

Introduction

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Adrienne Rich opened *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* with the observation, “We know more about the air we breath, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). In the twenty-eight plus years since the publication of *Of Woman Born*, the topic of motherhood has emerged as a central issue in feminist scholarship. “American feminism,” as Lauri Umansky observes in *Motherhood Reconceived*, “has subjected the institution of motherhood and the practice of mothering to their most complex, nuanced and multifocused analysis” (2). While the increasing centrality of motherhood in feminist scholarship has been studied by Umansky among others, what has been less recognized is how this new field of feminist inquiry has developed in reference to one theoretical work, namely Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, recognized as the first and arguably still the best feminist book on mothering and motherhood. Rich’s book—a wide ranging, far reaching meditation on the meaning and experience of motherhood that draws from the disciplines of anthropology, feminist theory, psychology, literature, as well as narratives of Rich’s personal reflections on her experiences of mothering—has had a broad and enduring impact on feminist thought on motherhood. Described by Penelope Dixon, in her 1991 annotated bibliography on mothers and mothering, as “one of the major feminist studies on mothering,” *Of Woman Born* has indeed influenced the way a whole generation of scholars thinks about motherhood (11).

The purpose of this volume is to examine how Rich’s ovarian work has informed and influenced the way feminist scholarship “thinks and talks” motherhood in disciplines as diverse as Literature, Women’s Studies, Law, Sociology, Anthropology, Creative Writing, and Critical Theory. In particular, the collection will explore how two key theoretical insights made by Rich

in *Of Woman Born* provided the analytical tools to fully study and report upon the meaning and experience of motherhood. The first of these is the distinction Rich made “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: 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” (13, emphasis in original). “This book,” Rich writes, “is not an attack on the family or on mothering *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy*” (14, emphasis in original). The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power.

The oppressive and the empowering dimensions of maternity, as well as the complex relationship between the two, first identified by Rich in *Of Woman Born* have been the focus of feminist research on motherhood over the last two and a half decades. Umansky, in her study of feminism between 1968 and 1982, ascertained two competing feminist views on motherhood: the “negative” discourse that “focus[ses] on motherhood as a social mandate, an oppressive institution, a compromise of woman’s independence,” and the “positive” discourse that argues that “motherhood minus ‘patriarchy’ [. . .] holds the truly spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self, to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of motherhood denies to women” (2–3). Umansky’s classification is drawn from the distinction Rich made between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and a nonpatriarchal experience of mothering. Chapters in parts 1 and 2 of this volume draw upon this first theoretical insight of Rich to explore, in part 1, motherhood as institution and, in part 2, mothering as experience.

The third part is developed from the second central theme of *Of Woman Born*, the relationship between mothering and writing. As parts 1 and 2 consider how Rich’s book came to define mothering versus motherhood as a central concern in feminist theory on motherhood over the last twenty-eight years, part 3 examines how this book made visible the tensions between mothering and writing, in particular how mothering both inhibits and fosters creativity. Furthermore, *Of Woman Born* influenced the *way* feminist scholars theorize mothering-motherhood. “It seemed impossible from the first,” explains Rich, “to write a book of this kind without being often biographical, without often saying I” (15). The “heart” of this landmark book, as Rich herself acknowledges, is the “painful and problematic plunges into [her]

own life" (16). In privileging subjective knowledge and by blending, blurring, and bending the conventional oppositions of theory and experience, *Of Woman Born* cleared the way for a feminist narration of maternity in both literature and theory.

"I told myself," Rich comments in *Of Woman Born*, "that I wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory. But I did not choose this subject, it had long ago chosen me" (15). Rich's reflections on her book capture well my reasons for doing this volume on the legacy of *Of Woman Born*. I first read *Of Woman Born*, the tenth anniversary edition, in the summer of 1987 when my first two children were three years and six months of age. I had just completed the first year of my PhD and was staying for a few weeks at my mother's cottage with my two young children. I had heard of Rich's book and, planning to do my graduate work in the area of Mothering and Women's Writing, had promised myself that I would read the book at the cottage that summer. I did not read *Of Woman Born* when it was first published in 1976; in that year I was fifteen and motherhood was the farthest thing from my mind. Eleven years later, at the age of twenty-six and the mother of two young children and a feminist scholar of motherhood, I was academically and personally well-suited to now read this book in its tenth anniversary edition. While with most books I am able to remember reading them, with just a few am I able to recall—vividly, almost viscerally—how I felt when reading them. *Of Woman Born* was one such book. One memory stands out in particular. I had managed to steal an hour of reading time while my baby daughter and toddler son napped, and I was reading the book in the front room when I experienced what only can be described as a torrent of anger rushing through me. On that hot afternoon in July reading *Of Woman Born*, I saw my life for the first time as it was and not as I wished or imagined it to be. I was an overwhelmed and exhausted mother, young and poor, struggling to do a graduate degree with no mother friends and in a relationship that was, in its early years, quite rocky and in which I was the one mainly responsible for the kids and the housework. I pretended otherwise and had convinced myself and the world at-large that I was a modern, feminist mom who was content with, and in control of, her life. Reading Rich I was forced to see and name my oppression as a mother; as well, it gave me permission to be angry. I also remember feeling a huge sense of relief—I was not the only woman who raged against motherhood, and at times, her children. At the age of twenty-six though, I was not able to fully live with or act upon this realization. It would take a few years more, and the birth of a third child, before I put into practice the insights of that July afternoon and challenge and change the way I lived motherhood. Seventeen years have passed since I first read Rich, and, while I have read *Of Woman Born* more than a dozen times since, I can still vividly recall that first time on the cottage couch when my identity as a feminist mother was conceived.

