Sharon M. Abbey

Deconstructing Images of Mothering in Media and Film

Possibilities and Trends for the Future

> In the collision of reality with mythology, it is the mythology that tends to prevail, as the language and the conventions of the story shape not only what is thought but also what can be said, not only what is heard but what can be understood. (Pope, Quinn, and Wyer, 1990: 445)

Over the past two decades, feminist researchers have persuasively argued that representations of the mother in popular culture shape our complex feelings about motherhood (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan, 1994). In fact, the "ideology of mothering can be so powerful that the failure of lived experience to validate often produces either intensified efforts to achieve it or a destructive cycle of self- and/or mother-blame" (Pope *et al.*, 1990: 442). From June Cleaver to Murphy Brown, television has obviously had a powerful impact on how maternal roles are valued and played out. These images have been well analyzed and deconstructed. In addition, the film industry and Hollywood directors have also had a significant part to play in what we value and expect of motherhood in North America. However, these big-screen mothers have not been as carefully scrutinized as their television counterparts. This paper explores the mother-as-subject as depicted by the film industry over the past 40 years. In particular, it will outline a cross-disciplinary undergraduate course on *Mothering and Motherhood: Images, Issues and Patterns* that I have developed and teach in the Women's Studies program at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

This course is always well received and enrollment reaches capacity very quickly. The majority of the students who attend each session are fulltime second to fourth year sociology majors, several are part-time working mothers

or grandmothers and a few are males. During the 12-week course, students are expected to: (1) keep a scrapbook of media clippings about mothers and prepare a summative reflection about predominant issues addressed; (2) interview their own mother and write a personal narrative about their experience mothering or being mothered; and finally (3) critique 14 American, Canadian, British and Australian films with prominent mother characters: *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *One True Thing* (1998), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Beloved* (1998), *Mommie Dearest* (1984), *Margaret's Museum* (1995), *The Piano* (1993), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *The Joy Luck Club* (1992), *Losing Isaiah* (1995), *Winter Guest* (1997), and *Terms of Endearment* (1983).

As a feminist study, this paper advocates the development of a deeper consciousness about women's identity with specific reference to mothering experiences. I will consider various definitions of mothering and summarize topics and theories addressed throughout the course. Topics such as "gynocentric vs. patriarchal images" (O'Reilly, 1998: 70; O'Reilly and Abbey, 2000: 7); biological, social construction and "object-relations" theories (Chodorow, 1978); "matrophobia" (Rich, 1986: 235); body politics and state policy (Ruddick, 1989); race, class and sexuality (Bell-Scott, 1996); stories from the "motherline" (Lowinsky, 1992: 12); and comparative relationships with sons and daughters (Abbey, Castle and Reynolds, 1998; O'Reilly, 2001) highlight the major themes that emerged from students' assignments and in-class discussions.

My objectives are two-fold: (1) to offer a workable structure for other women's studies educators who may be interested in developing a similar course and (2) to explore the use of media as an effective way to apply and compare theories of psycho-social constructions of maternal images and ideologies. My intention is to argue that although contemporary Western society validates a legitimate meaning for motherhood that includes feminine fulfillment representing "something beautiful which leaves women consumed and replete with joy" (Spender, 1985), this meaning has been created largely by males who live outside the experience and is narrow, misguided or even false. Historically, male authors, script-writers and film producers have misrepresented women's narratives in order to play out their own needs and interpretations (Heilbrun, 1988). By attempting to replicate this type of unrealistic conceptualization, many women are left feeling inadequate, guilt-ridden or confused. It is important for women to name realities that are more consistent with their experiences, redefine motherhood and challenge this conspiracy of silence (Abbey and O'Reilly, 1998).

This paper is intended to open up challenging conversational spaces to confront maternal myths, unrealistic ideals, ethnocentric stereotypes, suppressive repetitions and even silences and lies that, although oppressive and limiting, have come to be naturalized as normal patterns of motherhood over the last forty years. Through this course, I try to create a site for resistance and celebration of reclaiming the mothers' voices as we interrogate and reconstruct ideological discourses and socially constructed patterns of mothering and being

mothered. As a new course, I also learned along with my students and I will conclude by sharing my own personal transitions and insights.

