

Review: *Motherhood and Creativity in Contemporary Self-life Writing: Writers and Mothers*

Caelan Chew

Braun, Alice. *Motherhood and Creativity in Contemporary Self-life Writing: Writers and Mothers*. Routledge, 2025.

Keywords: [motherhood](#), [maternal studies](#), [women's education](#), [women's rhetorics](#), [writing studies](#), [academia](#)

Doi: [10.37514/PEI-J.2026.28.3.08](https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2026.28.3.08)

With the rise of maternal studies as a distinct field over the last several decades, scholars of rhetoric have attended to the figure of the mother on the landscape of discourse in a variety of contexts, from pregnancy to parenting and from politics to health care. Lindal Buchanan's foundational work on American maternal discourses in *Rhetorics of Motherhood* (2013) suggests that such discourses can alternately grant women ethos and position them with social disadvantages. More recently, Dara Rossman Regaignon (2021) has explored the emotions and anxieties that are rhetorically "written into motherhood[']s...script" through maternal advice literature and fiction (p. xii). Further, the rhetorics of reproduction have been considered in Kim Hensley Owens' *Writing Childbirth* (2015)—which investigates how female autonomy is or is not reflected in discourses of childbirth—and in Shui-Yin Sharon Yam and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz's (2025) examination of these concepts in the context of trans and nonbinary individuals.

Yet fascinatingly enough, the position of the mother specifically as *writer*, as producer of rhetoric in her own right, remains oddly underdeveloped within writing studies—perhaps reflective of the reality that motherhood is still considered by many "the central unfinished business of feminism" (Bueskens, 2018, p. 3). The most recent book in writing and rhetoric scholarship to examine the figure of a writing mother is *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition* (2008), by Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford, following Eileen Schell's *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers* (1998). Both of these texts studied mothering women primarily in the position of current or aspiring writing instructors. While this is a role that certainly involves writing—from dissertation work to job applications to research—the writing itself is not necessarily the primary focus of either work. Speaking back to *Women's Ways* several years later, Loren Marquez (2011) and Christine Peters Cucciarre et al. (2011) alluded to writing while juggling children as among the difficulties of working in rhetoric studies, amongst discussions of other important aspects of tackling academic work as a mom. Yelizaveta Renfro (2013) has similarly examined writing guides for mothers from the mid 2010s that emphasize similar practical challenges, and Kate Pantelides (2013) noted positive overlaps between her identities as a mother, dissertator, and writing-center-director.

Into a space, then, which has been explored but not wholly unveiled, Alice Braun's *Motherhood and Creativity in Contemporary Self-Life Writing: Writers and Mothers* (2025) enters as one of the first book-length studies to foreground a population that composition studies has yet to fully take into consideration: the mother considered primarily *in her role as writer*. Braun's focus on writing mothers is clearly relevant to

women working in the field of composition and rhetoric studies, many of whom have children (or intend to) and for whom writing is a regular part of the job. But I would suggest further that given the positionality of a significant number of female undergrad and graduate *students* as parents,¹ Braun's insights—while not specifically directed towards studies in college composition—are also worth considering for any instructor of rhetoric who wishes to be aware of the material, social, and emotional barriers facing student mothers in their writing and the ways they can empower such students.

Dovetailing with parts of Lydia McDermott's work (2016) where she reflects on problematic reactions to her own maternal writing during a graduate seminar, Braun's examines both the socio-cultural and practical realities and challenges of being a writer and a mother simultaneously, a problem she approaches through an interdisciplinary lens which draws on such fields as literature, psychology, women's studies, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. While her frequent reference to other writers occasionally obscures her own voice, in doing so, she provides an impressive synthesis of decades of scholarship related to feminism, motherhood, and the creative process. This makes her text an invaluable resource for anyone new to maternal studies and seeking a digestible overview, but scholars specifically interested in maternal creativity or writing will especially appreciate certain contours of her work.

After a brief introduction, Braun's first chapter, "The Impossible Subject," emphasizes the "minefield" (12) that constitutes the discourse surrounding motherhood with which women writers will contend. She explores concepts from maternal studies, such as maternal guilt, intensive mothering, and mother-blaming, that exert social pressure on writing mothers, and introduces several key tensions: if mothers are by definition *selfless*, how can they write with a self or voice of their own? How do mothers counter the prevailing cultural framework of "male artist as isolated genius" (39)? What makes a text "maternal"?

The second chapter, "To Have and Have Not," explores women writers struggling at the inflection point of deciding whether or not to have children. Braun amply highlights women's fears regarding whether they will lose their creativity or if "being a mother [is] compatible with the idea we have of what being a writer entails" (p. 55); she also considers the reflections offered by Turkish author Elif Shafak and Canadian writer Sheila Heti in their memoirs as they wrestle with the potential encroachment of children upon their writing. The third chapter engages with "pregnancy and childbirth"—why women writers lack adequate models of writing on such experiences within literature and why they feel the need to write them themselves, challenging "the formerly constituted body of knowledge of obstetrics" with new words and metaphors (p. 92).

