johnson attributes an article on birth control in *Working Woman* to Devanny, which positions women explicitly, through maternity, as powerful social agents responsible for the continuing identity of life and history, figured as an organic unity in the (exclusive) category ‘race’:

Women are the guardians of the race. Through their bodies life flows from one generation to another down the ages. It is our responsibility that no human life set out on its journey handicapped by hereditary disease nor condemned from birth to be scourged by the whips of hunger and poverty. It is our right, though we have never claimed it yet, to dictate terms as to the conditions into which our children shall be born (*Working Woman* October 1930).

Ann Curthoys criticises Devanny’s articles in *Health and Physical Culture*, and *Stead’s Review* in 1930 for “Showing a ... failure to analyse the dangers of handing ... powers [such as the compulsory sterilisation of the ‘unfit’] over to the State”. Angela Davis has elaborated a critique of the maternal strike as socialist neo-Malthusianism and as a precipitation of Margaret Sanger’s move towards eugenics, noting that it allowed a blaming of women for the exploitation of the working class, by “flooding the labour market with new workers” (213). She describes these directions on birth control as “unfortunate” and allied to concerns for racial purity. By 1932, at least 26 U.S. states had passed compulsory sterilisation laws for unfit persons (214). Australia continued a policy of the forceful removal of Aboriginal children and (there is some evidence for) the enforced sterilisation of Aboriginal women until well into the second half of the century.

The racist and anti-working class aspects of the maternal strike were not

foregrounded by left wing white women writers to any great extent; indeed, the maternal strike is featured in novels by Eleanor Dark and Barnard Eldershaw as a trope of social resistance that unites all women across difference. Three of Dark's novels of the thirties and forties mention the maternal strike, usually as it would be deployed as a peaceful protest against war, elaborating those oppositions between maternity as a life-creating force and war. *Return to Coolami* was published in 1937 in the shadow of European war. Margery, pregnant for a second time to Colin, a World War I veteran whose psychological trauma is expressed in alcoholism, voices declarations of a maternal strike against war as a form of natalist feminism in opposition to militaristic patriarchy. Her outburst is a good example of the extent of Dark's investment in the potential of the strike, employing stirring and powerful rhetoric made of warnings and threats, spoken by the unified representative speaking mother here reclaiming the space of the intellect as a speech to her child, the masculine nation, the whole warring male world:

Let them take care, these irresponsible child-mates of womankind! Let them not hold too cheaply the life she is growing tired of producing for such a senseless purpose! ... a day may come when she will say, "No. I bear no more children into a world not fit to receive them — "And then what? Not safe for very many centuries longer to talk too confidently of the unfailing maternal instinct, when even now, she herself and how many thousands of others like her felt revolt flame in them, cried, as she was crying now, "After this one — no more!" (210)

Drusilla Modjeska has read this declaration as an "awkward metaphor" which resulted from Dark venturing too far from personal women's issues without "theoretical or political backing" (220). Read in the context of socialist and eugenicist deliberations of the maternal strike however, Dark's continuing preoccupation with maternal strike in this novel and elsewhere features as a deliberated theoretical position wrought from the arguments of the peace movement, anti-fascism, medicine and eugenics, and a leftist liberal humanism searching for systematised explanations of global change. In particular, Dark's texts feature the maternal strike as a state of psychological anxiety which unites women characters across class and, in *The Timeless Land*, race. *Waterway* (1938) includes a critical moment in which an upper middle class female character arrives at a political awakening through her maternity, experiencing her own investment in her children as a shared investment in the community, an access and identity shared in particular by working class women (269). The text then pursues a polemic positioning women as the custodians of an instinct for continuing life that is threatened by war and capitalism, and therefore in revolt. This in a manner similar to that attributed to *The Timeless Land's* Barangaroo; in which place, nature and history are woven into an idealised traditionalism that is the custody of women, as a sex, as the *producers* of life; threatened not by the invaders, but by a masculine destructive instinct (196).