I tell this story to illuminate how fully and deeply my interest in, indeed passion for, Rich is linked to my own lived life as a mother and how central and crucial *Of Woman Born* was/is to the development of my feminist-maternal consciousness, both professionally and personally. In preparing this collection I learned that I was not alone in this. When I distributed the call for chapters for this volume I did not expect to receive the fifty plus submissions that I did, nor was I prepared for the deeply personal notes from prospective authors that accompanied the submissions. Most of the writers spoke passionately about how reading Rich “changed their lives” and recounted stories similar to mine. While I recognized along with most feminist scholars that Rich pioneered the field of maternal scholarship and that *Of Woman Born* continues to influence the themes and concerns of motherhood research, and believed consequentially that a volume on the legacy of Rich was needed and long overdue, I had not realized how fully and deeply Rich had touched the lives of so many women. This volume, as it considers how *Of Woman Born* defined the content and style of maternal inquiry over the last twenty-eight years, will seek to make apparent the profound impact this book has had on our minds *and* hearts as mothers and scholars of motherhood.

MOTHERHOOD AS INSTITUTION: PATRIARCHAL POWER AND MATERNAL OUTRAGE

Building upon Rich’s theoretical concept of the institution of motherhood, the contributors in part 1 examine how motherhood operates as a patriarchal institution to constrain, regulate, and dominate women and their mothering. “[F]or most of what we know as the ‘mainstream’ of recorded history,” Rich writes, “motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” (13). However, as Rich argues, and her book seeks to demonstrate, this meaning of motherhood is neither natural nor inevitable. “The patriarchal institution of motherhood,” Rich explains, “is not the ‘human condition’ any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are” (33). Rather motherhood, in Rich’s words, “has a history, it has an ideology” (33). The first five chapters of *Of Woman Born* narrate this history of motherhood, tracing the development of motherhood from neolithic Gathering and Hunting Goddess cultures in which maternity was a site of power for women, through the early agricultural period in which women’s powers of maternity began to be contained and controlled, to the domestication of motherhood post-industrialization. While recent scholars have clarified and corrected some of the details of this narrative, its overall plot and themes continue to inform contemporary feminist historical readings of motherhood. Feminist historians agree that motherhood is primarily *not* a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response

to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood. Works such as Ann Dally's *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*, Elizabeth Badinter's *Mother Love: Myth and Reality*, and Shari Thurer's *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, detail how the modern image of the good mother—the full-time, stay-at-home mother, isolated in the private sphere and financially dependent on her husband—came about as a result of industrialization that took work out of the home and repositioned the domestic space, at least among the middle class, as an exclusively nonproductive and private realm, separate from the public sphere of work. In the Victorian period that followed industrialization, the ideology of moral motherhood that saw mothers as naturally pure, pious, and chaste emerged as the dominant discourse of motherhood. This ideology, however, was race- and class-specific; only white, middle-class women could wear the halo of the Madonna and transform the world through their moral influence and social housekeeping. After World War II, the time when Rich became a mother, the discourse of the “happy homemaker” made the “stay-at-home mom and apple pie” mode of mothering the normal and natural motherhood experience. But again, only white, middle-class women could, in fact, experience what discursively was inscribed as natural and universal. In each of its manifestations, motherhood remains, at its core, a patriarchal institution deeply oppressive to women.

In *Of Woman Born* Rich highlights two features of modern patriarchal motherhood that are particularly harmful to mothers. First is the assumption that mothering is natural to women and that child rearing is the sole responsibility of the biological mother and that as such it should be performed as what feminist writer Sharon Hayes has coined “intensive mothering.” Second is the practice that assigns mothers sole responsibility for motherwork, but gives them no power to determine the conditions under which they mother. Mothering, in its current ideological manifestation, regards maternity as natural to women and essential to their beings conveyed in the belief, as Pamela Courtenay Hall notes, that women are *naturally* mothers—“they are born with a built-in set of capacities, dispositions, and desires to nurture children [. . . and that this] engagement of love and instinct is utterly distant from the world of paid work [. . .]” (337). This assumption over the last fifty years gave rise to and resulted in the modern ideological construction of “intensive” mothering. Intensive mothering, as Hayes explains, is defined by three themes: “first, the mother is the central caregiver”; second, such mothering requires “lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child”; and finally, “the mother regards mothering as more important than her paid work” (8). “The methods of appropriate child rearing according to the ideology of intensive motherhood,” Hayes concludes, “are constructed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing,

labor-intensive and financially expensive" (8). For Rich, and more recent theorists, this discourse becomes oppressive to mothers not because children have these needs, but because we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them. Petra Buskens explains: "Infancy and early childhood *are* periods of high emotional and physical dependency and, moreover this is not a pure invention of patriarchal science. [. . .] *The problem is not the fact of this requirement but rather that meeting this need has come to rest exclusively, and in isolation, on the shoulders of biological mothers*" (81, emphasis in original).