Perhaps most relevant to those interested in writing studies will be chapter four, "Mother Writing," which gets to the heart of considering what maternal writing looks like as a distinct practice. Braun explores material challenges in a mother's writing process, including experiencing the home as "prison" (p. 122) and finding the time not only to write but to achieve a state of fruitful "flow": "that mental space in which the author's thoughts are free to roam...[in] a long stretch of uninterrupted, focused activity" (p. 119). Such limitations,

1 According to an American Council on Education 2024 report, 18% of undergraduate students in the U.S. have children, and 74% of that population are women (Yates). This means that approximately 2.3 million students in the U.S. alone are learning and writing while also filling a maternal role. Close to a third of graduate students have children as well, with the majority of those being women (Anderson, 2022, vi).

she proposes, can impact the “form and...structure” of maternal writing, as well as its themes (p. 138). Braun also wonders whether maternal writing takes on a distinct nature or aesthetic. While skillfully threading the needle to avoid “essentializing” maternal writing, she suggests it might participate in the work of *forming* the maternal subject and her “plurality of positions” (p. 129) rather than proceeding in a defined way *from* her identity as a mother.

Braun finishes with a consideration of “Bad Mothers,” having already mentioned many times oft-reproached figures like Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing, both of whom struggled to reconcile writing and mothering—which may have contributed to their abandonment of their children and subsequent suicides. Braun suggests that self-life writing by mothers can be a useful way to work through feelings of ambivalence that arise from the mothering/writing tension and to combat societal binaries surrounding “good” or “bad” mothering practices. Ultimately, Braun demonstrates through the memoirs she considers that while hurdles exist, motherhood and writing need not be mutually exclusive.

Motherhood and Creativity should be brought into the ongoing conversations among teachers of rhetoric and composition. Her style is engaging and accessible, providing an easy entry to considering motherhood in relation specifically to writing—a perspective many in writing studies have not fully developed. Braun doesn’t explicitly consider the implications of her research for writing instruction, but while the omission of this field is surprising—given her expansive interdisciplinary approach—it does not detract from the overall effectiveness of her work or its potential use for composition studies. Her thorough and multi-faceted consideration of mothers who write could act as a starting point to inform further development of pedagogical best practices for empowering student-mothers in their writing at any level. Through such research, student writers who are also mothers can be taught more inclusively and effectively, and motherhood need not be the “unfinished business” of writing studies.

Biography

Caelan Chew is a PhD student in English at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where she has worked as an instructor in the writing center and currently teaches writing and rhetoric. Her research interests focus on representations of community and family relationships in British and Irish literature, and she most recently published “When the Private Becomes Public: Involuntary Disclosure in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in *Brontë Studies*. Her current project focuses on depictions of motherhood in modern and contemporary Irish fiction and memoir.

References

- Anderson, T. (2022). Roadmap for change to support pregnant and parenting students. *Urban Institute*.
[https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Roadmap for Change to Support Pregnant and Parenting Students.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Roadmap%20for%20Change%20to%20Support%20Pregnant%20and%20Parenting%20Students.pdf)
- Ballif, M., Davis, D., & Mountford, R. (2008). *Women’s Ways of Making it in Rhetoric and Composition*. Routledge

- Buchanan, L. (2018). *Rhetorics of Motherhood*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Bueskens, P. (2018). *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the sexual contract*. Routledge.
- Cucciarre, C. P., Morris, D. E., Nickolson, L., Owens, K. H., & Sheridan, M. P. (2011). Mothers' ways of making it—or making do?: making (over) academic lives in rhetoric and composition with children. *Composition Studies*, 39(1), 41–61.
- Marquez, L. (2011). Narrating our lives: retelling mothering and professional work in composition studies. *Composition Studies*, 39(1), 73–85.
- McDermott, L. (2016). *Liminal bodies, reproductive health, and feminist rhetoric: Searching the negative spaces in histories of rhetoric*. Lexington Books.
- Owens, K. H. (2015). *Writing childbirth: Women's rhetorical agency in labor and online*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Pantelides, K. (2013). On being a new mother-dissertator-writing center administrator. *College Composition and Communication* 65(1), 28–29. doi:10.58680/cc201324218
- Regaignon, D. R. (2021). *Writing maternity: Medicine, anxiety, rhetoric, and genre*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Renfro, Y. P. (2013). How to write motherhood: Writing guides for mothers. In J. Dymond and N. Willey (Eds.), *Motherhood memoirs: Mothers creating/writing lives* (pp. 48–63). Demeter Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1rrd91z.6>
- Schell, E. E. (1998). *Gypsy academics and mother-teachers: Gender, contingent labor, and writing instruction*. Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Yam, S. S., & Fixmer-Oraiz, N. (2025). *Doing gender justice: Queering reproduction, kin, and care*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Yates, A. (2024). Student-parent data: what we know, what we don't, and how to find out. *American Council on Education*. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Student-Parent-Data.pdf>