

VIRGINIA PIGNAGNOLI

MOTHERING AND FAMILY LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY AUTOFICTION

Maggie Nelson's The Argonauts, Sarah Manguso's Ongoingness, and Heidi Julavits's The Folded Clock

ABSTRACT. This essay explores mothering and family life in three twenty-first-century literary narratives: Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*, and Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock*. These texts, through an autofictional account of their authors' experiences with family making, call attention to the challenges contemporary American families face vis à vis gender and maternal roles and mainstream assumptions such as heteronormativity. By voicing a critique to today's "impossible standards" (O'Reilly 2010) for families and mothers, these narratives are challenging traditional images of "feminine selflessness" (Willett, Anderson, and Meyers 2016) and address cultural and ethical issues concerning current family models still unable to recognize queer family making and the idea that families are a dynamic process. The narratives' combined interest in self- and family-making is reflected in their fluid generic status. In our *post-postmodern* literary period, these authors' life writing is not only an attempt at postirony (see Konstantinou 2017). Rather, these narratives respond to the affective logic of contemporary autofiction (Gibbons 2017), portraying relational identities of the self. Nelson, Manguso and Julavits represent motherhood as a transformative, all-encompassing and bodily experience and choose to rely on "unfinished" genres (half-memoirs, half-essays, half-fiction) to reflect the idea of incompleteness around today's motherhood and family matters.

KEYWORDS: Autofiction, Contemporary Literature, Motherhood, Family, Gender Studies.

Despite the changes in gender equality and work dynamics of the last fifty years or so, contemporary families in North America are not free from social pressure, conflicts and insecurities. On the one hand, the crisis of 2008 and its aftermath are increasing job stress and anxiety; on the other hand, inadequate family policies leave parents "coping with seemingly endless demands and unattainable standards" (Gerson 2010, 6). As a consequence, the difficulty of balancing work and family life often leads to conflicts in adult partnership. Peggy Orenstein describes this situation as a "half-changed" world that still needs to work on gender equality. For instance, she argues that if men need to be

equal partners in the home, there must be further change in the workplace (2000, 288). As Lynn Hallstein O'Brien and Andrea O'Reilly point out, "our contemporary context is one that is simultaneously split between newfound gains for women – especially for middle-class women with class, race, and sexuality privileges – and old family-life gender patterns and assumptions that discipline both men and women" (2012, 4). The present generation of American parents are thus children of an "unfinished revolution," as Kathleen Gerson (2010) remarks, seeking new patterns of working and caretaking.

This article explores these dynamics in three twenty-first-century literary narratives: Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*, and Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock: A Diary*, all published in 2015. These texts, through an autofictional account of their authors' experiences with family making, call attention to the challenges contemporary American families face vis à vis traditional roles, mainstream assumptions, heteronormativity, and maternal roles. By voicing a critique of today's "impossible standards" (O'Reilly 2010) for families and mothers, these narratives are challenging traditional images of "feminine selflessness" (Willett, Anderson, and Meyers 2016) in order to include less conventional views of mothering and marriage in the wider discourse on the contemporary family. Nelson's *The Argonauts* deconstructs domestic master narratives by portraying a hard-to-categorize family, which orbits around the relationship between the author and her gender-fluid partner. Manguso's *Ongoingness* attends to the transformations that family-making and childrearing have on the perception of the self: the way Manguso aims at representing these changes is an ongoing process, as the title suggests, rather than a before/after binary pattern. Julavits's *The Folded Clock* depicts a vulnerable and multifaceted mother and wife, cognizant of the many stereotypes she holds while trying to make room for her distinctive self.

Because a "theme is always manifest in form" (Warhol 2012,12),¹ this article will also look at the way the narratives' combined interest in self- and family-making is reflected in their fluid generic status. Nelson's *The Argonauts* might be labeled as a personal essay, Manguso's *Ongoingness* is a diary-essay and Julavits's *The Folded Clock* is a diary that underlines the presence of fictionality. These authors' life writing is not only an attempt at postirony (see Konstantinou 2017) in a *post*-postmodern literary realm, but also at situating their identity and social roles. In other words, these narratives are portraying relational identities of the self "unfolding in a multiplicity of relationships" rather than in dyads and binaries (Willett, Anderson, and Meyers 2016), probably because, as Alison Gibbons notes, the "affective logic" of contemporary autofiction is "situational in that it narrativises the self, seeking to locate that self in a place, a time and a body" (2017, 118).