In *Of Woman Born* Rich writes of how she was "haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional' and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as single-minded identity" (23). But she also recognized that "this circle, this magnetic field [of selfless mothers and needy children] in which [she] lived, was not a natural phenomenon" (23). Children need love and care, but it is culture, not children, that demands that the mother be the one to provide such love and care. As Rich's eldest son, at age twenty-one, commented when he read his mother's journals of early motherhood: "You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there *is* no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment." "Yes I tried to explain to him, but women—above all, mothers—have been supposed to love that way" (23). That is the defining belief of the ideology of natural-intensive mothering.

Most women mother in the patriarchal institution of motherhood and, in contemporary times, according to the patriarchal ideology of natural-intensive mothering. Women's mothering, in other words, is defined and controlled by the larger patriarchal society in which they live. Mothers do not make the rules, as Rich reminds us, they simply enforce them. Motherhood, in Rich's words, is an experience of "powerless responsibility." Whether it is in the form of parenting books, a physician's advice, or the father's rules, a mother raises her children in accordance with the values and expectations of the dominant culture. Mothers are policed by what Sara Ruddick calls the "gaze of others." Under the gaze of others, mothers "relinquish authority to others, [and] lose confidence in their own values" (111). "Teachers, grandparents, mates, friends, employers, even an anonymous passerby," continues Ruddick, "can judge a mother and find her wanting" (111–112). "Fear of the gaze of others," she continues, "can be expressed intellectually as inauthenticity, a repudiation of one's own perceptions and values" (112). In *Of Woman Born* Rich remembers her mother locking her in the closet at the age of four for childish behavior—" [her] father's order, but [her] mother carried them out" and being kept too long at piano lessons when she was six, "again, at [her father's] insistence, but it was [her mother] who gave the lessons" (224). Ruddick calls this an abdication of maternal authority. Patriarchal motherhood is predicated upon such abdication of maternal authority and inauthentic mothering.

The ideology of natural-intensive mothering enacted in the patriarchal institution of motherhood has become the official and only meaning of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering polices *all* women's mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or can not practice intensive mothering. Coupled with this is the fact that in the patriarchal institution of motherhood women have little or no power to challenge this ideology or any other aspect of their motherhood experience. These two features of the modern ideology of motherhood make mothering deeply oppressive to women because the first belief—natural-intensive motherhood—requires the repression or denial of the mother's own selfhood, while the second—powerless responsibility—denies the mother the authority and agency to determine her own experiences of mothering. Women's mothering, as Rich asserts, is fully controlled and arbitrated by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. "The institution of motherhood," Rich writes, "is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not 'reality' but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives" (42).

The first two chapters in part 1 use Rich's concept of the patriarchal institution of motherhood to explore how women's motherhood, in particular reproduction, becomes regulated by the law and the state. In her chapter "The Supreme Court of Canada and What It Means to Be 'Of Woman Born,'" Diana Ginn explores connections between Rich's reflections on motherhood and recent jurisprudence on intervention in pregnancy. Her article focuses upon "two decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada: *Winnipeg Child and Family Services v. G* (1997), which held that a pregnant woman could not be confined to an addiction treatment centre 'for the good of her fetus,' and *Dobson (litigation Guardian of) v. Dobson* (1999), which refused to allow a child to sue his mother for harms allegedly caused by her negligence during pregnancy." Ginn explores how four themes central to *Of Woman Born* are manifest in these two cases; they include: Motherhood is a form of social control exercised over women as they bear and rear children; Mothers are made almost solely responsible for the well-being of their children; Women are either idolized or despised; and, finally, there is a need for new ways to describe the nature of pregnancy. "The fact that there is significant congruence between Rich's critique of social control of mothers, and the concerns regarding state intervention in pregnancy expressed by the majority [decision], is indicative," Ginn concludes, "of the impact that Rich [. . .] has had on thinking about motherhood, and by extrapolation, pregnancy" (28). Moreover, the cases in showing how actual mothers, in their everyday experiences of motherhood, are coerced to conform to an unnatural and unattainable idea of motherhood and chastised when they do not, confirm the

truth of Rich's insights on the patriarchal institution of motherhood and their continuing relevance twenty-eight years after their publication.

Sarah Stevens's chapter illustrates the cross-cultural relevance of Rich's *Of Woman Born* by examining the institution of motherhood and reproductive politics in the People's Republic of China. The paper traces the evolution of political control over women's bodies in China, including an analysis of Cultural Revolution Propaganda about reproduction and the implementation of the one-child policy in the early 1980s. Rich's investigation of motherhood as an institution and her identification of motherhood as locus of female power provides, according to Stevens, a useful lens through which to see these developments. The one-child policy, while representing the pinnacle of political power over reproduction, is nonetheless merely one link in a long chain of patriarchal control over motherhood. Stevens argues that the Chinese nationalist rhetoric functioned to make formerly private spaces (the womb, the home) into public spaces where the interests of the nation-state are preeminent. Using Rich's reflections upon the public and private dichotomy, Stevens examines the ways in which a blurring of the public/private boundary can lead to an increase in patriarchal control over motherhood. The Chinese case illustrates both the dangers of a strict public/private divide and the dangers inherent in a complete conflation of the private and public, individual and nation-state. Both of these theoretical extremes, as Stevens concludes and as Rich observed in *Of Woman Born*, reinforce patriarchal control over reproduction and undermine motherhood as a site of power.