The Little Company (1945), written during World War II and the most explicitly political of Dark's novels also offers maternity as a force for radical unity between women. An explication of the argument for maternity as a defining and

radically peaceful ethic of female nature, in defining opposition to a construction of overweening patriarchy, is offered by one character. The argument is spelt out in a lengthy quotation from the book written by Marty, a central woman character who is articulate and active, and carries a measured dose of authorial identification. Her book is subjected to the scrutiny of Gilbert, the writer whose position is the agonising but disengaged liberal intellectual and he reads this extract from Marty's book with irony:

Was there ever a man creature who, from his first jam-stealing onward, did not rationalise his misdeeds? And now, perturbed by the dimming of the one fundamental source of life (whose failure would have passed unobserved by him had he not provided himself with complicated figures which he is pleased to call Statistics of the Birth Rate) he searches wildly for something to blame — anything to blame, so long as it is not his own criminal muddling. Women, he cries accusingly, are selfish and pleasure loving. They prefer parties to parturition — fie upon them! And women, who have poured themselves out with misguided, sacrificial recklessness through the long histories of his silly blundering, to keep that light alive — women who have stunted their brains, lost their alertness, narrowed their vision, and all but renounced their very humanity to make good his senseless orgies of self-destruction, are now dumb, lacking direction, knowing only (and without statistics) that the flame they have tended is going out, and the principle of life, whose devotees they are, has been too often, and too brutally violated (132).

Marty's hyperbole develops women's rejection of parturition as both the symbol and effect of global crisis, at the same time as it is deployed as a gendered political weapon. The 'natural', embodied in women as the 'creating' power to bring forth life, a power both foundational and transcendent, is employed as the absolute, as that upon which the on-going essence of humanity depends and is defined; biology become history; monumentalist maternal time. Gilbert reads the energy and excess of her writing as characteristic of a shared hatred of men necessarily common to very different women, forced together in hatred of a common oppressor. Modjeska argues that "there is no hint of 'the army of women', of collective political solutions to women's issues" in *The Little Company*. At the same time she maintains that Dark shares with Kylie Tennant and M. Barnard Eldershaw "a basic concern with the nature of human existence which might be described as a feminine humanism" (232). It is possible to argue that this "nature" of human existence is maternity, and that even as these novelists appear to distinguish between the differing interests of women interpellated through class and race, maternity must return as an apparent commonality of all female, even human experience.

Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* develops this foundationalist positioning of maternity as generative history further. Because they bear the children, women know "the value of life", according to the anti-war, anti-exploitation rhetoric of Bowmaker the peace activist in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (211). Maternity brings mysterious knowledge and becomes that eternal and essentialised connection to life, to beginnings, which allows women to

