THE MATERNAL TUG
Ambivalence, Identity, and Agency

Edited by Sarah LaChance Adams, Tanya Cassidy, and Susan Hogan
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This book is dedicated to my sisters, Diane and Kristan; to Audrey Devine Eller; and to my comrades in the Mental Labor Union.
—Sarah LaChance Adams

I wish to dedicate this book to my sister (Andrea), my mother (Laura) and her sister (Gloria), and their mother (Evelyn), and her mother (Gloria), whom I heard so many stories about, despite her having died shortly after giving birth to her only child, my grandmother.
—Tanya Cassidy

In memory of my grandmother Adah Clara Hogan, known as “Pips,” who developed a life-long love of vegetable gardening during WWll scarcity, providing me with delightful early memories of sitting on her lap shelling peas and eating freshly picked strawberries in her beautiful garden.
—Susan Hogan
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Introduction
Sarah LaChance Adams and Tanya Cassidy

In the novel Circe, by Madeline Miller, the goddess daughter of the Sun grapples with new motherhood in a conspicuously human fashion, despite having the powers of magic and prophecy:

I did not go easy to motherhood. I faced it as soldiers faced their enemies, girded and braced, sword up against the coming blows. Yet all my preparations were not enough.

Thank the gods I did not have to sleep. Every minute I must wash and boil and clean and scrub and put out to soak. Yet how could I do that, when every minute he also needed something, food and change and sleep. That last I had always thought the most natural thing for mortals, easy as breathing, yet he could not seem to do it. However I wrapped him, however I rocked and sang, he screamed, gasping and shaking until the lions fled, until I feared he would do himself harm. I made a sling to carry him, so he might lie against my heart. I gave him soothing herbs, I burned incense, I called birds to sing at our windows. The only thing that helped was if I walked…. This was the child I deserved.

We did find some moments of peace, when he finally slept, when he nursed at my breast, when he smiled at a flight of birds scattering from a tree. I would look at him and feel a love so sharp it seemed my flesh lay open. I made a list of all the things I would do for him. Scald off my skin. Tear out my eyes. Walk my feet to bones, if only he would be happy and well.
He was not happy. A moment, I thought, I only need one moment without his damp rage in my arms. But there was none. He hated sun. He hated wind. He hated baths. He hated to be clothed, to be naked, to lay on his belly and his back. He hated this great world and everything in it, and me, so it seemed, most of all.

I thought of all those hours I had spent working my spells, singing, weaving. I felt their loss like a limb torn away. I told myself I even missed turning men to pigs, for at least that I had been good at. I wanted to hurl him from me, but instead I marched on in that darkness with him, back and forth before the waves, and at every step I yearned for my old life. I spoke sourly to the night air as he wailed: “At least I do not worry he is dead.”

I clapped a hand to my mouth for the god of the underworld comes at much less invitation. I held his fierce little face against me. The tears were standing in his eyes, his hair disordered, a small scratch on his cheek. How had he gotten it? What villain dared to hurt him? Everything that I had heard of mortal babies flooded back: how they died for no reason, for any reason, because they grew too cold, too hungry, because they lay one way, or another. I felt each breath in his thin chest, how improbable it was, how unlikely that this frail creature, who could not even lift his head could survive in the harsh world. But he would survive. He would, if I must wrestle the veiled god myself.

Circe lives in exile, banished by her father for giving water to Prometheus. She makes the potion that turns Glaucus into an immortal. She turns the nymph Scylla into a monster. She makes lovers of Hermes and Odysseus. She tames lions and turns brutal men into swine. Despite her courage, powers, and charms, this baby’s slightest injury commands her; his needs enslave her; his fleeting moments of peace seem to flay her. She bears his hate and rage as a torment that she deserves, and she fights other gods to protect him. Motherhood takes away everything that gives her comfort, pleasure, and a sense of her own identity. What is it about motherhood that can possess even the sorceress Circe?