Theoretical perspectives

From a feminist perspective, this course seeks to uncover contradictions in traditional thought and to root these in the realities of male experience. Although such traditional thought might have provided valid contexts for film in specific historical circumstances, such images must now be questioned. The course was designed to examine the historical, socio-cultural and psychological constructions of "motherhood' within the patriarchy that determine how women mother and to contrast these essentialist discourses with what Adrienne Rich (1986) considers to be the more empowering and diverse potentials of authentic "mothering' and its shifting meanings within feminist praxis. Following Sara Ruddick's (1989) premise that "maternal work demands that mothers think," and Maureen Reddy's (1994) conclusion that "much mothering work is mental, not visible from the outside, and the strength for it comes from women's feeling, memory, judgment, and faith" (313), this course addresses gender discriminating trends in the media highlighted by the Canadian National MediaWatch Centre in Toronto, Ontario. Such trends include portraying women as passive, silly, weak or sexual; treating women's bodies as products; negatively misrepresenting self-assured women as aggressive or strident; suggesting that the only valued accomplishments of women are those that serve the needs of men or children; limiting the voice of women; and stereotyping women based on race, class or sexuality.

Defining the concept of "mother"

There is no shortage of definitions for "mother." More than any other field of human endeavor, motherhood is like the air we all breathe. Because it is clear, transparent and readily available, we often take it for granted. Motherhood is a "heroic quest"—a journey into selfhood and ultimate meaning that cries out to be chronicled, celebrated and shared (Estes, 1992). Although it has become an issue, it still is not a valued narrative and the lived experiences of mothers still undocumented, marginalized and silenced. The "masks of motherhood" (Maushart, 1999: 3) conceals the tension between the maternal power of creation and the dependencies that this power engenders. Yet, as Susan Maushart (1999) points out, it is not the tension but the attempt to deny the tension that creates the need for pretense and silence. Largely, mothering is an unexplored frontier of thought and emotion, according to Adrienne Rich (1986) that we try to tame with rules, myth and "authorized" knowledge. In addition, under patriarchal capitalism, she claims that white motherhood is largely about private property (ownership, competition and power). Traditionally, the children are the property of the father who "loans" them temporarily to the mother, whose duty it is to raise them according to the father's law (placing her own children above other children.) In contrast, mothering in

other cultures is more about collective responsibility and equal entitlement (Bell-Scott, 1996). To alter our narrow ethnocentric perception, Patricia Bell-Scott (1996) encourages all mothers to free themselves from arbitrary, culturally imposed restraints that suggest there is only one correct way to mother. To this end, mothering might be better viewed as a verb, something women *do*, rather than something they *are*. By unmasking the idealized image of motherhood and sharing what we really experience collectively, Maushart believes that women can break the cycle as willing conspirators and take the first steps toward reconciling reproductive power with social rights and responsibilities.

In her attempt to define mothering as a discipline, Sara Ruddick (1989) points out that the mother's voice is absent in psychoanalytic theory. She emphasizes that mothering is about a set of culturally learned values, attitudes, competencies and skills developed over time primarily in relation to the demands and needs of children. According to Sara Ruddick (1989), the practice of mothering involves interconnected reciprocal relationships arising out of a primary interest in the growth of a human infant, unequal in terms of power and status, from childhood to a socialized adult. "To be a mother," Ruddick (1994) suggests, "means to see children as demanding protection, nurturance, and training and then to commit oneself to the work of trying to meet these demands" (33). She describes mothering as a social discipline involving unconditional attachment and attentiveness as well as certain reflections, judgments and emotions that require thinking. It involves transformation, adaptation and sacrifice while continually struggling with autonomy, boundaries and a sense of self. However, Ruddick stresses that the work of mothering must also emphasize the role of empowering the self as well as others and shifting the shared responsibility for the well-being of children to other family and community members. Only by creating purposeful, livable space for oneself will a mother offer choices, possibilities and freedom to her children. There is a glaring need, she concludes, to restore to mothers their own presence and to understand that they are persons entitled to their own subjectivity, not merely caregivers of their children.