As the first two chapters in part 1 explore the various ways the patriarchal institution of motherhood is enacted in and reinforced by public policy and jurisprudence, the final chapter examines the impact of the institution on the daily lives of women and their children. The final chapter of *Of Woman Born*, entitled "Violence: The Heart of Maternal Darkness," opens with the story of Joanne Michulski, thirty-eight, mother of eight children, who killed and mutilated her two youngest in June 1974. Responding to the media's attempt to "explain, exonerate, psychologize," the event, Rich commented in a letter to a local newspaper, "the expectations laid on her and on millions of women with children are 'insane expectations.' Instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological" (263). The institution of motherhood, to use Emily Jeremiah's words, is "violently oppressive [. . .] and give[s] rise to violent behavior on the part of mothers." "Motherhood without autonomy, without choice," Rich explains, "is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control" (264). The powerless responsibility of patriarchal motherhood discussed earlier is what gives rise to mothers' suffering and often results in violence against children. Violence, whether it be manifested in child neglect and abuse, the murder of children or a mother's suicide, is caused by the patriarchal institution of motherhood, not the demands of mothering

per se. “We have, in our long history,” Rich continues, “accepted the stresses of the institution as if they were a law of nature” (276). These stresses, however, created as they are by a constructed—hence changeable—institution are, Rich insists, preventable. Only in the institution of motherhood does such suffering and violence become natural *and* inevitable. This is the focus of the final chapter of part 1.

Emily Jeremiah’s chapter begins with a consideration of Rich’s conception of mothers as victims of violence, and themselves as capable of violence. She links this view to more recent feminist perspectives on the issues of maternal violence and murder in a variety of disciplines; history (Elizabeth Badinter), philosophy (Sara Ruddick), and psychoanalysis (Estela V. Welldon). Such perspectives challenge the traditional view of mothers as naturally passive and loving, and they point up the ambivalent character of maternity. They also raise the issues of choice and autonomy. Jeremiah deploys such ideas to probe and illuminate Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*, which she argues both confirms and extends Rich’s thesis, in particular by positing a postmodern maternal subjectivity that is relational and in process. Jeremiah, in her intertextual reading of Rich and Morrison, highlights the contingent nature not only of the mother but also of conceptions of maternity. She concludes with an assessment of Rich’s importance. While Jeremiah identifies problems with Rich’s account, in particular the notion of motherhood as a monolithic institution, these problems, Jeremiah concludes, can be explained in terms of the context in which Rich was writing. As well, Rich’s awareness of the constructed nature of maternity allows for the possibility of change.

MOTHERING AS EXPERIENCE: EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE

“To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood,” Rich writes, “It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination and conscious intelligence, as any difficult, but freely chosen work” (280). Rich, as noted above, distinguished “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: 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” (13, emphasis in original). Patriarchal motherhood is thus to be differentiated from the possibility or potentiality of mothering. In *Of Woman Born*, however, there is little discussion of mothering or how its potentiality may be realized. The notable exception is the brief reference Rich made to her summer holiday in Vermont when her husband was away and she and her sons lived “as conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood” (195). However, while mothering is not described or theorized

in *Of Woman Born*, the text, in distinguishing mothering from motherhood and in identifying the potential empowerment of mothering, made possible later feminist work on mothering, particularly those that analyzed mothering as a site of power and resistance for women. As well, in interrupting and deconstructing the patriarchal narrative of motherhood, Rich destabilized the hold this discourse has on the meaning and practice of mothering and cleared the space for the articulation of counternarratives of mothering, in particular woman-centered and feminist meanings and experiences of mothering.

A feminist counternarrative of motherhood is concerned with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is *empowering* to women as opposed to oppressive, as it is within the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Alternatively called authentic, radical, feminist, or gynocentric mothering, this mode of mothering positions mothers, in Rich's words, as "outlaws from the institution of motherhood." This new perspective, in emphasizing maternal power and ascribing agency to mothers and value to motherwork, gave rise to the view of mothering as a socially engaged enterprise that seeks to effect cultural change in the home through feminist child rearing and the world at-large through political/social activism. The first two chapters of part 2 consider why and how the mother role is a site of power and resistance in non-Western cultures. Here the emphasis is upon the woman's experiences of mothering and the meanings she and her culture attach to it. Specifically, the chapters look at the economic, political, and cultural centrality and importance of the mother and the mother role in these societies and how this, in turn, makes motherhood a site of power in and for these cultures. The final five chapters consider mothering as a site of power *in* the home. They explore how motherwork is, or may be, a socially engaged practice that seeks to effect cultural change through new feminist modes of socialization and interactions with daughters and sons. These woman-centered and feminist counternarratives of mothering resulted from and give rise to the destabilization of the patriarchal institution of motherhood. In all seven chapters we encounter a challenge to patriarchal motherhood through the formation of feminist mothering; or to use Rich's words, a mothering against motherhood. Rich writes: "We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood" (275). The chapters in this part analyze the mother power that already exists in non-Western cultures and consider how mother power becomes possible in Western culture through the abolition of the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

In the preface to the 1986 edition Rich revisited the claim she made in the first edition "that in the mainstream of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" to argue that woman-centered experiences of mothering and acts of mother power can be found throughout history if we look at cultures other than the dominant Western one. "Relying on ready-to-hand Greek mythology," Rich writes, "I

was lead to generalize that 'the cathexis between mother and daughter' was endangered always and everywhere. A consideration of American Indian, African and Afro-American myth and philosophy might have suggested other patterns" (xxv). In the 1986 preface she corrects the cultural blindspot of the 1976 edition to consider, albeit briefly, hitherto marginalized and neglected traditions of mothering, in particular that of African American mothering, wherein mothering is a site of power.