In Circe’s account, we see how the tensions of motherhood are
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distilled in its early days. All of its piercing affects crowd and tumble over one another: fear, guilt, rage, and love. Indeed, to take responsibility for another person’s fragile life is to invite physical labour, terror, feelings of failure, insane devotion, mournful regret, rage, claustrophobia, fierce protectiveness, amazement, and poetic inspiration.

Children’s vulnerability is so rooted and tangible that it may feel like a metaphysical principle. Their mortality is certain. Moreover, we carry the unspeakable knowledge that the world was just as real before they existed and that they might never have been. The questions can linger. Who might we have been without them? Who would they be without us? What would happen to them if we abandoned them or died? How will they take it when we do die, if we do indeed die first? We find ourselves utterly responsible and ultimately powerless.

Children’s needs are relentless and never ending. This can cause time to take on a peculiar character—disordered and anarchic. The days are long, and the years are short. On top of that, we are in suspense: Who will our children be? How can we make them ready for possibilities that cannot be foreseen or imagined? How can we prepare them for a future that we may never know ourselves? We may find ourselves hesitating and freezing time while trying to predict the future effects—good and bad—that our actions will have. Sometimes time rushes past, and we are unmoving while this other life flashes before us. The newborn’s stare seems to hold ancient wisdom and judgment. The toddler’s tantrums anticipate the teenager. When the future arrives, it echoes the past. It was only yesterday that they were starting school. A baby picture reveals the older child’s recognizable expression. Past generations resonate in their faces, bodies, choices, and dispositions. Yet to them, their infancy and early childhood seem like an abyssal history; the years before their existence, mythological.

Being close to a child often makes one’s own infancy and childhood appear more real. Memories and fantasies of mothers mingle. We may hold ourselves up to these images of benevolence and failure. We may find our own mother’s caresses or strikes reincarnated in our hands. We may measure our breaking point against hers.

Motherhood brings the paradoxes of being human into blinding light. It can be both strenuous and empowering. It can give one’s own life a new sense of legitimacy, yet it simultaneously certifies our finitude. It reconfigures our places in the familial and social nexus. It is no wonder
that mothers, mothers-to-be, and those who even imagine themselves as mothers find themselves tugged in multiple directions.

Certainly many of these experiences and impressions will also be familiar to fathers and other caregivers. However, the authors herein assert the importance of understanding how individual experiences are socially and materially situated. Gender, as we know, powerfully affects other aspects of our lives, just as class, race, nationality, and other factors do. There are some important differences in how mothers and fathers are treated, what they expect of themselves, as well as the resources and limitations they tend to have. These will affect the institutions and the experiences of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood more broadly. A book such as this, with a focus specifically on maternal ambivalence, invites us to consider intersectional commonalities and differences within this role. In this way, we may better understand what it is, what it has been, and what it may become.

Adrienne Rich’s highly influential book, *Of Woman Born*, provides a powerful example of how motherhood is contingent upon its material, social, and other conditions. She conveys her experience with poignant specificity, never generalizing or essentializing. Yet its individuality is firmly rooted in the gender roles and other systemic constraints of her time. This quote originates from her 1960 diary:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom.

And yet at other times I am melted with the sense of their helpless, charming and quite irresistible beauty— their ability to go on loving and trusting— their staunchness and decency and
unselfconsciousness. *I love them.* But it’s in the enormity and inevitability of this love that the sufferings lie. (Rich 1)

This quote has provided inspiration for much of the motherhood scholarship that has followed it (Ruddick; Parker; O’Reilly; Brown). Rich might have been the first person to describe maternal ambivalence—a strong contradictory desire to both nurture and abandon or hurt one’s children—in such vivid and honest terms. This topic has become increasingly important, given the necessity to debunk romantic ideals of an exclusively nurturing, maternal nature.

