



From  
Motherhood  
to Mothering

The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's  
*Of Woman Born*

*Edited by*  
Andrea O'Reilly

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*To Jesse, Erin, and Casey*

*For our journey from motherhood to mothering*



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# Introduction

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ANDREA O'REILLY

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