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I am delighted to have the opportunity to honor Sonya Michel for her untiring work as a historian, mentor, and colleague. I know of few scholars who are as community-minded and unstintingly generous in their support of junior colleagues.

My first encounter with Sonya was at a small conference at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam in January 2002. At the time I was a newly minted PhD in twentieth-century U.S. women's and gender history and held a temporary, non-tenure track position at a private university. I was already a big fan of Sonya's scholarship—including her work on the history of child care and social welfare policy, as well as her essays on the cultural history of gender and familial roles during and after World War II—so I was eager to meet her. That meeting occurred in a tightly packed hotel foyer, where many of the conference participants were huddled before venturing out into the cold and lashing rain. Though I was a bit tongue-tied, Sonya immediately put me at ease; when I told her how much I had enjoyed her 1984 article "American Conscience and the Unconscious"—which explores the intersection of Freudianism and Protestant religiosity—she laughed and professed amazement that I had read it. (It was one of her earliest publications, published in a somewhat obscure journal.) Quickly turning the conversation, she began questioning me about my dissertation research. She listened intently and expressed genuine interest and enthusiasm for my project. Over the course of the conference, we continued to discuss issues related to maternalism and the history of motherhood more broadly. I returned to the U.S. feeling bolstered and encouraged.

It turned out that I would need that boost of confidence, because I would soon suffer a professional blow. The department where I was teaching had advertised for a tenure-track job to fill the position that I was temporarily occupying, for which I had applied. I was invited to give a job talk, along with three outside candidates. Although the department ultimately voted to offer me the position, a recently appointed dean stepped in and overruled the decision for reasons that were never entirely clear to me. Needless to say, I was devastated. Some colleagues urged me to appeal the decision and solicit additional letters of support, but because I had only recently defended, I knew very few senior scholars outside of Johns Hopkins, where I had completed my degree. But with a tenure-track job on the line, I swallowed my pride, overcame my reservations, and wrote to Sonya explaining my situation. By then, several months had passed since the

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conference, and I'd had no interactions with her during the intervening time. I feared she would regard the request as an imposition and wondered if she would even reply. Yet she responded almost immediately, expressing not only her support, but also a sense bracing indignation that made me feel I had someone besides my graduate school mentors in my corner. Within twenty-four hours, she sent a very powerful letter to the dean vouching for the quality of my scholarship, which she kindly forwarded to me.

In the end, it did not change his mind, but it did a great deal to quiet my own. Later, as I encountered others who have profited from Sonya's mentorship, it became apparent that her actions in my case were very much in character. She has since sent out numerous letters on my behalf, served on panels I helped to organize, critiqued my unpublished work, blurbed my book, and—this really says it all—even invited me to stay in her guest room. She has done the same for many other scholars embarking on their professional careers. Her exceptional generosity, combined with her intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas, means that she is very plugged in when it comes to new scholarship; she has often referred me to recently published works or works-in-progress that she knows I will find interesting and helpful.

As a scholar, Sonya has had an equally if not more profound influence on my development as an historian. While I cannot do justice to the multiple ways in which I have drawn on her work in a short essay, I hope to convey here my indebtedness to the ideas that she and Seth Koven advanced in their much cited 1990 article "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States, 1880-1920," published in the *American Historical Review*, as well as the volume of essays that they subsequently co-edited, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (Routledge, 1993). In the late 1990s, when I was struggling to clarify the central argument of my dissertation and subsequent book, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago, 2010), the paradigm of maternalism introduced and elaborated in these works allowed me to achieve a critical breakthrough.

Originally, I planned to write about the relationship between psychiatry and gender ideology in post-World War II America. Like other scholars of the 1940s and 1950s, I was struck by how readily the image of Rosie the Riveter had yielded to that of the happy suburban homemaker, and I was curious about the role that psychiatry and Americanized versions of

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psychoanalysis had played in this process. Among the works that I felt best captured this fraught transition was Sonya's essay, "Danger on the Homefront: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Disabled Veterans in American Postwar Film," which elucidates how women's sexual and maternal qualities were simultaneously presented as essential to veterans' reintegration to civilian society, yet also potentially destructive and emasculating. In this essay, Sonya refers briefly to one of the texts that I had first encountered in my research—a surprise bestseller from 1942 called *Generation of Vipers*. Written by the popular writer Philip Wylie, the book contains a rant against American mothers that was responsible for introducing the term "momism" into the national lexicon. Employing a style that veered between biting satire and apocalyptic jeremiad, Wylie warned that maternal dominance was eroding American individualism and masculine fortitude, leaving the nation vulnerable to external threats and internal decay. His critique stood out not only for its breathtaking hostility, but also for the linkages that he drew between momism and other "isms" that threatened the nation's democratic order, namely fascism and communism.

Historians and cultural critics who had written about *Generation of Vipers* typically described it as a work that contributed to the postwar climate of hostility toward women that forced them out of the workforce and back into the home. Most portrayed it as an anti-feminist work that anticipated the emergence of the conservative gender ideology that would become dominant after World War II. But this interpretation never quite made sense to me. For one thing, Wylie wrote the book in 1942, before the major influx of women into the workforce. Moreover, he was clearly attacking middle-aged, middle-class housewives rather than those women who were venturing into new realms. I was particularly struck by a 1944 editorial in *Life* magazine that quoted Wylie in order to argue that American women were not pulling their weight in the war effort and therefore should be drafted for war work, like their counterparts in Britain. Clearly, in this instance, the momism critique was not serving as a weapon to force women out of the workforce. More broadly speaking, I also found it difficult to reconcile *Generation of Vipers* and other attacks on American mothers with standard accounts of the 1940s and 1950s, which emphasized the idealization of motherhood. Like Sonya in "Dangers on the Homefront," I was interested in the seemingly contradictory messages aimed at women during this period. I began to ask myself: why did such extreme attacks on mothers gain currency at a time when so many

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Americans were enthusiastically embracing domesticity, marrying at younger ages and rearing larger families than in the recent past?