This wide-ranging, interdisciplinary, and international collection takes up the call to recognize the widespread existence of maternal ambivalence. The authors and editors in this book deny the assumption that mothers who experience ambivalence are bad, evil, unnatural, or insane. In fact, historical records, as well as cross-cultural narratives, indicate that maternal ambivalence appears in a wide range of circumstances. However, we also assert that it becomes unmanageable in circumstances of inequity, deprivation, and violence. As such, societies must understand their role in perpetuating ambivalence to intolerable levels, sometimes resulting in maternal abuse and neglect as well as filicide and suicide.

Ambivalence, a term that describes how one can be pulled in opposite directions, is a concept with a long theoretical and interdisciplinary history. Although it is often thought that Sigmund Freud coined the concept, it was actually the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (Falzeder 343-68; Troha 217-44). Bleuler was later to reject psychoanalysis, which would lead to difficulties between him and Freud. However, it is significant that both Bleuler and Freud drew from their clinical considerations of women in understanding the phenomenon. Bleuler’s clinical example is a mother who “poisoned her child; but afterwards she is in despair over her act; it is striking that even with the worst moaning and crying the mouth laughs quite clearly” (see Bleuler’s *Die Ambivalenz*). Bleuler’s conception is not only emotional but also intellectual, as it could manifest as inabilities to choose between actions or behaviours.

The complicated relationship between the psychological, the social, and the cultural is captured by later theorists. They dispute whether the social and cultural considerations of ambivalence are more or less fundamental than psychological roots. Robert K. Merton and Elinor
Barber (Merton; Merton and Barber), for instance, developed the concept of “sociological ambivalence,” emphasizing that ambivalence is built into the very structure of social relations. Later critics, in particular Robin Room, argue that Merton’s understanding of ambivalence is primarily linked to those social problems that he sees as constitutive features of a complex industrial society. In other words, he thinks that ambivalence is the fault of modernity and that to change it requires changing society itself.

Exploration of the tension between sociological and psychological accounts of ambivalence persisted toward the end of the twentieth century. In his 1997 address to the American Sociological Association, Neil Smelser argues for a complex recognition of ambivalence, one that links the social and the individual levels. Following this call, some scholars have returned to the early works (1908) of the German philosopher Georg Simmel (Levine; Bauman). Simmel argues that society itself is built around the conception of the “stranger,” who is at one and the same time both potential friend and foe (Cassidy). Bauman goes on to say we are living in “a time of reconciliation with ambivalence” and that the promise of modernity to make the world understandable and controllable is now no longer believed. Unfortunately, these interpretations of Simmel do not take into consideration his extensive discussion elsewhere of gender and culture. These are important to the discussions of Simmel and maternal ambivalence presented in Rozsika Parker’s influential book *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. Parker draws on Simmel in recognizing that pregnancy and childbirth can be linked to thinking of the infant as a “little stranger” from within.

The notion that the child is “a stranger from within” is key to understanding the lived experience of maternal ambivalence. The living child, if not completely rejected or denied, comes from the mother’s own body or was adopted into her home. Mothers, both adoptive and biological, have reported that they have a hard time drawing any firm line between their own interests and their children’s interests. Indeed, this is the realization of the existential fact of human intertwining. The human person is not a separable monad. As such, maternal ambivalence is not merely directed from mother to child. One’s child, though radically other, is also seamlessly one’s own. Maternal ambivalence is simultaneously directed from oneself and towards oneself. Thus, it involves a
self-estrangement that earlier theorists did not always recognize (LaChance Adams).

This anthology examines the diverse and complex experiences of maternal ambivalence from an interdisciplinary perspective. The authors draw on a rich legacy of cultural, social, and economic analyses; feminist traditions; philosophical insights; literary criticism; and more. They represent an array of writing styles and epistemic practices, and attend to a variety of circumstances and situations. This provides the collection with a multifaceted perspective that cannot be attained by a single author or from a single disciplinary perspective.