Research questions, data sources, methodology

As the course instructor and participant observer, this study is qualitative and inter-relational in nature. It is intended to examine how film and media can be used to enhance women studies students' ability to deepen and transform their own understanding of mothering roles and how these concepts have been shaped and biased by media messages. I recorded weekly anecdotal observation notes regarding small group discussion of assigned readings and scrapbook collections as well as individual presentations of film reviews. In addition, students were asked to complete a personal inventory at the beginning of the course and a survey of mothering practices as the end of the course. This data was used to develop a demographic profile and define the cultural and maternal contextual background of participants. Finally, the written narrative assign-

ment, the reflective commentary on their media scrapbook collections, as well as weekly written questions on readings and film critiques were used to identify emerging themes and patterns about mothering images influenced by popular culture.

An overview of films and related theories: The image of the all-sacrificing mother

In the film *Stella Dallas* (1937, remake 1990, directed by King Vidor) Stella is an independent free-spirit who raises her daughter on her own. She is portrayed as a neglectful mother because she is fun-loving and wants to go out to parties after her child is born. Mothers, is would seem, are to have no interests of their own and never want to leave their child. Stella is portrayed as unstable and unreliable and is befriended by a man who is overweight and drinks heavily. Although he loves Stella and loyally stands by her and her child, he is made to appear less desirable than the ambitious biological father who left Stella and moved into a higher social status with a new love interest. In the end, although Stella loves her daughter, she deliberately drives her away to her father so that she may reap the advantages of a higher social position. By deliberating making her daughter angry and ashamed, Stella sacrifices all for her daughter, caters to her and tries to make all her dreams come true. Who would expect a "good" mother to do anything less in 1937!

Pregnancy, childbirth and infancy are non-issues or taboo subjects at this time in history. However, once the child is a grown-up person, the father steps back in. The mother is financially dependent on the father and his affluent white upper-class life style is valued. The father is viewed as the stable parent— well grounded, educated and able to provide more opportunities for the daughter. The mother flirts with other men but is never allowed to date seriously or remarry in this script. She stays interested in her husband and fusses over him when he visits. Other women in the film seem cruel and judgmental while men appear to be loyal and good. The daughter is able to accept her father's new partner but not her mother's. Clearly, the script-writers advantage the male's point of view.

Similarly, the film *Mildred Pierce* (1945, directed by John Erman) takes the ill-favoured image of the independent woman one step further. Mildred supports her unemployed husband by holding down two jobs. She finally tells him to leave and starts a successful restaurant chain. While she is away on business her younger daughter dies of pneumonia while in the care of the father and his female companion who is caring and nurturing. Mildred is blamed for leaving her child and neglecting her maternal duties. Career women can't be "good" mothers. As a result, she spoils her older daughter who becomes more selfish and demanding. In the end, this daughter flirts with her mother's second husband and murders him for not returning her affections. When Mildred learns the truth she willingly tries to sacrifice herself by confessing to the crime herself.

This film suggests that to succeed financially a woman must be shrewd, bossy and cold as well as totally committed to working day and night. The message in this film is that women who are outspoken and take a stand on their own behalf are dangerous and will suffer the consequences. However, although she appears capable, Mildred is still silenced and men do the talking, controlling and negotiating for her. She is objectified by her second husband who is attracted to her appearance, not her capabilities. She feels fulfilled because she is "wanted" by a man. In the end, good mothers simply can't have careers.

Popular culture implies that our children are exquisitely delicate creatures, hugely vulnerable to our idiosyncrasies and deficits, who require relentless psychological attunement and approval. The researchers who deconstruct this sentimentalized image of the perfect mother, one who finds passionate fulfillment in every detail of child rearing (Daly, 1982; Rich, 1986; Faludi, 1991; Kaplan, 1992; Maushard, 1999), emphasize how a long, guilt-inducing shadow is placed over real mothers' lives. This ideology of "good" mothering, they contend, is oblivious to a mother's desires, limitations and context, and when things go wrong, she tends to be blamed. They point out that the successful socialization of children by acceptable standards of the day becomes the final judgment on women's identify as mothers.

Using these films as a starting point, I challenge my students to consider their view of an "ideal" image of mothers as well as how their own mothers have complied with these traditional expectations. As might be expected, older women in the course who are mothers themselves are often able to step back and deconstruct maternal patterns more critically. In contrast, younger students tend to praise their mothers for "staying at home," "giving up their jobs," "looking after everyone else's needs in the family," "putting themselves last," or even "forgetting about who they are as persons." Although they might recognize that these expectations are unfair, they justify such maternal sacrifices by emphasizing how much they recognize and appreciate all that their mothers gave up and hope to be just like them someday. I challenge the hegemonic position of these students and encourage them to think about how they will reconcile giving up their own personhood, when this transition is likely to take place and how they might begin to plan for an alternate, more equitable lifestyle.