Rich identified, and later research shows, that two interrelated themes distinguish the African American tradition of motherhood from the Western patriarchal institution of motherhood and define it as a counternarrative wherein mothering is a site of power for black women. First, mothers and motherhood are valued by, and central to, African American culture, and secondly, black culture recognizes that mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture. The focus of black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete. To fulfill the task of empowering children, mothers must hold power in African American culture and mothering likewise must be valued and supported. There are three traditions in African American culture that are distinct from the Eurocentric or Western view of motherhood analyzed by Rich and which serve to empower black mothers and make black motherhood a site of power; they are: "Other-Mothering/Community Mothering," "Motherhood as Social Activism," and "Nurturance as Resistance."¹

Stanlie James defines othermothering as "acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (45) while community mothers, as Njoki Nathani Wane explains, "take care of the community. These women are typically past their childbearing years" (112). "The role of community mothers," as Arlene Edwards notes, "often evolved from that of being othermothers" (88). Both othermothering and community mothering are strategies of survival in that they ensure that all children, regardless of whether the biological mother was present or available, would receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical well-being and makes empowerment possible. "Biological mothers," as Patricia Hill Collins notes, "are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, 'othermothers,' women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood" (1993, 47). Community mothering and othermothering emerged in response to black mothers' needs and serves to empower black women and enrich their lives.

Black women's role of community mothers, as Patricia Hill Collins explains, redefines motherhood as social activism and hence a site of power: "Black women's feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community's children" (1993, 49). This construction of mothering as social activism empowers black women because motherhood operates, in Collins's words, as "a symbol of power." "More than a personal act," write Bernard and Bernard, "Black motherhood is very political. Black mothers and grandmothers are considered the 'guardians of the generations.'" (47). Black motherhood, as Jenkins concluded, "is a site where [black women] can develop a belief in their own empowerment. Black women can see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, for acquiring status in the Black community and as a catalyst for social activism" (206).

A third way that African American mothering differs from the dominant mode and defines motherhood as a site of power for black women is the way nurturance of children is understood to be an act of resistance. In African American culture, as theorist bell hooks has observed, the black family, or what she terms *homeplace*, is a site of resistance. She explains:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world. (42)

In a racist culture that deems black children inferior, unworthy, and unlovable, maternal love of black children is an act of resistance; in loving her children, the mother instills in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify blacks as other and object. Racial ethnic women's motherwork is concerned with, as Collins explains, "foster[ing] a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color" (1994, 57). This perspective of nurturance as resistance along with the African American traditions of othermothering and mothering as social activism, position mothering as an identity and role of power and empowerment. Specifically they challenge the two defining tenets of patriarchal motherhood discussed earlier and that make motherhood deeply oppressive to women, namely that the biological mother is the one who should raise the children and that intensive mothering is the manner in which children should be raised.

The first two chapters in part 2 examine these themes in cross-cultural, matrilineal communities and in Native American culture. While their subjects are not African American, they share themes similar to those described previously as marginalized cultures; likewise they position maternity as a site of agency and authority for women, or more specifically a site of resistance from which mothers may challenge racial oppression. As well, the final five chapters investigate how the power exemplified in African and African American mothering may be obtained in the dominant Eurocentric culture of North America. As Doreen Fumia observed: "In order to begin to think about alternative family structures, or households headed by the mother-lesbians, it is necessary to find an entry point into motherhood outside the North American ideal of womanhood" (91).

Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke in "We Have a Mama but No Papa": Motherhood in Women Centered Societies" builds upon Rich's discussion of matrilineal and gynocentric cultures in prepatrilial history to examine contemporary matrilineal, woman-centered cultures around the world. She explores the various ways mothers secure power and prestige in these cultures through their roles as "builders of generations" and as economic providers. Watson-Franke also considers the family arrangements in these cultures to argue that "motherhood in matrilineal systems is not as strongly defined by heterosexuality, if at all, as it is in the sexual family [of the Western tradition]." She concludes her chapter by considering how the matrilineal model "can provide an alternative to the heterosexual family" and allow us to envision in Rich's words "a wholly different way for women to exist in the world" (1986, 85).

Building upon Rich's observation that history is one of the most problematic areas with which women have had to deal, Dannabang Kuwabong in the second chapter of part 2 argues that, for Native women, this problem is exacerbated by cultural dislocation and disarticulation, which originate from the history of European colonization of the Americas. Kuwabong reads Monique Mojica's play *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* as a drama of Native women's self-representation within the rubrics of the mother figure in prepatrilial societies, as theorized by anthropologists such as Erich Neuman, Karen Sacks, and Robert Briffault, among others, and reviewed by Rich in chapter 4 on "The Primacy of the Mother." Kuwabong explores how Mojica's play successfully blends gynocentric motherhood discourse and Native American cosmogony to create a rhetoric of recovery for Native American women through the historical foremother Pocahontas. In *Princess*, Mojica reestablishes Pocahontas and other key Native American historical women as mothers worth venerating. Her re-visionary writing, Kuwabong concludes, "provides a framework for the development of an ongoing discourse of recovery of Native American matrilineage. The play legitimates the centrality of the Native American mother/woman in the project of recuperation of Native American personhoods and traditions."