If we claim that mothers are ambivalent, does this mean that we think that they are fragmented? Or that they are incapable of coherent action, emotion, or thought? On the contrary, the editors and authors of this book believe that reflection on maternal ambivalence can provide more nuanced and variegated understandings of rationality, agency, and identity.

The first two essays introduce us to the phenomenon of ambivalence. In Chapter 1, “Ambivalent Intersections,” Sagashus T. Levingston gives a raw, first-person account of her own maternal ambivalence in conditions of poverty, sexism, and racism. She reveals the struggle for bare survival, paired poignantly with the additional sacrifices demanded by academia. She performs, via her writing, the risks and the sense of vulnerability in revealing one’s ambivalence. However, she does so unapologetically and reveals the fire in her that is also the source of her children’s defiance, which is likely the key to all of their survival. The careful reader will see that Levingston’s ambivalence does not reveal instability; rather it is her manifest existential awareness of too many demands and too few resources.

Levingston’s essay poises us well to receive the message of Chapter 2—ambivalence may be virtuous. In “The Virtue of Ambivalence to Maternity,” Joan Woolfrey explores how virtue ethics provides a lens through which maternal ambivalence can be understood as both “appropriate” and “morally admirable.” Given the moral tone and prevalence of the maternal mandate, along with the general lack of support for childrearing, a rational creature would have to be rather insensible not to experience some ambivalence. Thus, she argues that given the circumstances, a unified self must also be a conflicted self.

Section I of the book, “Ambivalence in Pregnancy and Childbirth,”
begins with Amanda Roth’s Chapter 3 “What Is Pregnancy Ambivalence? Is It Maternal Ambivalence?” Roth argues that pregnancy ambivalence is not just a subset of maternal ambivalence, since it is not primarily about inconsistent feelings towards the fetus; rather, it is about the fact that the pregnant body is both one’s own and not one’s own. Thus, to be ambivalent about being pregnant is not the same as being ambivalent about becoming a mother, and it may be completely unrelated to the question of whether or not to terminate a pregnancy. Roth affirms this distinction through a discussion of thick and thin relationships. She asserts that it is “neither rare nor worrisome for some periods of pregnancy to involve only the thin sort of gestational relationship,” whereas for parents of a living child, it is highly problematic. As Roth indicates, this distinction is clearly important to abortion politics.

In Chapter 4, “The Unspeakables: Exploring Maternal Ambivalence through the Experience of Depression and Anxiety during Pregnancy,” Aleksandra Staneva discusses the wide range of emotions, as well as their complexity, during pregnancy. She claims that even in women-centric online spaces, there is active censorship and surveillance, which minimize discussions of pregnancy distress. As part of this research, Staneva analyses the language of eighteen pregnant women as they discuss their distress and ambivalence. She uses the theoretical framework of Julia Kristeva’s philosophy, which claims that the maternal is semiotic—the creative, emotive, and poetic aspect of language. Drawing on this concept, Staneva finds that pregnant women’s internal conflicts were ultimately liberating if they were not stifled but rather expressed through language.

With Chapter 5, “On Ambivalence and Giving Birth: Reflecting on Labour through Beauvoir’s Erotic,” the attention turns from pregnancy to childbirth. Here, Sara Cohen Shabot considers labour as an existential project—a work through which one reveals her values and challenges her apparent limits. This is in contrast to the medicalization of childbirth, which often “abandons the experiential body,” treating it merely as a medium or vessel. Overmedicalization focuses on the end product—the children—over the intrinsic value of the labouring process itself. In reclaiming the birthing experience, Shabot employs Simone de Beauvoir’s notions of the erotic. She does so despite the fact that Beauvoir did not explicitly think of childbirth as empowering. Cohen Shabot finds the ambivalent erotic to be a useful conceptual tool because it shares
several kinds of embodied ambiguity with pregnancy and child labour. These include the subject’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence, the intertwining of self and world, the otherness within one’s own body, and the dependence of one’s freedom on the irreducible freedom of others.