¹Although my approach to narrative is primarily informed by the rhetorical approach (see section 2), this article explores themes close to feminist studies.

Mothering and Family Pathways in *The Argonauts*, *Ongoingness*, and *The Folded Clock*

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson tells the story of her life from the moment she met her partner, Harry Dodge, to the birth of their son, Iggy. In *Ongoingness*, Sarah Manguso tells about a diary she has been writing compulsively to accurately record her own life since she was a teenager and how the birth of her son radically changed her writing habit. In *The Folded Clock*, Heidi Julavits reports about two years of her life she (supposedly) recorded in a journal in order to overcome a writer's block in part due to the difficulties in balancing work and family. These texts are nonfiction narratives and, with varying degree, they are committed to represent extratextual reality. The overarching purposive design of the texts is the portrayal of the authors' self in the network of relationships that constitute their families.

In *The Argonauts*, the narrating-Nelson tells about her love story with gender-fluid artist Harry Dodge and their making of a family despite the common belief that family life is heteronormative in itself. There are explicit critiques to “resistant institutions,” such as when Nelson says that Dodge and she have to marry hastily, fearing the revoking of same-sex marriage in California, or when she describes the amount of paperwork and money necessary to adopt a child at birth (the only way, for same-sex parents, to prevent future issues in case of shared custody). In a revealing episode, a friend visits Nelson and comments on a mug with an emblazoned family photo. The photograph portrays Nelson (pregnant at the time), Harry and his son standing in front of the fireplace at her mother's house and dressed up to go to the theater at Christmastime. Nelson reports that the friend mentioned having never seen anything so heteronormative in her whole life (13) and considers what was so heteronormative in the picture:

But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity? That my mother made a mug on a boojie service like Snapfish? That we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy – is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? (13)

As the whole narrative seems an attempt to answer to these questions showing what queer family-making can look like, this excerpt is particularly meaningful. Mothering, Nelson will later argue, cannot solely be a prerogative of mononuclear heterosexual families as there is “something inherently queer about pregnancy itself insofar as it

profoundly alters one's 'normal' state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one's body" (13).² "How can," she asks, "an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?" (13-4).

Nelson's way to change the master narrative that associates pregnancy with conformity and to eschew the imposed heteronormativity of everything that surrounds family life is to represent the bodily experiences that characterize the various steps in her family making: her romantic relationship with Harry, her pregnancy, her son's birth, her breastfeeding, and her love for her child's body. Starting from the very beginning, Nelson reclaims the centrality of her bodily experience in her family-making, juxtaposing the words "I love you" with an act of anal sex ("Instead the words I love you come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad" [3]). But it is her pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, and breastfeeding that describe the ultimate acts of bodily transformation:

The cartilage nub where my ribs used to fit together at the sternum. The little slide in my lower rib cage when I twist right or left that didn't used to slide. The rearrangement of internal organs, the upward squeezing of the lungs. The dirt that collects on your belly button when it finally pops inside out, revealing its bottom – finite, after all. The husky feeling in my postpartum perineum, the way my breasts filling all at once with milk is like an orgasm but more painful, powerful as a hard rain. While one nipple is getting sucked, the other sometimes sprays forth, unstoppable. (103)

The experience of pregnancy and mothering that Nelson depicts goes against dominant discourses in which subjectivity is neglected. This transformation, according to Nelson, happens because "a baby literally makes space where there wasn't space before" (103) so that, like Iris Marion Young argues, "the transparent unity of self dissolves and the body attends positively to itself at the same time that it enacts its projects" (2005, 47). This description exemplifies the bodily experience of the pregnant subject but it also supports Young's argument for the body split between past and future (47). Giving birth is such an intense bodily experience that you touch death "along the way" (134); a proximity Nelson emphasizes also by alternating the description of her son's birth to her husband's description of his mother's death ("Counting, counting. Jessica says breathe into the bottom and I can tell that's where the baby is. *each of the volunteers told me that my job was to let my mom know that it was ok to go*" [129]).

