term can be seen as potentially robust and interesting, and may provide templates for the directions in which “mother” might move over time.

**Why Do Mothers Blog?**

Mommyblogging stands in stark contrast to that other suburban maternal pursuit: scrapbooking. Whether physical or digital, scrapbooks focus on children, documenting and producing an artefact of their early lives. By contrast, mommyblogs capture *maternal* experiences, give mothers a voice, and foster conversation and participation in a community, the beginnings of a response to Sara Ruddick’s (1989) assertion that mothers are so often left out of the story (p. 11). This practice thus provides a necessary antidote to maternal isolation, but it also provides validation that maternal experiences – and not simply documentations of childhood – are valid and worthy of discussion. Like consciousness-raising groups of the past, mothers who blog have room to dissect their own experience in chorus, to (potentially, at least) find the political in the shared personal and examine their lives critically. Paul John Eakin (1999) draws on the work of psychologist John Shotter in suggesting that such writing exists at the moment wherein “the ‘I’ . . . is ‘interpellated’ by the ‘you’” (p. 63).

The mamasphere challenges the stability of the mother subject. In using life writing as “a critical practice” (Kadar, 1992), mommybloggers are able to construct a more nuanced and contradictory maternal subject. There are five key characteristics that allow them this capacity. Their blogs are

- diverse in terms of social location and maternal experience,
- multitudinous in their participation by vast numbers of mothers,\(^7\)
- relational in their focus on dialogue and interactivity across blogs,
- atemporal by allowing for a linking back into the past and the evolution of an unending narrative, and
- performative in sharing mothers’ lived experiences in opposition to prescriptive expert discourses.

It is these attributes of the mamasphere (all of which draw on and extend the rich history of life writing and motherhood writing) that allow mothers writing online to participate in a new form of maternal subjectivity. They are creating a form of maternal thought that is rich and interpersonal while at the same time full of contradictions and
confusions, providing an analysis of maternal experiences that is not found in more traditional, linear, and stable narratives.

By acknowledging the chaos of women’s lived experiences as mothers through their own words, mommybloggers are mastering a method that has strong roots in motherhood studies. They are reaching out through their life writings to “create a collective description of the world” (Rich, 1976) that can support and nourish as well as criticize and challenge what they do. As Adrienne Rich wrote in *Of Woman Born*,

For many months I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for the plunge into areas of my own life that were painful and problematical, yet from the heart of which this book has come. I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours. (1976, pp. 15–16)

In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Alice Walker (1974) takes these connections further, suggesting that there is much to gain by considering our mothers’ stories as the sources of our wisdom and continuity. She writes,

So many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded. (p. 93)

In looking at the “private and painful experience” of motherhood, at various mothers’ stories over time, mommyblogs provide an amazing portrait of the compelling, convoluted, and contradictory terrain of mothers and motherhood in the early twenty-first century, a portrait undertaken by vast realms of women that can be shared simultaneously. The presence of a collectively authored and endlessly evolving account of maternal life presents relationality squared: Mothers create shared accounts by engaging in dialogue about mothering, and are also presenting, in those accounts, evidence of the entwined nature of maternal work, the endless connections between mothers and children.
Such an account presents a very real threat to the myth of the individual human subject.

In describing this relational politic, it is important to skirt precisely the trap that mothers are often pushed towards: the concretization of motherhood as a natural and static condition with a concomitant natural morality and knowledge, which can somehow be plundered in order to heal the troubled world. Rather, by looking at mothers, who are often required to perform relational labour, we may consider the ways that, from infancy, all humans function as relational individuals, and also consider the relationships that exist beyond the dyad of mother and child. By beginning to view motherhood as simply one example of the relationality we all experience, we may shift towards a postmodern view that sees our liminal subjects as continuously overlapping rather than discretely and fixedly sitting side by side.

Mielle Chandler (2007) takes up the idea of maternal subjectivity in the context of a politics of individualism, arguing that the focus on women’s autonomous empowerment that characterizes much feminist theory foregrounds individuality and is thus inconsistent with the lived experience of motherhood. She suggests, instead, that society acknowledge mothers as subjects “in-relation” and that “the problematic lies not in the equation of motherhood with non-subjectivity but in the privileging of an emancipated individuated subjectivity” (p. 535). Chandler’s insights provide possibilities for a relational understanding of the maternal subject that acknowledges both the intrinsically dyadic nature of parenting vulnerable children who are unable to care for themselves and the implications of mothering undertaken in community and described in dialogue.

Such an insight makes sense not only of individual experiences of parenting but also of the emergent community exposed in the mamasphere. Drawing from Andrea O’Reilly’s (2008a) insights about the four “a’s” of empowered mothering (agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity) (p. 11), the hybridity of the mamasphere (discussed in chapter 3) allows for a complicated empowerment, one that draws on two further “a’s”: ambiguity and ambivalence. This confusion is born of both the wealth of maternal accounts that exist online as well as the depth of each individual story, leading to a fractured and incoherent subjectivity. The mamasphere thus presents a view of the maternal subject that draws on feminist motherhood studies but extends this understanding even further in its focus on the maternal subject as relational and ambiguous.
What Mommyblogs Offer

If, in Rich’s terms, mothers are caught between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the mothering practice that they undertake, mommyblogs provide infinite examples of the incredible shackles of the dominant discourses of motherhood presented as a selfless natural state, interrupted continuously by account after account of mothering shown as hard, raw work.