The third chapter of this part, "Of Woman (but Not Man or the Nuclear Family) Born: Motherhood Outside Institutionalized Heterosexuality," considers the extent to which Rich's analysis, now commonplace in academic circles, entered the realm of popular or material culture in the United States. Examining popular books as diverse as Arlene Eisenberg et al.'s *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, Rachel Pepper's *The Ultimate Guide to Pregnancy for Lesbians*, Ariel Gore's *The Hip Mama's Survival Guide*, Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, and Cherrie Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*, Kate McCullough examines the degree to which Rich's feminist critique has translated into popular culture and considers whether we see in texts by "marginalized" mothers such as Gore, Pepper, Moraga, and Lamott a challenge to the patriarchal institution of motherhood. McCullough explores how these four authors denaturalize the nuclear family and celebrate non-normative versions of motherhood; as well they interrogate the relationship of motherhood to patriarchy. McCullough finds that while these books continue and amplify Rich's challenge to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, Rich's critique has not yet had, in McCullough words, "a socially significant impact." While the conditions of class-privileged, privatized maternal isolation faced by Rich have in some degree shifted due to labor demands of global economy, working-class women continue to be demonized for both their poverty and their employment and middle-class women are now required to be successful as both professionals and mothers under the new "supermom" model. "The structures of motherhood, the nation-state, and even contemporary icons (like the soccer mom)," McCullough concludes, "work jointly to reinforce a narrative of motherhood that remains deeply destructive for women."

In chapter 7 Fiona Joy Green argues that still missing from scholarship on motherhood is an examination of Rich's monumental contention that motherhood can successfully be a site of empowerment and potential political activism. Green's chapter, developed from interviews with self-identified feminist mothers, considers how mothers successfully negotiate the tension between the "institution" and the "experience" of motherhood. This study shows, Green contends, that mothers can, and do, find opportunities within motherhood to explore and cultivate their own agency and to develop their relationships with children and others to foster social change. Some openly resist the pressures to live by the patriarchal script of "good" motherhood, while others consciously use their socially sanctified role of motherhood in a subversive way to raise their children to be critically conscious of, and challenge, various forms of oppression. "Regardless of the strategies invented and utilized by these feminist mothers," Green concludes, "they successfully challenge and bring about social change as Rich suggested a quarter century ago."

In the following chapter, Voth Harman explores how the Demeter/Persephone myth utilized and celebrated by Rich functions in contemporary

women's fiction. Reading authors as diverse as Jenny Joseph, Rita Dove, Maggie Gee, and Barbara Kingsolver, she explores how mother-daughter separation serves to empower both mother and daughter. These texts, Voth Harman emphasizes, search for a vision of maternity in which the mother is not solely responsible for the daughter. In these contemporary renditions of the myth, temporary loss of the daughter actually strengthens the mother. And for the daughter in the text and the reader of the text there is, Voth Harman contends, "a growing awareness that the mother cannot serve as Ground of Being." In this, the stories describe a mother-daughter separation that does not sever that "first love" of the mother-daughter bond as required under patriarchy, rather separation in these female authored and centered texts seek to promote the autonomy of mother and daughter alike while still preserving the connection between the two.

Chapter 9, written by myself, focuses upon the formulation of a female-defined and centered experience of mothering and the development of a feminist practice of gender socialization. While the two aims seem similar, the first is concerned with mothering in terms of the mother herself—her experiences of mothering, the meanings she attaches to it—while the second theme focuses upon the mother's relationship with her children and in particular the manner in which she raises them. It has been long recognized that Rich was one of the first feminist writers to call for nonsexist child rearing and women-centered practices of mothering. What has been less acknowledged, and what will be the focus of this chapter, is how the two, in Rich's view, are intrinsically linked in so far as the goal of nonsexist child rearing depends upon the abolition of patriarchal motherhood and the achievement of feminist mothering. Rich argues that nonsexist child rearing—a challenge to traditional practices of gender socialization for both daughters and sons—depends upon motherhood itself being changed; it must become, to use Rich's terminology, mothering. In other words, only in mothering becoming a site, role, and identity of power for women is feminist child rearing made possible.

Chapter 10 develops in response to Rich's observation that: "Motherhood is one part of the female process; it is not an identity for all time. The process of 'letting go'—though we are charged with blame if we do not—is an act of revolt against the grain of patriarchal culture." Margaret Gullette argues that, while feminists have developed many other ideas of this landmark book, they have not developed the concepts that underlie these sentences; they have not theorized postmaternity. Gullette's chapter develops the term postmaternal to counter "empty nester." The first section of the chapter considers some of the worst of these cultural images of the empty nester and their effects. In the second, she develops new concepts and more positive views of postmaternity, based on the questionnaire she developed with adult students to encourage postmaternal women to discuss their experiences of mothering adult children.

In conclusion, she considers possible reasons for the feminist avoidance of the postmaternal figure to argue that an affirmation of postmaternity is a crucial and essential dimension of the feminist challenge to patriarchal motherhood.

