Introduction
In Search of the Maternal Body

In 1798 Gertrude Meredith reported to her husband that she was “better than I have been this summer, but extremely thin notwithstanding. Mama tells me this is owing to my suckling my Child—she is very anxious that I should wean her, but this I cannot think of doing.”

Meredith’s brief update highlighted the toll that childrearing could take on a mother’s health, but also emphasized her dedication to what she saw as her duty to nourish her daughter from her own body. A year later, an American women’s magazine printed an article on breastfeeding in which the author argued that by nursing her child, a “woman undergoes a kind of happy metamorphosis, which almost renders her difficult to be known. Her skin becomes fine, soft, and fair; her features are refined into an uncommon degrees of sweetness, under the influence of this new regimen. The too-ardent carnation of her cheeks, tempered by the milky revolution, assumes a milder teint.”

This portrait of the refined and beautiful nursing mother exposed a gulf between the lived experiences of women such as Gertrude Meredith and the cultural representations of motherhood that increasingly permeated American society. Although these two perspectives exposed a disconnect between the maternal body as it was lived and as it was imagined, perceptions of the body were integral to each writer’s vision of motherhood. In this respect both writers were representative of their time, for ideas about the body became central to defining motherhood both as a lived identity and as a cultural symbol in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America.

This study begins in the 1750s, a time when childbearing and childrearing occupied the physical and emotional energies of most American women, who could expect to be pregnant or breastfeeding and tending young children almost constantly between their early twenties and early forties. Women gave birth in their homes attended by other women—midwives, friends, kinswomen—who had lived through the same cycles of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, and who understood the physical rigors of motherhood. Those women who enjoyed a comfortable home and the ability to
take time away from their duties spent an additional period recuperating in bed, supported by female companions. Those who lacked that luxury still depended on the women around them to boost their spirits and provide practical assistance in negotiating work and motherhood. The shared experiences of motherhood bound female friends and family members together as they tended one another or wrote letters sharing reproductive news and advice and commiserating over the anxieties and discomforts wrought by motherhood. Women were also the primary caretakers of their children, particularly of young ones, and they spent their days balancing the demands of domestic work and other labor, depending on their socioeconomic status, with the demands of mothering. Women clothed, fed, healed, and educated their children, all tasks that involved tiring physical and intellectual labor. Sarah Hale, for one, complained in 1822 amid the squabbling of her young children, “My cares are never ceasing.”

This study concludes in the 1850s, encompassing roughly a century of both change and continuity in women’s lives as mothers. By this time the average number of children in an American family had decreased from more than seven to just over five children, a fertility revolution that particularly affected white middle-class women in the North, who now spent less of their adult lives pregnant, recovering from childbirth, and breast-feeding. Yet even with this decline in fertility, the rhythms of childbearing and childrearing continued to define most women’s lives, prompting both anxiety and satisfaction as women watched their families grow. At the same time, while growing numbers of women gave birth under the supervision of physicians, the majority continued to deliver their babies much as their mothers and grandmothers had, with the assistance of other women. Other changes were also slow in coming. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, for instance, that anesthetized childbirth became an option for some women, while it was even longer before the development of infant formula offered women a safe means of raising their children without breast milk. Moreover, women continued to do most of the work of childrearing, so that the rhythms of daily life were still defined by the work of mothering. Thus the period between the 1750s and the 1850s encompassed significant continuities in the lives of American mothers.

More visible changes emerged in the realm of feminine ideology in this period. Although women’s lives were profoundly marked by the experiences of motherhood, in 1750 the figure of the mother was not yet imbued with the cultural importance she would gain by the turn of the nineteenth
century. Print culture—sermons, prescriptive texts, and popular literature—taught that the dutiful woman’s primary function was as a “help-meet” to her husband, a position that implicated many different roles, including that of motherhood. Print culture put more emphasis on women’s ability to produce offspring than on their efforts in childrearing. A mother was first and foremost a reproductive body, and she was celebrated more for her fecundity than for her ability to shape the minds, morals, and bodies of her children. Many early parenting advice manuals, in fact, were addressed to fathers rather than mothers in the belief that it was the father’s responsibility to direct how his children would be raised and educated. The popular literature of the time similarly put less emphasis on women as mothers than as virtuous virgins, loyal daughters, and obedient wives.

