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**The Crisis of Childrearing Behind Bars: Analyzing the Construction of Motherhood  
in Prison Nursery Programs**

Due to the recent rise in pregnant women behind bars, prison nursery programs have garnered attention for preventing mother/infant separation by allowing eligible mothers to live with their babies in a unit separate from the general prison population for a finite period. Existing research confirms these programs reduce recidivism (Carlson, 1998, 2001, 2018), foster healthy mother/infant attachments (Byrne et al. 2010) and prepare mothers for childrearing post-release (Tuxhorn 2022). This research, however, does not explore how these social institutions contest or negotiate dominant constructions of motherhood. Thus, this talk draws from secondary sources to perform a feminist rhetorical analysis of the Residential Parenting Program (RPP) located in Washington's Corrections Center for Women. Referencing mothers' required responsibilities, this analysis reveals that the RPP's construction of motherhood includes the feminist insistence that women have autonomy and the conflicting notion that motherhood is woman's most important role. This distortion is central to what Meredith Michales and Susan Douglas have coined as the new momism (2004) or the assertion that a woman is the best primary caretaker and should devote her entire being to her child 24/7. By characterizing incarcerated mothers' circumstances before and after incarceration, I demonstrate how the new momism allows these mothers to counter discourses labeling them as negligent, and simultaneously dismisses the structural barriers that will impede their ability to continue this labor post-release. I conclude with suggestions of intervention, as this dominant construction of motherhood may keep mothers and infants together initially, but can lead to separation later.

JWells is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies and in the African American and Africana Studies program at the University of Kentucky. JWells specializes in cultural literacies, women's rhetorics, and maternal incarceration. Her research applies ethnographic research methods to explore how incarcerated mothers' form their mothering practices at the intersection of multiple oppressions, and how those practices align with as well as counter dominant mothering ideologies. Her current project uses interviews to trace how formerly incarcerated mothers construct motherhood over time in a carceral state.