NARRATING MATERNITY: WRITING AS A MOTHER

The well-known science fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin once commented:

There is less censure now, and more support, for a woman who wants both to bring up a family and work as an artist. But it's a small degree of improvement. The difficulty of trying to be responsible, hour after hour, day after day, for maybe twenty *years*, for the well-being of children and the excellence of books, is immense: it involves an endless expense of energy and impossible weighing of competing priorities. And we don't know much about the process, because writers who are mothers haven't talked much about their motherhood—for fear of boasting? For fear of being trapped in the Mom trap, discounted? Nor have they talked much about their writing as in any way connected with their parenting, since the heroic myth demands that the two jobs be considered utterly opposed and mutually destructive. (174)

“The idea of maternal writing,” Emily Jeremiah notes in her recent article “Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature and Ethics,” “undermines one of the oppositions upon which motherhood in Western culture has traditionally rested, namely that between maternity and creativity, or ‘the binary system that conceives woman and writer, motherhood and authorhood, babies and books, as mutually exclusive’ (Freidman 1987, 65–66)” (7). In so doing, Jeremiah continues, maternal writing “upsets other [. . .] oppositions, such as public/private and mind/body [; . . . as well it] entails a publicizing of maternal experience, [. . .] subverts the traditional notion of the mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being [and] challenge[s] dominant ideals of individuality and autonomy” (7). Maternal writing therefore, as it interrupts and deconstructs the normative script of maternity as private and silent, also disturbs and counters the received narrative of creativity, specifically the liberal humanist view of subjectivity and authorship. Jeremiah contends that, contrary to the liberal humanist view of creativity, writing, much like mothering, is based on relationality, reciprocity, and mutuality: “Reading and writing involve an imaginative engagement with others, a process which might strategically be linked to the idea of maternal thinking [; . . .] that is they constitute activities which produce and encourage a relational mode of subjectivity which might [. . .] help challenge and overcome Western capitalist models of individualism” (12–13). Jeremiah insists that this idea of relationality may be

understood as subversive: “To posit reciprocity as an ideal is to challenge the notion of the rational autonomous subject dominant in modern capitalist societies—a fiction which fosters the marginalization of those who do make the grade, the denial to these ‘failures’ any kind of state support, and the continuing fragmentation of community” (12). “The advantage of motherhood for a woman artist,” Alicia Ostriker writes:

is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the courses of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption. If the woman artist has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to the main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself. The training is misogynist, it protects and perpetuates systems of thought and feeling which prefer violence and death to love and birth, and it is a lie. (as quoted in Le Guin, 176)

Mothering, therefore, as Jeremiah concludes, may be understood as not only “compatible” with art but more significantly as *conducive* to it; and this perspective, in turn, constitutes a “strategy of subversion,” an undoing of the hegemonic constructions of both mothering and writing (10–11).

However, as Jeremiah asserts that mothering is advantageous to writing, mother writers have been marginalized and silenced. “Until recently,” as Tillie Olsen has observed, “almost all distinguished literary achievement has come from childless women” (50). “The reasons for the widespread absence of creative achievement on the part of mothers,” Jeremiah argues, “are in part practical and financial” (3). Indeed, as early as 1929 Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One’s Own*, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (6). Likewise, writing has traditionally been viewed as an exclusive, if not biologically determined, male activity and achievement in so far as artistic creativity has been equated with paternity, and the pen regarded as a metaphorical penis. “In patriarchal Western culture,” as Gilbert and Gubar note, “the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator and aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6).

Motherhood in a Western context, as Rich and numerous feminist theorists on motherhood have pointed out, is organized as a patriarchal institution that is deeply oppressive to women. “The predominant image of the mother in white Western society,” as Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan write, “[assumes mothers are] ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing . . . not destroyed or overwhelmed by the demands of [their] child[ren]” (2–3). When white middle-class mothers write about motherhood, as Elizabeth Johnson explains, “they write about their own struggles for identity in the institution of motherhood” (33). Adrienne Rich wrote, in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”:

[T]o be maternally with small children all day . . . requires a holding back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism. . . . [T]o be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination. (43)

And in *Of Woman Born* Rich wrote: "Once in a while someone used to ask me, 'Don't you ever write poems about your children?' The male poets of my generation did write poems about their children—especially their daughters. For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (1986, 31). Women in the dominant Anglo-American culture often experience the demands of work, in this instance writing or art more generally, in conflict with those of mothering because of the way this culture defines and positions the public sphere of work in opposition to the private/reproductive sphere of the home/family. Women, according to this maternal ideology, are categorized and regulated by what has been termed the "either-or dichotomy": women must choose between work and motherhood. "The price for the middle-class mother who would be an artist," Gerber argues in *Portrait of the Mother-Artist*, "is high—she must forsake either her child or her creative work" (12–13). Thus while mothering may be conducive to writing as Jeremiah speculates, sexist ideologies and practices have kept mothers *from* writing.

Jeremiah's argument on the paradoxical standpoint on mothering and writing serves as a useful introduction to the theme "Writing as a Mother" explored by Rich and examined in this section. Chapters in part 3 consider how mothering, particularly in the relationality of maternal subjectivity, may foster or inspire creative expression; likewise they explore how the work of mothering may simultaneously frustrate or inhibit the expression of this creativity.