In Chapter 6, the final chapter of this section, “A Healthy Baby Is Not All that Matters: Exploring My Ambivalence after a Caesarean Section” Bertha Alvarez Manninen discusses a similar theme: her sense of ambivalence towards her daughters’ Caesarean-section births. Unable to take the active role she desired in bringing her children into the world, Manninen felt alienated from what she felt was a vital aspect of becoming a mother. Employing and extending Marx, Manninen describes the role of technology in alienating workers from their labour as parallel to the overmedicalization of childbirth. Similar to Marx, she argues that the product of one’s labor is not all that matters; rather the process itself may cause disappointment and ambivalence. Focusing solely on the ideal product of child labor—healthy babies—minimizes the importance of the birth process.

Section II, “Seeking Perfection, Finding Despair,” includes four chapters that explore different ways in which ambivalence is heightened due to attempts to be perfect parents. For women, this desire for flawlessness is decidedly gendered. These chapters show that cultural roles and habits need improvement, not the individuals themselves. The section begins with Chapter 7, suitably named “I’m So Tired: The Labour of Care, Infant Sleep Management, and Maternal Ambivalence,” in which Patricia MacLaughlin and Gwen Scarbrough discuss sleep deprivation and infant care. The nightshift is an underresearched area in sociology. However, in the research that has been done, night time care has been found to prioritize men’s sleep, leading women to experience chronic exhaustion, intensifying their rage and ambivalence toward both their children and male-partners.

In Chapter 8, “Maternal Guilt and the First-Time Mother,” Claire Steele LeBeau’s interviews with mothers reveal the maternal guilt regarding several features of new motherhood: the high stakes of personal responsibility, the mother’s need for separation, her self-estrangement, miscommunication at the pre-verbal stage, feelings of inexperience, conflict between reality and one’s expectations, and the intensity and variety of one’s mixed emotions about this new role. As
many of the other chapters indicate, ambivalence itself is a powerful source of maternal guilt. However, it is also an opportunity for insight and solidarity among mothers.

In Chapter 9, “Meta-Helicopter Parenting: Ambivalence in a Neoliberal World,” Talia Welsh describes a type of situational ambivalence that comes from popular discourse on helicopter parenting. Helicopter parenting can be described as supervision so intrusive that all of a child’s time is scheduled between school and activities, with very little time for spontaneous play and relaxation. This style of parenting is considered smothering by some and is blamed for young adults not being prepared for independence. Contrasted with helicoptering parenting is a style underlined with nostalgia for a time when children were more free range. This so-called natural parenting style is thought to resolve ambivalence for the excessively devoted parent. Against both of these perspectives, Welsh doubts that making a choice to parent differently can actually address ambivalence. She thinks that it has more to do with the larger issues that plague parents, such as economic exploitation, diminished funding for public education and healthcare, and environmental degradation. Meanwhile, the debate over free-range and helicopter parenting ignores the socioeconomic context; it offers a neoliberal and “personal-choice” resolution and treats children as their parents’ personal project.

In Chapter 10, “Sustainable Ambivalence,” Kate Parsons describes her growing ambivalence and resentment when taking her children on a Fulbright-Hays group trip to Brazil. Falling prey to the conflict between the “good mother” trope and her feminist consciousness, Parsons finds herself torn internally between two visions of who she wants to be. As she explores her ambivalence, she discovers a related divide between herself as an environmentalist and herself as a wealthy world-traveller. These divides share the same false dichotomy between self-care (enjoying comforts that are environmentally unsound) and taking care of others (fighting environmental degradation). Indeed, many of our lives are structured to oscillate between enjoying the comforts, employment, and culture of the city as it absorbs the resources of the rural, and then fleeing to the wilderness on the weekends or vacations. Parsons affirms that this incoherence is the result of colonially manufactured privileges and, thus, has political and ethical consequences. By bravely sinking into both her environmental and maternal ambivalences, Parsons finds
inspiration for effecting cultural transformations that may alleviate them both.