In seeking to answer this question, I visited Princeton University's Firestone Library, where Philip Wylie's enormous collection of papers is held. Reading through the hundreds of letters that Wylie received from readers in response to his book, I was surprised to discover that the women who responded most vehemently to the momism critique were those who upheld quite traditional views of motherhood and womanhood. In contrast, women respondents who expressed frustration with confining gender roles often embraced at least certain components of his critique. I sensed that the discrepancy between my expectations and what I actually found in the Wylie Papers pointed toward a lacuna in twentieth-century U.S. women's history, but I struggled to precisely define what that was.

Only when I stepped back, easing my intensive focus on the wartime and postwar years to look at developments in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, did a picture begin to form. And only when I began reading widely in the literature on women's reform activities during the Progressive Era did my argument begin to take shape. At the time, a number of scholars in addition to Koven and Michel (including Molly Ladd-Taylor, Linda Gordon and Theda Skocpol, among others) were fleshing out women's contributions to the nascent American welfare state. Historians who had previously written about the activities of these women reformers had sometimes used the term "social feminism" to differentiate them from feminist activists who focused primarily on winning the vote and equal rights, eschewing social protections based on sex. But "maternalism"—the term that Koven and Michel introduced and that other scholars quickly adopted—seemed to me more apt, because it drew attention to the ways in which numerous reformers used the rhetoric of motherhood, not simply that of gender difference, to advance their agenda.

Once I began to understand the pervasiveness and power of maternalist claims during the early twentieth century, the momism critique and similar midcentury attacks on American mothers suddenly appeared less confusing and contradictory, because I could now read them as repudiating an older gender order. In other words, by immersing myself in the scholarship on early twentieth-century maternalist reformers, I came to understand that the story I wanted to tell was really that of the slow demise of maternalism and its predecessor, the ideology of moral

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motherhood. As I use it in my book, "anti-maternalism" refers to the belief that motherhood had become too freighted with political meaning and too laden with sentiment, and that it should instead be construed in a more limited and rational manner—as a biologically based familial role. Critics argued that what appeared like self-sacrificing "mother love" could in fact be narcissistic, possessive and pathogenic. They claimed that medical advances had dramatically reduced the suffering and mortality associated with childbirth, rendering obsolete the age-old analogy between mothers and soldiers. They pointed to laborsaving devices in the home, lower birth rates and longer life spans, and insisted that many middle-aged, middle-class women had become idle, even parasitic. And finally, they derided the idea that women were "above politics" and therefore disinterested advocates of the national good. In making these seemingly disparate arguments, I came to understand, critics sought to curtail women's abilities to claim rights or privileges—in either the public or the private realm—based on their status as mothers.

In "Womanly Duties," Koven and Michel insightfully note that, "Maternalism was and remains an extraordinarily protean ideology capable of drawing together unlikely and often transitory coalitions between people who appeared to speak a common language but had opposing political commitments and views of women." As was true of maternalists, mid-century critics of American motherhood voiced such sentiments for strikingly different reasons, eluding easy categorization. Broadly speaking, they fall into one of three categories: modernist writers and commentators who railed against sentimentality, hypocrisy and sexual repression; social scientists and psychologists who sought to extend their professional expertise by questioning "maternal instinct" and encroaching upon mothers' traditional domain; and women (especially young women) who disliked the Victorian construction of motherhood, with its associations of self-sacrifice and suffering. As I use it, "anti-maternalism," implies neither a particular set of beliefs about women's proper roles, nor a coherent political stance: some commentators debunked old gender ideals expressly in the service of new ones, whereas other writers were simply disillusioned with contemporary women and nostalgic for gender ideals rendered anachronistic by modernity. But whether they consciously rejected the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother as a worthy goal, or simply lashed out at modern mothers for falling short of it, such critics helped to erode the ideological bedrock of maternalism—the notion that American

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mothers were high-minded, politically disinterested actors who worked on behalf of the public good.

In the end, I came to believe that, if we are to appreciate the complexity of postwar gender ideology, it is necessary to view anti-maternalism and pro-natalism as paradoxically collaborative forces. Whereas anti-maternalist critiques at times helped to promote a more gender-neutral understanding of women's roles, postwar pro-natalism contained the revolutionary implications of this shift by recasting maternity as the ultimate source of "feminine fulfillment." To put it differently, anti-maternalism undermined the ideological basis that had previously allowed white, middle-class American women to exert influence both within and beyond the domestic realm, yet without positing an alternative basis through which they might exercise authority. Such women therefore found themselves betwixt and between: they continued to be defined primarily in relation to their familial roles, and they continued to face pervasive discrimination in the public realm, even as society repealed many of the privileges and compensations that prior generations had accorded to them.

In retrospect, this all seems so obvious to me that it is hard to understand why I had so much trouble putting the pieces together. What I can say for certain is that I would not have arrived at my conclusions without the scholarship that Sonya, Seth Koven and others produced—scholarship that analytically differentiated the efforts of women reformers who tried to empower women *as* mothers from the efforts of those who fought to free women from the inevitability of motherhood. On a more personal note, Sonya's vote of confidence in my work strengthened my resolve to press ahead in the face of intellectual challenges and professional roadblocks. For that, I will always be grateful.