Responding to Rich's observation, "For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (31), D'Arcy Randall considers how *Of Woman Born* may be read as a meditation on the writing and reading of maternal literature. "Whatever Rich's reasons may have been for avoiding the maternal in her poetry," Randall writes, "*Of Woman Born* contributes substantially to the field if we read it as literary criticism." The book functions as literary criticism that elucidates not poems themselves but the cultural and social expectations that Western readers commonly bring to them. Identifying the various societal and psychological factors that keep mothers from writing and keep readers from seeing mothers as writers and writers as mothers, Rich, Randall argues, makes maternal writing imaginable. Elsewhere, as Randall notes, Rich commented that "[t]he critic's task is not to try to deflate, shrink, and contain poetry, but rather, as John Haines has written, to provide 'a space in which creation can take place, a clearing in the imagination.'" Randall's chapter explores how the creation and appre-

ciation of maternal writing is made possible through the clearing of the imagination that *Of Woman Born* provides.

Jeannette E. Riley's chapter, "A Sense of Drift": Adrienne Rich's Emergence from Mother to Poet" addresses Rich's conflicting emotions caused by her motherhood and writing in order to explain the emergence of poems that appear in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law*. The conflict between Rich's role as mother and wife versus her desire to write described in *Of Woman Born* is analyzed in this chapter. Riley explores how these conflicting emotions resulted in Rich being unable to write for eight years until the publication of *Snapshots*. Riley argues that Rich's efforts to understand what was happening to her and to find "clues" that would illuminate her position and identity—all explored in *Of Woman Born*—led Rich finally after years of "reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments" to an emotional and literary breakthrough in *Snapshots*. That eight year period, Riley concludes, created a new vision in Rich's work as she approached subject matter previously avoided, resulting in a collection with new material that handles, albeit cautiously, experiences of "real" life as a wife-mother.

Ann Keniston's chapter begins with the author's reflections on the significance of *Of Woman Born* in her own life as a mother-scholar. She writes: "I first read Rich's *Of Woman Born* as a beginning doctoral student on the verge of dropping out of graduate school because I could not find a way to make my own experiences relevant to my scholarly work." Her essay, in homage to what she considers to be the central elements of Rich's work, begins with the author's often conflicted experiences as woman-scholar-poet-mother. In integrating academic with personal discourse, Keniston honors Rich's mix of memoir and social critique while illustrating the paradoxes in this fusion. Keniston foregrounds these difficulties in Rich's work, arguing that its personal narrative ultimately resists being joined with its historical/political account. The chapter examines in detail Rich's adoption of inconsistent and mutually exclusive "I"s while arguing that Rich's split narrative mimics a split within feminist theory of the past ten years. Keniston concludes by looking at several recent feminists who have adopted Rich's method of inquiry while refining and re-visioning it.

CONCLUSION

I wrote most of this introduction in the week before Christmas when the end of the teaching term freed up a block of time for intensive writing. However, the week of tranquility I imagined and longed for in order to reflect upon and compose this introduction never quite materialized. Instead, my thirteen-year-old daughter was home for the week ill with a cold. My computer broke, which required me to write the introduction on an old laptop and, with no access to

email, I had to conduct my university administrative duties the old-fashioned and, I may add, more time-consuming way over the telephone. Our lizard's heating light burnt out, which necessitated a drive to the city for a replacement. Our home experienced a major electrical "brown out," which caused our meter box to catch on fire, more or less implode, and cut off our electricity. For two days we had an electrician and various Hydro technicians in and out of our home and went without electricity—that is, heat and light on one of the coldest days this year—for close to ten hours. During that time, when the power was suddenly turned off for the repair, I lost over a page of writing on the laptop. Furthermore, the other children had to be driven to school, the boyfriend's house, and driving lessons; and Christmas shopping of course had to be done. In the midst of this domestic chaos I thought and wrote about motherhood, about how Adrienne Rich has influenced, indeed inspired, the work I and others do as mothers and as scholars. Concluding this introduction and reflecting upon my week of writing and mothering in the context of Rich's *Of Woman Born*, I am drawn to the words that end the final chapter. Rich writes:

What is astonishing, what can give us enormous hope and belief in a future in which the lives of women and children shall be mended and reweaved by women's hands, is that we have managed to salvage, of ourselves, for our children, even within the destructiveness of the institution: the tenderness, the passion, the trust in our instincts, the evocation of a courage we did not know we owned, the detailed apprehension of another human existence, the full realization of the cost and precariousness of life. (280)

I want to suggest, as I conclude this introduction, that *Of Woman Born* and the feminist writing on motherhood it inspired, has enlightened and empowered countless mothers to survive, resist, dismantle, and abolish the institution of patriarchal motherhood in their own lives and in the lives of others. While the patriarchal institution of motherhood can never be destroyed as Rich wished and believed, it is being ambushed on all sides by mothers who have imagined and put into place feminist mothering, informed and inspired by Rich and other feminist maternal scholars' radical vision of an empowering and empowered maternity. They are purposely and courageously mothering against motherhood. In so doing, to cite Rich again, these feminist mothers have "released the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination and conscious intelligence as any other difficult, but freely chosen work" (280). Looking back on this busy week, I see my days of writing and mothering as a lived example of such "difficult but freely chosen work" and understand that this was possible only from my position as an "outlaw from the institution of motherhood"; in other words, a feminist mother who demands and expects the same feminist living from her partner, her children, and the world around her.

NOTES

1. Two other themes characterize African American mothering: “Matrifocality” and “The Motherline: Mothers as Cultural Bearers.” The five themes are discussed at length in my article “‘I come from a long line of Uppity Irate Black Women’: African-American Feminist Thought on Motherhood, the Motherline and the Mother-Daughter Relationship,” in *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, Transformation*, Eds. Andrea O’Reilly and Sharon Abbey (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

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