² Mothering refers to "women's lived experiences of childrearing" as opposed to motherhood that is a term "used to signify the *patriarchal institution* of motherhood" (O'Reilly 2010, 2; emphasis added). See also Ruddick 1989.

Ongoingness, to some extent, tackles maternity from a similar perspective, including the bodily experience of sleepless nights and breastfeeding (“Nursing an infant creates so much lost, empty time. Of the baby’s nighttime feeds I remember nothing. Of his daytime feeds I remember almost nothing” [53]), and of mortality (“When I became pregnant,” she says, “I struck something mortally. Not just myself symbolically; my son, actually. The partly made flesh wriggling inside me was already mortal” [45]). The most challenging transformation of motherhood for the narrating-I, however, is the coming to terms with the loss of the self, something that although not in itself gender-specific, as Rebecca Whisnant notes, is “endemic to traditional feminine roles” (2004, 202). Women that lose themselves upon becoming mothers are not something of the past. The “Feminine Mystique” of the 1950s-1960s has now been replaced by a motherhood mystique, intensive mothering or the “new Momism” (see, for instance, O’Reilly 2010), dominant views that promote the mother-child bond as primary and the mother’s priorities in the order of children, career, spouse and then household (Macdonald 2013). Self-loss is thus a byproduct of this mommy mystique (see also Warner 2005), in which contemporary mothers are consumed by an ideal of perfection, combined with the pressure and anxiety of a neoliberal job market and inadequate help in care policies.³

Manguso seems to account for this prevailing view on motherhood and the anxieties that ensue by considering the change in her perception of time. Ever since she became a mother she became “the baby’s continuity, a background of ongoing time for him to live against” (2015, 53). She turns into “the warmth and milk that was always there for him” (ibid.). She thus recognizes: “my body, my life, became the landscape of my son’s life. I am no longer merely a thing living in the world; I am a world” (ibid.). This change in her perception of time, which becomes *ongoing* rather than being made of beginnings and ends (23; 41), is also reflected in her experience of marriage as the opposite of a “fixed” one, something that “changes form but is still always there, a rivulet under frozen stream” (25). To accept these changes, Manguso tells readers, is not easy. Mothering is such an all-encompassing experience that the previous self of the mother (in this case, the one who would record everything meticulously in her diary) is supplanted by a self that has to live to ensure that someone else could live. Manguso eventually “had no thoughts, no self-awareness, just an ability to sit with a little creature who screamed and screamed” (55), and her diary suddenly becomes only about her son (54).

As she explains in the afterword, including parts of her actual diary in the main text (a possibility she had contemplated) wouldn’t sufficiently display the impact of this transformation towards an “ongoingness.” Manguso refers to her diary as “the writing that stands in for [her] entire self” (97): its absence stands in for a pre-motherhood self

³ As Charlotte Faircloth remarks, raising children today is not only a matter of “choosing between alternatives” such as breast or bottle but a “choice that engenders accountability” (2009, 15).

that no longer exists. Thus, while through the exclusion of the actual diary the narrative embodies the acceptance of her new self (Manguso has parted goodbye with her pre-baby self by parting goodbye with her diary), the uncertainty surrounding her mothering experience is also revealing of the lack of understanding she perceives around her. In other words, Manguso is both supporting the idea that mothering is a transformative and challenging experience and expressing insecurity about how these challenges and transformations can be addressed. Given the impossible standards of the current beliefs in intensive mothering, this representation is both revealing of a lack of adequate models and a re-affirmation of self-realization for mothers beyond the good versus bad mother opposition (see Rich 1995).

The Folded Clock is a narrative about self-discovery and the search for new family models too. The romantic relationship of the couple in the family is one of the themes addressed and deconstructed. After years spent mainly as parents – a mode Julavits and her husband, fellow writer Ben Marcus, call “corporation co-management” – they have “grown shy around each other” (2015, 162). More than portraying romantic love as the necessary ideal for family happiness, in Julavits’s narrative, marriage is something to believe in and to fight for. She recognizes that there are situations, like art colonies for instance, in which infatuations happen easily because they “conspire against our best intentions” (14), but, generally, developing crushes on co-workers or random strangers is also unavoidable. These infatuations have no basis in reality and can easily be “entirely one-sided” (186), but not only do they trigger Julavits’s self-exploration, they are also something she can easily share with her husband, thus dismissing their relevance for the couple’s relationship and, at the same time, recognizing unconventional patterns for adult partnership.