In Chapter 11, “Ambivalence and Identification: Avenues for Reification or Change,” Joan Garvan focuses on the identity crisis that many women experience upon becoming mothers. Despite some progress towards gender equity, the birth of a child often leads to more gendered roles in heterosexual couples. As a result, many women experience depression over their increasing estrangement from their male partners, anxiety in comparing themselves to their own mothers, and general distress in this ill-fitting new role. Garvan concludes that the insights into maternal subjectivity that have been achieved in motherhood research indicate that new narrative representations of mothering are needed.

Although all of the authors in this collection consider the circumstances in which maternal ambivalence occurs, those in Section III, “Mothering in Context,” give attention to more specific socio-historical circumstances: contemporary queer mothering, mothering children with disabilities, England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and mothering in the aftermath of wartime rape in Uganda. In Chapter 12, “Unpacking Monomatemalism within a Queer Motherhood Framework,” Mel Freitag explores the role of the nonbiological mother whose partner is the biological mother. She argues that such mothers need their own narrative that is distinct from the fathers’, from those who adopt, and from simply being defined in secondary terms as “the other mother.” This lack of a socially identifiable role perpetuates maternal ambivalence; however, it also raises important challenges to heteronormative motherhood that can inspire us all.

In Chapter 13, “Mothering Children with Disabilities: Navigating Choice and Obligation,” Sophia Brock draws on the experiences of mothers of children with disabilities. Their ambivalence can be amplified under these circumstances as the mother struggles to establish her identity while coping with the intensive and prolonged care that they are expected to provide without adequate social support.

In Chapter 14, “Unnatural Women: Reflections on Discourses on Child Murder and Selective Mortal Neglect,” Susan Hogan takes the reader to England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. She argues that this society had a great deal of social tolerance towards child murder—from severe neglect to purposeful filicide. She looks at a
number of cases in which there was hesitation about prosecuting or punishing women who killed their newborns, especially when those children were illegitimate. Hogan references Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s hypothesis that maternal expectations play a role in many children’s deaths. She notes that the vague illnesses that were blamed for the deaths of many infants might have been caused, or assisted by, the neglect of children whose deaths seemed inevitable.

The book concludes with Chapter 15, “‘Mother Is This Our Home?’ Mothering in the Context of the Lord’s Resistance Army Captivity: Understanding the Perspectives of Mothers and Children in Northern Uganda” by Myriam Denov. Denov describes the plight of girls who became pregnant while held captive by the Lord’s Resistance Army in Northern Uganda between 1986 and 2007. Girls were selected for marriage against their will; they were forced to become pregnant, give birth, and raise the children. Many of them understandably felt ambivalent towards these children—for some it was a reason to carry on living, but a child also severely limited their ability to escape. Denov concludes that if children are to be well protected and cared for, then their mothers must also be supported.

This interdisciplinary and international collection adds to the growing recognition of the complexity of mothering. Maternal ambivalence—the simultaneous and contradictory emotional responses of mothers towards their children—is not merely an emotional reaction. Affects, intentions, and behaviour are socially and culturally responsive. They reveal social contexts and aspects of the human condition that are relevant to us all: the false dichotomies of good and bad in our ethical lives; the visceral impacts of gender normativity, violence, and racial discrimination; and the importance of first-person embodied experience. The authors in this collection reveal that maternal ambivalence may be wise, virtuous, and creative. Perhaps even more importantly, it presents opportunities to realized solidarity across difference.