Gynocentric "mothering" vs. patriarchal "motherhood"
Adrienne Rich (1986) draws a distinction between the male-defined institution of motherhood from the outsider's perspective of authority figures, experts and family members and the concept of mothering from the perspective of those who live within the experience. She points out that the patriarchal notion of a mother's role works to disadvantage women by setting impossible standards for them to live up to, by isolating them and devaluing their work, by imposing a binary distinction between those who mother and those who don't, and by exploiting the caretaking jobs in an under-paid workforce. In contrast,

gynocentric perspectives of mothering emphasize the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children from within the experience. From this perspective, the role is viewed as only one temporary aspect of a woman's life rather than her whole identity and poses the question of who takes care of the mothers (Abbey and O'Reilly, 1998; O'Reilly and Abbey, 2000).

In the film *One True Thing* (1997, directed by Carl Franklin) the issue of who takes care of the mother is addressed. A young woman (Ellen) reluctantly interrupts her budding career as a journalist to move back home—at her father's request—to take care of her dying mother (Kate). Although she always admires her father's career as a language professor and trivializes her mother's role as a housewife and a community volunteer, in the end, she learns to respect her mother's life and her values. The story is told by the daughter, first as an outsider who resists becoming like her mother (matrophobia) and then as an insider, as she shadows her mother in her final months. The initial impression of this silly woman who dresses up for Hallowe'en and focuses on decorating her house for each holiday changes to that of a women who is deeply loyal and tolerant of a cheating over-dependent husband who is cold, condescending, insensitive and judgmental.

In the end, Ellen comments that "being my mother is very tiring" and asks her mother "how do you do this every day?" And she admonishes her father, pointing out that "you need her to keep your life running smoothly." Before she dies, in a private conversation with Ellen, Kate points out that "no one lets me talk. I'm tired of being shushed. I want to talk before I die even if the things I say hurt you. Love what you have instead of yearning for what you imagine you are missing." The audience gains a sense that Ellen's life was far more than caretaking, as it would appear on the surface but the film still honours complacency and compromising with patriarchal values for the sake of harmony. As her parting advice to her daughter, Ellen points out that "your husband is your life and everything is built around him. If you take him out of the picture, just a big hole is left!"

In contrast, the film *Ordinary People* (1980, directed by Robert Redford) is told from the teenage son's (Conrad) point of view as an outsider. He portrays his career-oriented mother (Beth) as cold and aloof as she struggles to come to terms with the accidental death of her older (and presumed favoured) son. The males (father, psychiatrist) are portrayed as the nurturers and, like *Mildred Pierce*, children's lives are in danger when mothers fail to stay at home. Nancy Chodorow's "Object-Relations" theory is exemplified in Conrad's need to separate from his mother in order to attain his masculine identity. One wonders how Beth would have told her own story of coping with loss and grief.

Mother-blame, matrophobia and daughter-centricity

As Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998) point out, instead of harshly criticizing mothers for child neglect we might become more consciously aware

of how social systems often prevent mothers from balancing child care and work and from being paid for looking after their own children. They point out that the profiles of "bad" mothers (those who don't live by "traditional" nuclear family patterns and white middle-class standards, those who can't protect their children from harm, and those whose children commit crimes) often mask society's ambivalence. Criticizing mothers allows society to avoid confronting some of the painful, socioeconomic and emotionally induced conditions that women endure. In addition, the dominance of child-rearing experts and media messages in recent decades makes it impossible to follow all the advice. Mothers are too smothering and dominant if they stay at home and too selfish if they pursue careers. Furthermore, double standards are imposed on affluent women who don't stay at home and poor women who do. The growth of state power with new policies regarding fetal rights, legal custody, pensions, reproduction technology, immigration and public health increases the opportunities for mothers to be criticized and reprimanded. Such powerful influences often overshadow the real problem for many mothers of how to survive emotionally with little or no support. Emotional deprivation brings on rage, self-hatred and the desire for revenge. Although we can tolerate men who have difficulties with intimate relationships, we struggle to acknowledge that women can also have problems with the closeness that young children need. It is supposed to come naturally. Instead of perpetuating mother-blame, we ought to look for the deeply rooted issues that can be addressed.