In the Julavits-Marcus family, the tasks of parenting seem equally distributed, with both partners engaged in their children’s lives. However, recalling a period of great work-related stress, Julavits notes that she spent so little time with her children that they started to call her “dad” (164), as if “dad” or fathers in general were the one usually spending less time with them. She is, in fact, often complying with the new momism beliefs, reinforcing gender roles: she feels anxious leaving for a work trip (“I’m sure something terrible is going to befall them while I’m gone” [165]), and she worries about not knowing enough about her children’s lives (198), a preoccupation her husband doesn’t seem to share. She also describes feeling guilty about her career: if she is not working “and getting ahead of the work and the deadlines, and by implications freeing up some future time” she might be able to spend with her children, she feels undeserving of her own job (164).

The narrating-Julavits seems aware of the social pressures upon motherhood. Ultimately, she declares, women are the ones responsible for the people in the family having cleaned clothes (199). And she depicts herself as a vulnerable subject in this social scenario, so that when the narrating-Julavits reports of the experiencing-Julavits being

enraged by a comment about being a good mother as something at odds with having a consuming career, she has to admit that she had come to the same conclusion and in the “interest of her family” downsized her ambitions (198). The woman as vulnerable to the pressure of the motherhood mystique is further reflected in Julavits’s final affirmation of self-discovery: “Sometimes,” she confesses, “the self I return to loving belongs to me” (290).

Julavits’s intimate portrayal of her relationships with her husband and her children embodies the kind of contradictions often faced by contemporary American families, even privileged ones such as Julavits’s, especially when confronted with both parents having a consuming career and no clear family model inclusive of current ambiguities and insecurities concerning job stress and anxiety and the difficulty of balancing work and family life.⁴ We live in a moment of “spreading precarity” as Laurent Berlant remarks, with no assurances that the life one intends can or will be built (2011, 192). Thus, while the present anxiety towards the future makes many turn to the personal and the intimate, the lack of suitable family models able to include and account for the present transformations of work and parenting dynamics increases the families’ vulnerability.⁵ Finally, it is also significant that Julavits’s intimate narrative is framed generically as a diary, a form whose “freedom from format constraint” shows “a compatibility with ideas of the self as multiple, improvisatory and unbounded,” as Porter Abbott points out (2005, 106). In the following, I will investigate further the relationship between self-narration and the construction of alternative family models, as emerged in the three narratives.

Self-explorations of Self- and Family-Making: Representing Subjective Truth

According to rhetorical poetics, narrative communication is a multilayered communicative event between an author and an audience. The author employs resources such as paratexts, characters, free indirect discourse, genre, space, style, and many others to convey her or his message. Rhetorical readers develop interests and responses to three different components of the narrative: the mimetic, which in nonfiction involves the “readers’ sense of fit between the actual world and its representation in the narrative;” the thematic, which involves “rhetorical readers’ interest in the ideational function of the characters and in the cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed

⁴ As Davis, Winslow and Maume remarks, “gender operates differently when it is intersected with other forms of inequality” (2017: 4).

⁵ For an overview on vulnerability see Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2014.

by the narrative;” the synthetic, which involves “interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs” (Phelan 2017, 11). The three narratives presented above, *The Argonauts*, *Ongoingness*, and *The Folded Clock*, all share a similar communicative purpose (the representation of motherhood as a transformative, all-encompassing and bodily experience), and put priority on the thematic. They address cultural and ethical issues concerning current family models still unable to recognize queer family making and the idea that families are a dynamic process.

These narratives, however, are also conveying their messages through nonfictional genres: personal essays, memoirs, diaries. From a feminist perspective, the combined interest in the self, family and genre is not surprising. As Robyn Warhol points out, “the very act of writing outside generic realist boundaries has been seen by many feminist novelists and theorists as itself a subversive gesture” (2012, 10). Moreover, they are twenty-first-century narratives, a literary period that has often been described as the “Age of the Memoir” (see Miller 2007). It is also a time in which “creative nonfiction” is taught in many American writing programs (Dawson 2015, 81), and the internet and social media encourage mixed forms of self-narration through their many platforms. Genre-blending narratives, such as memoirs or personal essays, have been gaining increased attention starting from Dave Eggers’s acclaimed memoir, published in 2000 (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*), to the recent media hype surrounding Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* (2011-15). These texts and others, such as James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), sparked a lively discussion over the last few years on what counts as nonfiction and paved the way for a renewed critical interest in fictionality and autofiction (a term labeled by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977).