Endnotes
1. Discussions of love-hate relations, what Wilhelm Stekel called “bipolarity,” predate the use of the term “ambivalence.”
2. Google translate provides translation for “Die Ambivalenz” to “The Ambivalence” and the above translation for the original quote in
German, which is “hat ihr Kind vergiftet; aber nachträglich ist sie in Verzweiflung über ihre Tat; nur fällt auf, daß auch beim ärgersten Jammern und Weinen der Mund ganz deutlich lacht. Letzteres ist der Kranken unbewußt” (see www.sgipt.org/medppp/gesch/ambiv-g.htm)

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Chapter One

Ambivalent Intersections

Sagashus T. Levingston

Is this a safe space? Can I speak openly and candidly here? As a mother, I am supposed to tell you about all the ways in which I adore all my children. I have six. And the assumption is that I have no favourites. I think that I am expected to tell you about all the ways in which I sacrifice for them; how I would die for them; that everything I do—eat, breathe, and sleep—is for them. Maybe you want to hear about how my life stopped the day my first one’s began. But those would all be lies. I do not adore all my children. I do have favourites. A lot of our life is about survival. My favourite children are the ones who are not currently threatening that survival with all of their rebellious back talk and defiance. I live in a community that would rather us be seen and not heard. My favourites, today, are the ones who help me get out of this place we are passing through—the ones who help us do it quickly and quietly without drawing more attention to ourselves. For us to survive, I often put myself first. I am not a martyr. I want to live just as much as I want my babies to live. So, no, I will not blindly and valiantly die for them. I will fight for them, though, if I have to. If dying is the result of that fight, then I would think that it must have been my time. I say all of this with conviction now when, in reality, I am filled with all kinds of ambivalence. There is always a conflict rising between my needs and the needs of my children, tension between my survival and theirs. Which do I choose? Those lines are always blurred.

I birthed my nemesis. I swear this kid will be my downfall, my ruin. Every day, when she wakes up, it is like there is a poltergeist in my house. As soon as her eyes opens, the atmosphere changes. It feels like the cabinets are opening and slamming shut on their own. It feels like the
window shades are rolling up and down on their own. The faucet, the lights, the electricity all seem to take on lives of their own. And then her feet hit the floor, and her mouth opens. “Who took my hair pick?” “Somebody ate my this...” “I hate this house for that...” She goes on like this for minutes as she scrambles to get out the door. All the while I am in my bed, shrinking, dying on the inside. Her voice is like nails on the chalkboard or grinding teeth. It pierces my soul, and then it stops. The poltergeist, the cabinets, the shades, the hurricane all stop as she storms out the door. Then the atmosphere goes back to normal.

I regret not touching her or getting up to ask her if she needs me to do something to ease her anxieties. I want to hug her and tell her I love her and that things are going to be ok. I cannot. Something in her triggers something in me, and for my own safety, I don’t reach out. In fact, she is a version of me when I was her age—awkward, insecure, and depressed, full figured, emotional. Like me, she cries almost instantly about almost everything. She is a fighter who stands up for what she believes in and for those she believes in. She hates bullies. Even when she’s up against a fight she knows she is going to lose, she challenges people that intimidate and mistreat the powerless and vulnerable. She is loud and rebellious and funny and beautiful and verbally aggressive—all the things I was her age, all the things I believe and promote in a girl (a woman).

Yet I cannot touch my own child and embrace all of her because she reminds me too much of the girl I was her age—the girl who remained untouched for all those same reasons. I am torn between giving her the comfort she needs and reassuring myself against my own unresolved hurts. For my own protection, I do not touch her. I do not jump out of my bed to comfort her because I cannot face the image of me that I see in her. I leave her to storm through our home, as I lay in my own bed terrified about what will happen to me if I reach out for her. My terror appears to her as resentment—a much safer, more socially acceptable emotion from a mother to a daughter.

May I write openly and candidly? May I tell you about all the ways in which I experience maternal ambivalence? Will there be a social cost? I am always torn and pulled between multiple minds. The projections show that in less than six months, my business is going to skyrocket, bringing in an amount of money that can change the course of our family forever. The problem is this: we’re falling apart today. My son is starving
for my attention. My seven-year-old is playing with fire—literally. My entire house is in survival mode. Do I put it all on hold and nurture them and be the mother they want and need me to be? Or do I plough through so that I can create pathways that remove some of our barriers? Rent is already four months behind. The engine just went out on the car. Food is sometimes scarce.