The second half of the eighteenth century, however, marked a transitional period in ideas of womanhood as British and American writers articulated a new emphasis on motherhood as women’s most important role. This new cultural vision stemmed from Enlightenment ideas that circulated among England, Scotland, France, and America in the eighteenth century as well as from the growing evangelical Protestant impulse in both England and America. Although different in many ways, both Enlightenment thought and evangelical religion constructed a popular and enduring vision of women’s superior virtue and natural tenderness that combined to foster the ideal of what Ruth Bloch has called the “moral mother.” Enlightenment thinkers extolled women’s superior virtue and tenderness, while religious writers commended women’s natural piety. Both strains of thought contributed to a growing emphasis on the affective ties of motherhood and on women’s ability to transmit virtue to their children. Women themselves echoed this new emphasis on motherhood, expressing a greater sense of responsibility in the lives of their children.

The rise of republican ideology during the era of the American Revolution also contributed to this shift in cultural depictions of motherhood. The need for order in a society newly bereft of class-based social distinctions and anxious about the production of a virtuous citizenry made the role of the mother ideologically and practically central to the new republic. The new figure of the “republican mother,” as Linda Kerber has called her, was responsible for creating a domestic space in which to endow her children with moral sensibility and civic responsibility, thus ensuring the enduring success of the republican project.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, then, an array of influences had converged to place motherhood at the center of American notions of
virtuous womanhood. At a time when American society was becoming more
diverse, urban, industrial, and market-driven than ever before, the figure of
the good mother counterbalanced these rough and unpredictable forces by
becoming a symbol of morality and stability, particularly for the middle
classes that were at the center of many of these social, cultural, and economic
changes. During the first half of the nineteenth century, cultural depictions
of motherhood developed a vision of what Nancy Theriot has called “impe-
rial motherhood.”13 As mothers, women not only bore children but were ex-
pected to be wholly child-centered, nourishing their children’s bodies and
guiding their moral and intellectual development. In return for their dedica-
tion as mothers, women gained—ideologically, at least—a significant degree
of power and influence in society. As one nineteenth-century author ear-
nestly explained, “The mistress and mother of a family occupies one of the
most important stations in the community.”14 Thus by the early decades of
the nineteenth century the mother had become one of the most potent sym-
bols of virtue and order in American society. I will refer to this vision of
women’s role as the ideal of sentimental motherhood, a term that encompasses
the traits of the moral mother, republican motherhood, and imperial mother-
hood, while also recognizing the ways in which sentimental expression and
the power of feeling became central to the definition of the good mother.

Ideas about the body were deeply implicated in the construction of the
sentimental mother. By the late eighteenth century the body had long been
subordinated in Western intellectual traditions to the mind or soul, alleged-
lly superior sites of reason, truth, and virtue. As Susan Bordo has writ-
ten, “The body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and
confounder of its projects: these are common images within Western phi-
losophy.”15 Plato, for instance, linked concepts such as knowledge, truth,
beauty, and love to the soul, while he understood the body to be the site of
vulgar and dangerous appetites. He also drew a clear link between women
and the body, arguing that one of the defining characteristics of women was
their preoccupation with materiality. To focus on the body and its senses
was to behave like a woman. To be embodied was to be tethered to the par-
ticularities of one’s time and place, to lack objectivity and autonomy.16 The
legacy of Plato and subsequent thinkers was a vision of the body, particu-
larly the female body, as debased and disorderly. Thus, by creating new im-
ages of the mother—defined not by her sheer reproductive capacity and
the messiness of her body, but by her ability to nurture the morals of her
children—the sentimental maternal ideal marked a significant departure
from long-standing notions of female corporeality. By emphasizing women’s emotional and moral qualities, cultural representations of sentimental motherhood contested the ways in which women had been defined as inferior and corrupted by their bodies.