Although hybrid forms of nonfiction are not original *per se*, their current modalities and purposes may be. Alison Gibbons, for instance, recently argued that while contemporary autofiction incorporates stylistic tropes of postmodernism, such as “the sense of subjectivity as fragmented, socially constructed and textually fabricated,” it also departs from postmodernism’s self-serving logic (2017, 130). Gibbons defines the logic of contemporary autofiction as affective and situational and pertaining to “represent truth, however subjective that truth may be” (118). *The Argonauts*, *Ongoingness*, and *The Folded Clock* seem coherent with this idea of autofiction: their fluid generic status embodies the dynamism of the authors’ evolving selves in their evolving families. Together with this idea of narrativizing the self and representing truth, however, these texts are also stressing their synthetic component (i.e. the artificiality of the narrative) by signaling the presence of fictionality in their nonfictional narration.

Manguso builds her narrative made of short vignettes about her habit of keeping a diary around an absence (the diary she chose not to include) and highlights the fact that truth in nonfiction is always subjective as authors make choices “about what to omit, what to forget” (2015, 6). In *The Folded Clock* the various dairy entries are jumbled. For

instance, as to disrupt the general assumption that nonfiction is an accurate account of true events following a chronological order, Julavits writes: “Today is actually six months earlier than when I started writing this entry” (2015, 289). As diaries are also meant to “show an identity in process, even as they are part of the process itself of creating identity, day after day” (Rak 2009, 24), Julavits is thus able to convey a sense of identity that creates itself subjectively rather than chronologically. With their accounting of their manufacturing (a tendency that was recognized by David Shields in his 2010 manifesto for hybrid genres, *Reality Hunger*), both Manguso and Julavits are warning readers that their account of extratextual reality cannot avoid the subjectivity of their telling.

As Nelson’s focus on the “lived body” (see Toril Moi 1999) resonates with existing feminist scholarly works on the body, her self-narration includes quotes from various sources among which are a few recurring names such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler.⁶ Nelson emphasizes the manufacturing of her narrative through a peritextual resource: in the margins, in grayscale, *The Argonauts* displays the references for the quotations she merges with her own writing, so that, for instance, in the margin of the sentence “I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought” (4) appears the name of Ludwig Wittgenstein. A peritextual mode *à la* Roland Barthes in *A Lover’s Discourse* (1978) in line with Jerome Bruner’s idea that the self is “‘distributed’ in the same way that one’s knowledge is distributed beyond one’s head to include [...] the books one has on one shelves” (2001, 34-35).

Including the author’s manufacturing of the narrative is also a way to show the authors’ self-making in the making. The narration of the self becomes essential to the desire of a sincere communicative act. In the age of post-truth and precariousness of various kind, these narratives bring relationships to the fore, not only attending to the necessary relation with the readers, but also to those who help construct the author’s self, i.e. their family members. As Gibbons remarks, “in a crisis-ridden world, subjects are once more driven by a desire for attachment to others and to their surroundings” (2017, 130). This is evident from the narratives’ thematic exploration of family issues and mothering. Not only, as Miller points out, “in autobiography the relational is not optional” (2007, 544), the authors’ explorations of these relations become the main arena to express their various “emotional truths.”⁷

Calling attention to the synthetic component (the manufacturing) to highlight the thematic (self-explorations of mothering and family life) is comparable to the presence of fictionality in nonfictional narratives, in which, as James Phelan argues, “the

⁶ See also Edelman 2004; Muñoz 2009; Halberstam 2005.