transcend mere sex and become fully human. At the same time, it is the foundational force upon which humanism must stand in order to initiate resistance. It is threatened by the end of history; it resists the end of history; even without women, reproductivity is history, the passage of the present from the past into the future. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* allows these varying descriptions of maternity to circulate and contrast, spoken by different characters, none of them authoritative but all representative, juxtaposed in the "net" of life, an "endless reticulation" (204). But in so far as these representations are outlined against a future in which women's sphere of maternal care seems largely unchallenged, the text seems to refuse a link between a feminist understanding of the specific oppression of women and reproduction. Instead, it seems a re-establishing of the latter as a ground for liberation narratives which exclude the demands of sexed, desiring women, thus delineating between different sorts of sexed embodiment for women, and refusing the legitimacy of feminine identity without maternity.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow pursues few excursions into the politics of sexual difference, but when they are discussed, usually in quite self-conscious dialogue, sexual difference features as difference made of specific historicity, on one level transparently expressive of its extra-textual context and on the next, historiographic experiments in re-presenting or forecasting sex and gender as determinants of history. It is a futuristic utopian novel that employs the authority of realism in order to write the present as past, and indeed the future as possibility, and as such it sustains anti-realist premises that interrupt the seamless process of historical narrative and render its realism determinedly heuristic. Knarf's historical novel within the novel writes the present as retrospective, in the act of becoming monumental, determining past. The moment of Knarf's writing in the future is also the moment of the past (that is Barnard Eldershaw's present) becoming past, and at this moment the historical becomes contestable, fragile and interpretable. Sexual difference also becomes an historical trope, a phenomenon of material progress that is gendered female and that has a specific and identifiable role in the chronological narrative apparent to the male Historian, and this phenomenon is embodied in fictional women characters both individual and representative. Knarf's novel within the novel presents sexual difference as inchoate and brooding, portentous, on a trajectory of exploding impossibility; a constitutive feature of the manifesting crisis in social and economic relations which will mean revolution, but still only one feature of this. Both novels, the inside and the outside one, build a separation between sexed sexual difference and unsexed parturition, which is withdrawn from the care of women in order to be generalised, made historical. Women present as constituted only by their sexual oppression, distinguished from a more material, reproductive identity. This characterisation is particularly concerned with young desiring women, trapped in defining desire which can find no outlet but marriage and babies, even while this outlet changes their 'nature' into human, no longer just female:

There was a malign feminine world, a pool of discontents, a treasury of bruised vanity, constantly recruited. Women as women, rather than as individuals, had a grievance, a mass grievance, a mass hostility, a mass frustration. Of this black legend, Shirley was an initiate, so Harry as a man

and Gwen's lover, must fear her. None of which made the least sense, either to himself or to Gwen, and could not be explained (203).

In the twenty-fifth century, listening Ord interrupts Knarf's reading:

"This peculiar and sinister female ..." Ord interrupted.

"She is neither peculiar nor sinister," Knarf asserted pedantically. "She is merely one of those unfortunate women who are women only and not human beings. They are quite common".

"You may be right", Ord agreed cautiously. "I've always felt, too, that there is a sort of femaleness ..."

"Woman is the complement of man, and sometimes, by the law of recoils, she becomes the complement of her own complementariness".

Ord grinned broadly. The husk of Knarf's sententiousness also split in a wide grin (203).

The master narrative grins at its own explanatory imaginings, 'recoiling' from dualism's which have begun to hint at an otherness monstrous and dangerous to it, that "dark legend" (a phrase hinting at elided Aboriginality), which can assert its own stories, and has a world of grievances directed at the masculine. Women as women are less than the androgynous human, but nevertheless carry themselves as a class, a class whose grievances may be vanity but whose power is malignant and frightening. As sexual difference seems to be made of the features of women's defining oppression, so woman seems to recoil from her defining complementariness into monstrous masculinity, at odds with herself in seeking the desiring position which has no other to desire but herself. And sexuality is constitution even while its direction is traced as perversion, a determined malignance symptomatic of diseased dissatisfaction, unhealthily misdirected and frustrated away from its solution, still pregnancy.

Quoting *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*: "Competition makes greed, greed strips the country and won't wait to rehabilitate it. War is competition raised to the *n*th. Threatened people don't breed" (174). So it is not that maternity as essential femininity is also essential femininity as the *a priori* of all being, but that *reproductivity* as the *a priori* of all being is not femininity. Instead it is a social force of history that exists independently of the sexed identity of women, who are really men when they make it into the social order. 'Woman', made and unmade maternity, figures as the embodied ground of the modernist teleology of parthenogenesis. This is the danger of Dark and other writer's use of maternity as the predicate for ethical identity and social life; they share, and perhaps begin from, a privileging of over-arching and rigidly defined reproductivity, that either elides or excludes racial difference, reassigns feminine sexual desire to the grotesque and abnormal, and anthropomorphises economics. So that what can occur is not an establishing of social and political agency for women, but a figuring of maternity as a disembodied social and economic force that could be named as population growth, which had little to do with women's somatic realities and instead functioned discursively as ground and imagery for the shifts of economics, depression and war. Nevertheless, if idealised maternity, as Emmanuel Levinas and

some contemporary feminist psychoanalysis have postulated, can be a paradigm for all ethical being — that is, placing the subject in immediate relation to an other, generating an ethic of care (Grosz 146 and passim) — the maternal strike can figure, via birth control, as the apocalypse, as the (looked for) end of ethics and history.