At the heart of this study is an examination of the role the body played in defining motherhood. Putting the body at the center of the history of motherhood reveals that perceptions and representations of corporeality were crucial to defining motherhood, both as it was lived by childbearing women and as it was configured into a potent cultural symbol. Making the body the central category of analysis brings together two different narratives. On the one hand, this book explores women’s own descriptions of their bodies during repeated cycles of childbearing to understand how the work of their bodies shaped women’s attitudes toward motherhood. On the other hand, it examines the vast realm of print culture, which included medical texts, prescriptive literature, visual culture, and popular literature, to reveal the increasingly elaborate cultural prescriptions for how the maternal body was supposed to look, act, and feel. This work is structured around the tension between perceptions of the lived maternal body, as articulated by childbearing women themselves, and the imagined maternal body that was created in the realm of print and visual culture.

In exploring this tension, I argue that the lived experience of the maternal body was the foundation of women’s perceptions of childbearing and childrearing and prompted feelings of ambivalence toward motherhood. When I write of women’s experience, I borrow from Nancy Theriot’s concept of experience not as an event that happens (a pregnancy, a birth) but as the meaning that women created for themselves around that event.17 Women loved their children and derived emotional and intellectual satisfaction from mothering, but the pain, fatigue, and unwieldiness of their bodies during cycles of childbearing and childrearing also made them regard motherhood with trepidation. In contrast, I argue that beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, cultural representations of motherhood increasingly sought to refine the maternal body, and even make it disappear entirely, in order to project a vision of motherhood that was defined by women’s spiritual and emotional work rather than by their physical labor. In other words, while childbearing women acknowledged the messy physical work that gave a range of meanings to motherhood, the emerging ideal of
sentimental motherhood effaced the body and privileged women’s abstract moral and emotional qualities.

Several important issues emerge from these distinct narratives of the maternal body, first among them the question of historical continuity. While print culture revealed an uneven but definite change over time toward a disembodied vision of the sentimental mother, women’s personal depictions of the maternal body were predominantly defined by continuity. This continuity is somewhat dismaying to the historian, who typically seeks to identify and explain change over time. Yet tracing some of the consistencies in the lives of American mothers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may alleviate some discomfort. For instance, we might expect that the changing childbirth practices wrought by the professionalization of midwifery as part of the male medical profession would dramatically impact women’s perceptions of the physical experiences of childbearing. But the material changes surrounding childbirth were gradual and uneven, and the use of male physicians did not dramatically change the outcomes for birthing women. In fact, Judith Walzer Leavitt has shown that women’s perceptions of the pain and danger of childbirth did not change significantly until the twentieth century, when deliveries moved from the home to the hospital. Moreover, we might expect that declining fertility rates would change the way that women regarded the physical rigors of childbearing. But although some women in this period bore fewer children than their mothers and grandmothers, most still spent a significant period of their adult lives pregnant, recovering from childbirth, breastfeeding, and tending young children. Finally, women’s perceptions of motherhood were shaped by preceding generations. Older women shared advice and the wisdom gleaned from their own experiences, and women often created explicit links between their own childbearing experiences and those of their mothers. In 1793 Maria Flagg, for instance, drew a connection between her future suffering in childbirth and the past suffering of her mother: “I always thought & think now, that if I am ever married, what she suffer’d for me, I shall for another, believe me in such a case it will comfort me to think I am paying the debt I owe.” Thus we cannot assume that a woman’s vision of the corporeal work of motherhood in the 1850s was radically different from that of her mother or even grandmother.

A second issue relates to the ways in which changing cultural depictions of motherhood paralleled ongoing developments in the ways that Americans thought about women’s work. Jeanne Boydston has shown that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries women’s productive activi-
ties began to be dissociated from notions of real (that is, breadwinning) labor. By the mid-nineteenth century women's work was no longer viewed in middle-class culture as economically productive; instead, women's responsibilities were understood to revolve around motherhood and the creation of an ideal home. Even these homemaking responsibilities came to be described “less as purposeful activities” than as “emanations of an abstract but shared Womanhood.”