⁷ “Emotional truth” is an expression Miller borrows from an article by Patricia Williams (2006), but it has its roots in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language (see de Sousa and Morton 2002).

fictionality does not provide a denial or an escape from the actual but rather a richer, more nuanced way of both representing and dealing with it” (2016, 25). By attending to their crafting (instead of concealing it), Nelson, Manguso and Julavits aim at achieving a truer self-narrative, a postironic mode meant as a “giving” and that has been described by Adam Kelly as the invoking of “a reader who can acknowledge and even co-produce the gift of writing” (2017, 25). The narrative communication becomes a matter of trust: the authors share their vulnerability, their intimate details, showing their trust in readers. Because of this gesture of intimacy towards their audience, readers may feel forced to impose the same intimacy on themselves.⁸

It is in a “spirit of truth” that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) when sealing his or her autobiographical pact with the readers (Lejeune 2005, 31). These narratives call attention to the difficulty of portraying the truth that nonfiction requires, because the self they are portraying is evolving, ongoing, mixing with the past and the future. By stressing their manufacturing, Nelson, Manguso and Julavits highlight the existence of a “persona” writing the narrative. Thus, the three narrating-I might be “deficient” and the narrative contain discrepancies between the representation of the extratextual and that of reality itself, but it is by showing their defectiveness that the authors establish a sincere mode of communication coherent with Lejeune’s spirit of truth (for a comprehensive study of the effects of deficient narration see Phelan 2017).

Conclusion

Looking at these three texts together offers us a snapshot of contemporary “family pathways,” as Gerson calls them in opposition to family types (2010). Families are “a dynamic process that changes daily, monthly, and yearly as children grow,” but American society does not seem to provide a balance between the changes in “intimate relationships, work trajectories, and gender arrangements” of the last decades and the resistant institutions of the past (4-5). For instance, as Davis, Winslow and Maume note, “college majors and jobs remain gendered-typed; the sex-gap in pay persists; women are underrepresented in authority positions in the economy, politics, the church, the military, etc.; women still do most of the housework and child care; and traditional beliefs

⁸ In a recent essay on Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*, Arnaud Schmitt and Stefan Kjerkegaard explore similar issues. They observe a connection between Knausgaard’s interest in autobiography and his “attempt at a more sincere vein, regardless of the genre” (2016, 4). In line with Jerome Bruner’s conception of the self as “intersubjective” (2001, 34), Schmitt and Kjerkegaard claim that Knausgaard forces his intimacy on the readers “in such a way that we feel drawn into an intersubjective relation with the author, one in which we cannot remain neutral” (2016, 17).

about gender abound” (2017, 7). *The Argonauts*, *Ongoingness*, and *The Folded Clock* attend to the tensions between these rapid transformations and the lack of adequate responses from society and policy-makers. Moreover, they attempt to make room for a discourse on motherhood and women’s self-affirmation. Thus, they represent family pathways that accommodate several relationships and dynamic processes of today’s “ambiguous mix of new options and new insecurities” (Gerson, 2010, 7).

Maggie Nelson, in *The Argonauts*, is trying to portray “empowered mothering” (see O’Reilly 2010) by eschewing the patriarchal doxy of the family as inherently heteronormative and by elaborating on the bodily experience of pregnancy and mothering. Sarah Manguso’s *Ongoingness* tackles the question of self-loss reclaiming maternal empowerment by presenting the binary opposition of before/after as ongoing, while calling attention to the affirmation of the mother’s own selfhood. Heidi Julavits, in *The Folded Clock*, depicts many of the feelings of anxiety and guilt linked with idealized motherhood. These authors chose to rely on “unfinished” genres (half-memoirs, half-essays, half-fiction) to reflect the idea of incompleteness around today’s motherhood and family matters.

Motherhood in the twenty-first century is still largely grounded on patriarchal institutions and mothers are still far from being truly “empowered.” In other words, it is hard for women to choose to be “empowered” mothers in a society that still discourages gender equality in its institutions and beliefs. Likewise, it is hard for families to find suitable patterns of working and caretaking. Which kind of family models are to follow if “marriage no longer offers the promise of permanence, nor is it the only option for bearing and rearing children” (Gerson, 2010, 7)? Although “most women no longer assume they can or will want to stay home with young children, there is no clear model for how children should now be raised” (ibid.). At the same time, “most men can no longer assume they can or will want to support a family on their own, but there is no clear path to manhood” (ibid.). Contemporary narratives of motherhood and family life tell stories that are as unfinished, raw, fluid, contradictory, and vulnerable as the subjects they portray.

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