To address this issue, Paula Caplan (2000) proposes the "scapegoat theory," stating that the less a group is valued, the easier it is to blame. She argues that since maternal work is largely invisible and instinctive, it is viewed to inferior to the work of men. On the other hand, she points out that mothers are viewed as dangerous when they are ambitious, outspoken and independent. As one case in point, Caplan refers to mother-bashing jokes, emphasizing the general acceptance of maternal weakness and how easy it is for women to internalize these societal viewpoints. In every culture on historical record, mothers are "wicked" if they dare to violate the gender norms of their time. I point out to students how this has significant implications, for example, in the court system with respect to child custody decisions for lesbian mothers (Nelson, 1996).

We look at the film *Beloved* (1998, directed by Jonathan Demme) in which a young pregnant woman (Sethe) escapes slavery by fleeing to Kentucky after the Civil War. Rather than risking her children being captured by the same white men who enslaved and tortured her, she kills her baby. Years later, the ghost of this baby (Beloved) returns as an 18-year old girl to live with Sethe and her younger daughter (Denver). When Sethe becomes obsessed with indulging Beloved's every pleasure and too demented to work, Denver must take on the responsibility of caring for her mother.

This powerful story raises the complex issues of mother-blame and role-reversal. Was Sethe justified in killing her baby to save her from slavery? Was

her ultimate guilt and self-condemnation warranted? Who was available to provide her with emotional support and assistance? Was Sethe, in fact, a "bad" mother? How valid is the interpretation of this mother as portrayed by a jealous daughter for the most part? Similar questions are raised in the film *Mommie Dearest* (1981, directed by Frank Perry). After her mother had died, the daughter of the actress Joan Crawford wrote this very critical story about being abused by her mother as a child, providing the basis for the film. It is not uncommon for daughters to be publicly critical of their mothers but are their memories infantile and egocentric, the product of vindictive, spiteful anger? It is never difficult to find stories in the news about mothers who are harshly judged or vilified for committing acts of neglect or violence against children (drowning their children, throwing themselves with child in arms in the path of a train, abandoning a newborn on a cold sidewalk or colluding with partners who batter their children to death). Through a critical analysis, I encourage my students to refrain from placing all the blame on these desperate women and also to look beyond these horrific acts at the lack of crucial social support structures and to the governments who fail to provide them.

The (m)other side of the story

Multiple identities of mothering as defined and determined by women themselves with an insider's perspective are addressed in this course. We begin with Sarah Ruddick (1989), who stresses that we must work to transform maternal practices into the work of public conscience and legislation. For her, mothering is a social discipline involving the actual experiences of child rearing that involve the repeated practice of significant traits include preservation, responsiveness to change, acceptability, unconditional attentiveness and managerial capacities. She emphasizes that these are learned skills that can be acquired by anyone (male or female) who is involved in the primary care of children. Likewise, Greta Nemiroff (1994) emphasizes that participating in child-care helps the caregiver develop a sense of intimacy and a reconnection to the child within each of us. As a result, one becomes more receptive and accepting of life changes, more aware of tactile communication and more strongly focused on future realities. Finally, we address Judith Butler's (1990) theory of "subversive repetitions" in which she questions the ideal of a unified continuous self. Instead, she suggests that mothering is composed of multiple identities and that being a mother is a cultural performance that creates the illusion of naturalness and coherence. In fact, it is an identity tenuously constructed in time through stylized repetitions that daughters often struggle to subvert. Many students can easily make connections to their own lived experiences.

Adrienne Rich (1986), speaking as an insider with a tacit knowledge of maternal embodiment, acknowledges that her memories of motherhood were not always idyllic and there were times when she envied childless women to live a life of privacy and freedom. To confess that "my children cause me the most

exquisite suffering of which I have any experience" does not make her a "bad" mother or "a monster of selfishness and intolerance" (21-22). In fact, these feelings are realistic and need to be voiced. The construction of maternal knowledge involves an ongoing internal negotiation between what mothers think they know, what they know they know, and who they are.

Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) argue that class distinctions play another significant part in maternal identity and the telling of mothers' own stories. Growing up as daughters of working-class mothers, they point out that most maternal accounts are told by mothers who are middle-class intellectuals. From this limited and biased perspective, working class mothers are often viewed as inadequate and insensitive and it follows that their children are deprived and disadvantaged. In defense of their own mothers, Walkerdine and Lucey point out that middle-class mothers who are generally at home and available to their children at all times might not always provide the most ideal environment for children. Although their domestic life appears to centre around their children and they transform domestic routines into playful educational learning, a false sense of democracy often results. By appearing to put their child's needs first, these mothers often become trapped into suppressing and hiding conflict but not eliminating it. Rebellion goes underground and harmony becomes a superficial sham.

In contrast, working-class mothers who may appear to lack sensitivity, are actually providing their children with realistic coping skills, according to this research. These mothers work outside the home and, as such, their domestic duties must be accomplished in a limited amount of time. Children are not expected to interrupt and learn to rely on themselves. These children can voice their conflicts and anger overtly and their mothers create a space for this to be expressed safely. In addition, Paula Caplan (2000) points out that few middle-class mothers tell their children how difficult mothering can be. In a culture in which mothering is generally undervalued, chances are slim that anyone outside mother is going to teach children how much effort and uncertainly are involved in the job. As a result, both sons and daughters grow up thinking mothering is natural, instinctive and easy.

Margaret's Museum (1995, directed by Mort Ransen) is one of the few films to depict a working-class mother/daughter relationship and to tell a realistic story from inside a mother's experience. Mothering is not romanticized in the harsh reality of life in eastern Canada where a bitter widow (Katherine) resigns herself to the coal-mining deaths of her husband and two sons. She does not support her daughter's (Margaret) marriage to Neil, professing that all men are unreliable—"He'll make you cry and then you'll have children to add to the suffering.... The world is a bad place. He'll put you in the nut house." In fact, Margaret ends up learning from her mother and repeating oppressive social norms even though Margaret openly resists becoming like her mother (matrophobia) and resisting her ways (subversive repetition).

Unfortunately, there are few films featuring a mother's life that is both

written and directed by a woman. Happily, Jane Campion has both written and directed *The Piano* (1993). The story is narrated by the mother (Ada) who is mute—a striking commentary on the silenced voices of women in this turn-of-the-century era. The audience hears what she is thinking which offers a very intimate perspective of her life as a mail-order bride who travels with a young daughter (Flora) from her privileged life in England to the harsh reality of the Australian outback. She becomes a prisoner in a loveless marriage and seeks company in an extramarital relationship. She is never free of her child and must conduct her liaison with the child in tow. On many occasions, Ada seeks to satisfy her own needs at the expense of her child and the audience must confront the justification of such self-indulgence. Many of her actions go against the notions of the ideal mother. In the end, the child betrays her mother and colludes with the male in power. After Ada is severely mutilated as her just punishment, Flora becomes the caretaker and their roles are reversed. The issue of subordination of mothers and socialization of daugthers by the patriarchy is clearly confronted in this film.

The politics of reproduction: Whose body is it?

Mary O'Brien (1981) questions why society fails to take reproduction seriously. She points out that, ironically, it is the only natural function that has not been studied and theorized by men. She suggests that the reason why a female "reproductive taxonomy," including such embodied moments as menstruation, ovulation, copulation conception, gestation, labour, birth, lactation, nurturing and menopause, is devalued is because these moments are largely invisible and involuntary and they happen only to women. She argues that "labour" requires analysis and compares productive labour with reproductive labour, concluding that reproduction (along with women's bodies) has become a commodity and childbirth has become medicalized and institutionalized in a male-dominated arena. The health and legal industries are controlled by experts who stand to gain financially. As a result, child birth, originally celebrated as a social rite of femininity is concealed and reduced in value. Issues of custody, paternity, and spousal support as determined by state policy and court procedures are discussed in this section of the course.

The film *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979, directed by Robert Redford) is told from the male perspective in the judicial court system of the '70s. Joanna is portrayed as a "bad" mother because she left her family for the sake of personal fulfillment. As a single parent, Ted experiences the intolerance of a workplace that cannot accept a working parent. He is fired for putting his child's needs first. Although Joanna wins custody in the end, she makes the ultimate sacrifice (much like *Stella* and *Mildred Pierce* of earlier decades) in order to allow the strong bond between father and son to continue. She does what is best for her child, by leaving him with his father, ignoring her own needs. We are left to wonder how Joanna would have told this story herself and how the male-dominated court room manipulated the outcome.