Although Boydston's argument does not focus specifically on depictions of motherhood, I would argue that this shift away from acknowledging women's productive work was an essential part of the evolution of the sentimental maternal ideal. As the maternal body began to vanish from cultural representations of motherhood, so too did the impression that motherhood involved (re)productive labor. Instead, motherhood came to be presented as an effortless and joyful experience, and the work that women did was imagined as solely emotional and spiritual.

Finally, as the concept of physical labor vanished from cultural depictions of motherhood, it also became clear that sentimental motherhood was profoundly defined by notions of class and race. Physical labor was associated in American society with the lower classes and the enslaved. Wet nurses, for instance, were often lower-class immigrant women, and by the nineteenth century they came to be regarded as laboring bodies that disrupted the values of sentimental motherhood. Enslaved women were defined even more profoundly by the productive and reproductive labor of their bodies. At the same time, white middle-class Americans became increasingly preoccupied with the presentation and management of the body, creating a culture that sought to restrain the body in order to privilege the mind and soul and to project an appearance of gentility. Bodily restraint became the hallmark of the white middle class. Disorderly bodies—often defined in terms of unrestrained sexuality or intemperance—came to be associated exclusively with the poor, with immigrants, and with nonwhite Americans. Because the sentimental mother came to be envisioned as a noncorporeal figure who did not work but simply emanated virtue and love, women who were socially and culturally defined by their laboring or disorderly bodies simply could not be sentimental mothers. Thus the disembodied sentimental mother of print culture became clearly defined as white and socioeconomically privileged, precluding many women from claiming the moral and emotional authority and privilege of the good mother.

This study endeavors to capture a broad range of ways in which Americans living between the 1750s and the 1850s thought about the maternal
body. I have drawn on women’s letters and diaries as well as slave narratives and interviews to uncover the diverse meanings created around the lived experience of the maternal body. Middle-class and elite white women left a more substantial archive of first-person accounts of childbearing than did lower-class women and women of color, but the less abundant testimonies left by enslaved women offer powerful insights into the importance of the body and provide a needed counterpoint to the experiences of socioeconomically privileged women. Putting the insights of enslaved women and privileged white women side by side illuminates critical commonalities and differences in the role that corporeality played in defining motherhood. The majority of the women I write about came from the more populous Eastern Seaboard, though some lived as far west as Missouri, Texas, or even Oregon. Although the West is underrepresented in this study, the sources I have examined suggest that region was less important in differentiating women’s perceptions of embodiment than other factors such as enslavement, age, number of children, and the particularities of individual experiences.

In order to uncover the cultural perceptions of the maternal body that shaped the mind-set of an increasingly literate American public, I have focused on a seemingly disparate selection of print sources. Although medical literature, prescriptive literature, popular literature and visual culture, and antislavery print culture may at first glance appear to have little in common, by focusing on depictions of the body I show that all of these print sources worked together to generate the cultural icon of the noncorporeal sentimental mother. To a large extent the cultural history of the maternal body is a transnational one. Much of the print culture that was consumed by eighteenth-century Americans was originally published in Britain before making its way to America. An indigenous American print culture emerged more fully at the beginning of the nineteenth century, though it too was heavily influenced by trends across the Atlantic. American print culture largely emerged in cities in the Northeast such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, but in spite of this northeastern bias these texts were widely consumed and constituted an influential national culture.23

This book is organized thematically to consider different issues and types of sources while also mirroring the cycles of motherhood that structured women’s lives. The chapters function in pairs, moving from the processes of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding through which motherhood was imagined in medical and prescriptive literature and by which women entered the realm of motherhood, to broader visions of the mother as an
imagined figure in popular print culture. The chapter organization also reflects the broader tension between change over time and continuity that structured the history of the maternal body in this period. The chapters that focus on print culture depict the gradual emergence of the disembodied sentimental mother, and these are interwoven with chapters depicting the underlying continuity in women’s descriptions of the physical experiences of motherhood. Each chapter alone provides only one facet of the varied perceptions of the maternal body that coexisted in American society, but taken together they re-create the complex and often contradictory culture within which women lived as mothers.