As a woman who is poor, Black, single, the mother of six children by four different men … as a PhD candidate, an entrepreneur, a woman, I find myself always stuck in the balances, trapped in these kinds of dilemmas. The trade-offs are never simple. It is always something like this—choose between getting on the plane to present my innovative work to an international audience at a conference in Montreal, Canada (a place I have always wanted to visit), or rush home because my daughter needs to have emergency surgery so that her arm does not get amputated. This happened to me for real, by the way. As much as I would like to say I would make the obvious choice, I never take that for granted. In fact, each time I choose my children, I am always both surprised and relieved.

Poverty is a cruel master. For its own entertainment, it forces you to make impossible choices. Pay for parking so that you can drop off and pick up your children from school on time or use that money to buy toilet paper. It’s sadistic. Spend time with your children so that they can be nurtured while living in a war zone, or move them into a safe community, work three jobs, and make them latchkey kids.

Sexism is even crueler. Here are the options for many impoverished, Black, single mothers. Option one is to stay in an abusive relationship with a jealous man because his being there makes the neighbours feel safe. You know? He makes her look respectable and her family less of an eye sore. His being there decreases their anxiety about illegitimate families and non-normative heterosexual sex. He rights her wrongs, easing the public’s mind. Meanwhile, in fact, he makes her home highly dysfunctional and broken. While she is privately beaten, the neighbours stroll by their home, pushing their carriages, happy that he has legitimized her and eased their discomfort. There is always option two. She can raise her children alone, as a single mother in a highly functional and loving family and have Child Protective Services always showing up because the neighbours suspect the children are hungry. Sometimes, it is not even that. They call “just in case”—just in case she has too many children to handle, just in case someone is being abused, just in case she
is too Black to mother, just in case she is a stereotype. I have been in different versions of these scenarios on both sides. I cannot help but wonder: do I teach my girls to have ambition and to accept the world hating them, including their lovers, for accomplishing too much? Or do I teach them to play themselves small to be more likeable, marriageable? If I am to lead by example, which do I choose?

Racism is a monster. It taunts and divides. For years, I taught at a top-tier research institution. I was good. Each day, I would show up to give my students—often very white and sometimes very wealthy—the best parts of me. I loved it. At some point, while I was there, my son was in elementary school, struggling. In fact, he always struggled. But at the time, it was important for me to not see it. I needed to believe that the teachers would resolve his problem because I had another fire to put out. I had to move us from one social class to another. I had to follow my dreams of becoming a college professor. I did. Meanwhile, he grew taller, and his reading stayed the same. The teachers promoted him from second to third grade and then from fourth to fifth grade, all the while he kept reading at a first-grade level. I stood at that chalkboard and then the whiteboard, year after year, teaching, because it fulfilled me. The discussions, the assignments, the grooming, the influence, it all gave me a rush. So I kept lecturing and kept teaching and kept inspiring, while my baby was falling deeper and deeper into an academic hole. He was so uncomfortable with reading that he grew anxious about it, so much so that when he knew he would be called upon to read out loud, he would misbehave or walk out of the classroom to avoid the embarrassment. And I kept teaching. While he was being placed in cinder block rooms that look like solitary confinement in the name of protection—protection for him and the population—I kept teaching. When he was nodding off in school and losing weight because of the “focus medicine,” the Adderall or the Vyvanse, still not making progress, I kept teaching. I kept teaching until, finally, one day, I picked my son up from school. He was drugged from the medicine. On either side were two staff members, ushering him to my van. He looked so lost. In that moment, I saw him being pushed right through the school-to-prison pipeline. I had read the Moynihan Report. I knew that we lived in a society that was quicker to elevate Black women while leaving behind Black men and boys—even if the women was a mother and the boy her son. I was loving the high, the power, the rush. But what would it cost me in the long run?