Rich (1976) presented this distinction between institution and practice of motherhood initially in Of Woman Born, writing of

the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one half of the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between “private” and “public” life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. (p. 13)

Rich’s distinction remains intensely relevant. Mothering is still taking place within the context of patriarchal motherhood, and the distinction – between the specific work that mothers do and who mothers are, as well as the specific constraints placed on women’s lives as mothers – is all too often ignored. To ignore this distinction is to expect women to grin and bear all that is unbearable about motherhood. Rich’s insights were groundbreaking, allowing as they did the distinction between the work done by mothers and the dominant discourse of patriarchy guiding this work. Her ideas have since been taken up and developed by many motherhood scholars. By suggesting that women’s dissatisfaction with motherhood might be due to the imposition of misogynist expectations and demands, and not the biology of mothering itself, Rich allowed for the possibility of a reclamation of motherhood, a way for mothering to be undertaken in an enjoyable and empowering way. Interestingly, Rich arrives at this conclusion through the lens of her own experience. Writing in a style reminiscent of many mommybloggers, Rich writes of a vacation from her husband and, as a result, from the constraints of expectations of “appropriate” motherhood:
Driving home once, after midnight, from a late drive-in movie . . . with three sleeping children in the back of the car, I felt wide awake, elated; we had broken together all the rules of bedtime, the night rules, rules I myself thought I had to observe in the city or become a “bad mother.” We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life. (1976, pp. 194–5)

In chronicling her escape, Rich clearly shows the cage in which she is trapped. By exposing the institution of motherhood, then, Rich is finally able to find possibilities beyond it. This distinction has greatly informed the wealth of motherhood literature that has burgeoned in the thirty-five years since Rich first put it forth. Rich’s insights, and those of the powerful motherhood theorists who have followed, have created a groundwork for understanding maternity as a complicated subjectivity and a field of study ripe for analysis.

Mommyblogs present a lived tension between mothering and motherhood, between “good” and “bad” mothering, which allows for collisions to occur between these slippery and contested terrains. In their vast and unedited realms, mommyblogs reveal a self-reflexivity and an honest grappling that resists an easy label of “feminist” or “patriarchal.” It is precisely this lived tension that mothers embody. While the theoretical possibilities of Rich’s distinction have led motherhood studies to some critical and important realms, the time has come for an approach to motherhood that gives a closer examination of discourse and subjectivity, an analysis that stands on the shoulders of critical mothering theorists but extends their analysis even further. Such an analysis may defy easy conclusions, but it is not at all unproductive; rather, in looking at the lived tension between contradictory and confusing discourses of motherhood and the ways they are enacted, the complicated nature of maternal subjectivity and the significant complexities of the constraints and opportunities afforded mothers may be appreciated. Thirty-five years ago Rich’s incisive distinction was required to push analyses of motherhood forward. In order to successfully examine motherhood in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to draw upon feminist insights about motherhood and extend the analysis even further, to consider the hybridity and confusion of the maternal subject.

In trying to form conclusions about mommybloggers – and about mothers – I am reminded of my children attempting to jump upon their own shadows: I am attempting to trap an essentially untrappable form of knowledge. After the initial discomfort and frustration that
this inconclusive conclusion elicits, however, I have found that there is much to be gained, as a researcher in general and as a motherhood researcher in particular, in looking instead at uncertainty as a valuable critical lens. By showing the limitations of a framework that draws, in both theory and policy, from liberal modernism in its respect for individual human rights, the theoretical manifestations of hybrid, cyborg, and queer theory expressed in these online writings move us towards a relational politics that is both flexible and responsive to the convoluted and interactive lives that people are truly living.

**Limitations of the Genre: The Digital Divide**

The term “digital divide,” defined as “the troubling gap between those who use computers and the Internet and those who do not” (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004, p. 782), initially referred only to computer ownership; as Internet use has become more firmly embedded in the details of Western life, however, it has become a core component of the digital divide. Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop argue that race, class, and education are the key components that disallow some people from digital citizenry. These characteristics generally refer to a digital divide within industrialized nations, looking, for example, at the greater access to computers and the web among wealthy students in comparison to their poorer counterparts. Beyond this definition, however, there is an increasing discussion of the global digital divide – the lack of computer hardware and digital infrastructure that leaves much of the developing world unconnected. While there are emergent initiatives such as One Laptop per Child that aim to respond to the global digital divide, these are usually reliant on open-source software and operating systems that may, even at their best, still result in a two-tier system of computer use, again entrenching the poverty and digital limitations of those in the Global South. Indeed, even in the developed world, the spread of wireless and high-speed Internet access has been slow and uneven, skewing access towards urban centres and arguably thus rendering the experiences of rural households less prominent.

The implications of the digital divide cannot be understated as computer access creates faster and thicker connections between privileged users and thus emphasizes and solidifies the poverty of non-Internet users at both a national and international level. Arguably, the digital divide is a key method for ensuring that the rich get richer while the poor fall deeper into poverty. Furthermore, beyond creating or facilitating