This book begins by exploring the first stages of motherhood—pregnancy and childbirth—from the perspective of the male medical profession and the perspective of childbearing women. Chapter 1 looks back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to locate some of the earliest print culture depictions of the maternal body and to explore how the development of midwifery as part of the male medical profession in the eighteenth century reshaped medical representations of the maternal body. I argue that in the mid-eighteenth century medical writers began to shift their focus away from the elite white mother as an active corporeal figure and toward the uterus as the primary agent in childbearing, thus replacing her labor with the work of the physician and the uterus. The dissociation of the mother from the labor of her body opened the way for an emerging cultural vision of the mother as a refined, moral, and spiritual figure.

Chapter 2 approaches the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth from a very different angle by examining the ways in which women discussed the experiences of childbearing. Middle-class and elite white women left frequent references to pregnancy and childbirth in their letters and diaries. These brief textual moments reveal that women viewed the experience of motherhood as profoundly rooted in the work of their bodies. Moreover, their writings show that the physical challenges of childbearing made them deeply ambivalent toward motherhood. Enslaved women also left behind references to childbearing in published narratives and interviews and revealed that the maternal body signified different things in bondage than in freedom. While white middle-class and elite women emphasized the day-to-day physicality of pregnancy and childbirth, enslaved women’s testimonies show that their experience of childbearing was most profoundly shaped by the commodification of their bodies as mothers. Childbearing women, both free and enslaved, placed the work of their bodies at the heart of their understanding of motherhood, but for vastly different reasons.
Next, the focus shifts from childbearing to the early stages of childrearing by exploring breastfeeding as it was depicted in maternal advice literature and women’s personal writings. Chapter 3 explores how debates about the importance of maternal breastfeeding underwent a rhetorical shift beginning in the late eighteenth century. Maternal advice manual authors moved from a focus on women’s divine duty and the practical benefits of nursing for infant and maternal health to a new sentimental rhetoric that emphasized maternal pleasure in the act of breastfeeding. In doing so, they effaced the real labor involved in mothering and presented a newly idealized vision of motherhood as natural, effortless, and delightful.

Women’s discussions of breastfeeding both echoed and contradicted the ideals set out in prescriptive literature. Chapter 4 examines white middle-class and elite women’s letters and diaries to show that frequent discomfort tempered the pleasure they derived from nursing their children, resulting in ambivalence toward the physical act. In spite of their ambivalence, women agreed with prescriptive authors that breastfeeding was practically and symbolically crucial to the identity of the good mother. Because the act of breastfeeding was so important to the idealization of motherhood, by the beginning of the nineteenth century it became a central issue around which the very definition of the mother became fractured. Middle-class and elite white women’s attitudes toward their hired wet nurses reveal that the issue of breastfeeding helped widen race- and class-based fissures in the definition of the good mother. Middle-class and elite mothers viewed themselves as good mothers, while they came to see nonwhite and lower-class mothers merely as useful or troublesome reproductive bodies.

Finally, I move from the more concrete experiences of childbearing and childrearing to the imaginary realm of literary and visual culture. Chapter 5 examines representations of the mother in the popular sentimental poetry and visual culture that were widely produced and voraciously consumed by Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the 1830s this sentimental print culture consistently portrayed the ideal mother in terms of her moral and emotional influence, disguising the work of her body in favor of the more intangible qualities of maternal love and piety. These texts took the image of the sentimental mother a step further by defining her as a transcendent figure whose ethereal influence was infinite and everlasting, granting her a unique kind of power over her children and, by extension, society as a whole.

The figure of the mother was also central to antislavery print culture, and chapter 6 explores the ways in which the enslaved maternal body was
depicted in antislavery poems and visual culture. Like mainstream print culture, antislavery poems and pictures used sentimental language and imagery to create a common bond between mothers, enslaved and free, but they did not invoke the fantasy of the transcendent mother in their representations of enslaved women. Unlike the white mother in the sentimental poetry of popular middle-class culture, the enslaved mother was bound to her corporeality by the physical torments of slavery. By emphasizing the disorderly corporeality of the enslaved mother, antislavery poems and images exposed and perpetuated a culturally entrenched race-based division between white transcendent mothers and black embodied mothers. Ultimately, these sources show that the maternal body came to be used to symbolize the forces of order and disorder in American society.