The American feminist critic Sabina Lovibond reads maternalism in feminism as “a celebration of the life lived by the twentieth-century Western, bourgeois married woman” only (789). The maternal strike has a contradictory relation to maternalism, as both a privileging of its status as identity and history, and as a manifestation of birth-control’s prising apart of sex and reproduction. A separation of sex and reproduction, and the further distinction between femininity and maternity, was the point from which the birth control movement and its manifestations in public discourse could begin to assert the legitimacy of white women’s sexual pleasure. It seems likely, however, that representations of Aboriginal and working class women in Australia did not similarly begin to reflect this split as new or liberatory. Dominant representations of Aboriginal women include them as emblems of a ‘natural’, even animal, sexuality, at odds with white conceptions of rationality and maternalist ethics. Militant women were shrugging off a similar working class association with unthinking animalism in reading for redefinition’s of maternity as voluntary labour. In the context of the forced separation of Aboriginal families, the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by whites and anthropologist insistence on *The Passing of the Aborigines* (Bates 1938), Aboriginal sexuality and maternity already meant distinct things, not in the interests of Aboriginal people. Susan Sheridan is able to trace the gesture of invoking maternity as a unifying identity inclusive of Aboriginal womanhood back through colonial Australian women’s writing as far as Eliza Dunlop’s 1838 poem “The Aboriginal Mother”, and forward to Catherine Martin’s *The Incredible Journey*, published in 1923 (124). *The Timeless Land’s* a historical maternalism is similar in an attribution of ethics and citizenship via maternity, but in doing so, it appears to invoke a militaristic instinct from Aboriginal men and white men as a threat to the continuity of Aboriginal life and identity, and not the invasion and dispossession of Aboriginal land by white invaders. This enunciation of solidarity from white feminists to Black women is nevertheless constituted for Sheridan in Homi Bhabha’s “Classic ambivalence of colonial discourse” that Sheridan reads as “the simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of likeness” (125). I’d like to suggest that the dominant mode of relation between colonising and Indigenous women figures as maternalism, the mode occupied by the narratives of Daisy Bates and Mrs Aeneas Gunn, (Hampton, qtd in Shoemaker 51) and elaborated by the work of Margaret Jolly as a colonising strategy crucial to the imperial project (114-15). The conceding of maternal citizenship to colonised women is an act constitutive of their relation to invader notions of identity. The rhetoric of this concession remained at odds with the material dispossession of Indigenous women’s reproductive freedom, and the question remains as to how far maternity can constitute citizenship when it is absolutely regulated by the state.

The rhetoric surrounding maternity and maternalism in this period, especially citizenship, make it the premier site for resistive white feminist appropriation. The

maternal strike is a forceful moment in the history of Australian feminism that witnesses the turning together of different strands and sources of liberation discourses. It produced aggressive rhetoric that believed in and threatened the destruction of nations, capitalism, society, ethics and history at the hands of women. As a site of theoretical debate between explanatory discourses, it exhibits many of the same problematics as second wave feminism; particularly the concern to address distinctions between the spheres of reproduction and production, as history or time, in their (re)positioning of women as historical agents. The maternal strike, even in a positing of apocalyptic disturbance to grand narratives, had also necessarily to evoke the power of maternity in sustaining them, however. Maternalism, as ethics, was able to ignore the very opposite positioning of Indigenous women in relation to voluntary motherhood, as well as the interests of other excluded women, — even women who didn't want children, or just wanted to have sex without getting pregnant.

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