The study of the history of the body is a relatively recent project that has added new depth to our understanding of the human experience. Although the material body does imply a certain biological constant—after all, physiological processes such as conception, pregnancy, or lactation have not changed markedly over time—scholars have shown that the body is always defined, regulated, and reinvented by its social and cultural context. The very same living human body may be burdened with different meanings in different contexts, while the imagined bodies that appear in print, visual, and material culture vary according to the beliefs of the overall culture whose values they articulate and shape. Different notions of power and social worth, as well as a host of identities based on categories such as gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and age, are inscribed on the body. Thus scholars have explored the body as individual and collective, coerced and contestatory, and as a site of inscription and performance. Historians in particular have been interested in the ways in which oppression and agency have been located in the body and how notions of class, gender, and race have been inscribed on and contested by the body at different times and in different places. Historical analyses of the body have revealed that representations of embodiment helped to define social and cultural belonging, and this was certainly true in the context of motherhood.

The pioneering work of Michel Foucault has provided the foundation for much of the scholarship on the body across disciplines. He has argued that power acts on the body in society and in doing so creates the body as a recognizable signifier of identity and status. In Foucault’s formulation, the body must be understood as a discursive product; there is no original or
natural nondiscursive material body. I do not wish to deny the existence of an original material body, yet following Foucault and other scholars I do work from the understanding that everything we know about the body is mediated through language and other forms of representation. As Judith Butler has written, “To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.” Although many of our experiences in life may be rooted in the materiality of the body—touch, sounds, smells, pain, pleasure—we can never know or understand those moments outside of language, and language is what gives meaning to our bodily actions and encounters. Thus historians can approach the body as a purely discursive construction, as I do in my analyses of the imagined maternal body in popular print culture, or as a site of experience, which is always given meaning by language.

The study of the body has been particularly fraught for feminist scholars whose work seeks to challenge the biological essentialism that has historically constrained women’s opportunities, while simultaneously striving to understand the fullness of women’s lived experiences. There is no doubt that women’s place in American society, and elsewhere, has been historically defined by their biological capacity to bear children. Feminist scholars are right to contest the enduring tendency to define women in terms of their sexual and reproductive bodies. Yet in writing about the women of the past, it is also important to recognize the ways in which the biological capacities of their bodies truly did shape their lives. Women did lactate, not men, and this seemingly simple fact shaped the rhythms of their lives and the meanings they drew from their roles as women and mothers, as well as influencing the ways in which women were imagined in American culture. Elizabeth Grosz has challenged feminist scholars to consider the body in explorations of subjectivity and identity instead of privileging the mind, and this book seeks to respond to her call. In writing the history of the maternal body, my goal is not to essentialize women as mothers, but to historicize childbearing and motherhood. I show that the meaning of the body and the ways in which it contributed to perceptions of motherhood were contingent on time, social position, experience, and a host of other variables. The body must be seen as “a fleshy field of dreams,” and the purpose of this book is to examine the experiences and fantasies that invested the maternal body with meaning in American society.
Writing a history of the maternal body is in some respects an impossible task. The bodies of which I write have vanished, and most women did not reflect on and write about their embodiment in a conscious way. Even in the abundant cultural representations of motherhood it is not always easy to read between the lines to understand what perceptions of the body shaped the vision an author or artist sought to convey. Looking for the historical body often feels like peering through a heavy veil at a figure just beyond reach. But it is essential for historians to keep in mind the physical dimensions of human experience and understanding. The body is both everywhere and nowhere in the historical record. It existed in the lived experiences of the individual, in encounters between people, and in the articulation of sameness and difference, and it has been the fundamental site of both oppression and resistance. As historians we most often rely on written evidence from the past that allows us to forget that the mind that articulated the words on the page was given form by a body, and that the pen that recorded events and ideas was wielded by a fleshly hand. As historians we tend to bring to life the thoughts and feelings of the women and men of the past, while allowing the flesh to remain dead and forgotten. In order to find the historical body we must peer imaginatively at every source, for inevitably the body is present just below the surface.