In contrast, the film *Steel Magnolias* (1989, directed by Herbert Ross) is told from the perspective of privileged white Southern women. Shelby, a severe diabetic, is advised not to get pregnant. She resists her controlling mother's wishes and gives birth to a son, only to die of complications shortly after. The audience is taken into the indifferent world of the hospital where the insensitive businesslike manner of the staff is contrasted to the emotional dimensions experienced by Shelby's mother. The men all appear aloof and irresponsible (excessive to the point that they cannot be taken seriously) while, once again, women are prepared to make ultimate sacrifices—Shelby to risk her life to have a child and her mother to risk her life by donating a kidney to her daughter. O'Brien's theory of the invisible reproductive taxonomy is exemplified in this film even though women act and the men stand by and watch.

From margin to centre: Race, class and sexuality

In this class I raise awareness about marginalized women and alternate patterns of mothering related to class, race and sexuality (e.g. Afrocentric, lesbian, foster and adoptive mothering). As Adrienne Rich (1986) considers her lesbian identity, she points out that when those who have the authority to name and determine what will be valued (such as teachers) choose to ignore or mistreat minority groups (including women) or describe the world without you in it, a process of psychic disequilibrium is created. Patricia Bell-Scott (1991) extends this observation to the mothering experiences within the white and black cultures. She points out that while white women traditionally gain status as stay-at-home mothers with the economic security provided by husbands and are afforded the time to focus their care-taking responsibilities, black women are concerned about supporting their families, education, independence and control over their own bodies. Mothers in black cultures are often more central and powerful figures in the family and rely more on themselves for economic security.

The frustrations of other marginalized positions are addressed as well in order to heighten awareness of students to alternative viewpoints. According to Coll, Surrey and Weingarten (1998), adoptive mothers often feel devalued and worry about the valuing of blood relations and genetic endowment over environmental nurturing and about the psychological pathologizing of the wellbeing of their children. Likewise, as Bo Miedema (1998) points out, foster mothers are often exploited, unsupported and even resented for performing a crucial child-care service—often with little preparation time and a high degree of risk and emotional tension. Finally, we consider Katherine Arnup's (1998) perspective on lesbian mothering in which she stresses how her children often struggle with the pressures to conform to traditional norms. She points out that lesbian couples, in contrast to ill-intentioned stereotyping, provide stable and secure homes in which decisions to conceive and raise children are made with thoughtful care and deliberateness by both parents.

In the film *Losing Isaiah* (1995, directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal) an

abandoned baby is found by a social service agent (Margaret) and adopted into her white middle-class family. The young birth mother (Khaila), a black drug addict, initiates a court battle to reclaim her son and challenge the adoption process. After winning the case she quickly realizes she cannot sever the strong emotional bond her son has build with his adoptive family. She realizes that she needs emotional support and agrees to allow her son to return to Margaret's family if she can remain a part of his life. Racial stereotyping is very evident in this film as is the Hollywood image of beauty and success. A black single mother (unemployed and drug addicted) is portrayed as inferior to a white mother living in a nuclear family with a double income.

In contrast, the film *Joy Luck Club* (1992, directed by Wayne Wang) depicts the lives of eight Asian women—four mother/daughter pairs, who struggle to hold onto strong cultural practices while assimilating into American norms and values with more authenticity. As women and mothers, these women were disempowered and forced to make significant sacrifices for their own survival as well as the welfare of their daughters. The stories are all told in the first person, as insiders although the perspective continually shifts between these eight storytellers. In the end, they all find their voice, overcome their submissiveness and claim their rightful space.

The motherline Generational stories

Naomi Lowinsky (1992) reminds us that what is often forgotten is that mothers are people with their own lives, who are profoundly affected by the experience of having children. She describes the "motherline" as stories of female experience—physical, psychological, and historical patterns emphasizing "the oneness of body and psyche ... a life vessel" (4). She points out that the grand narratives of the patriarchy do not reflect female experiences in their full sense. All of us, she argues, need access to our biohistorical sense of continuity to be fully, creatively alive, to face our own mortality and to honour life in all its forms. She explains the process of "looping" in which women pass through their own experience of mothering in order to fully understand the experiences of their own mothers and grandmothers. Through a series of visualization exercises, I begin this section of the course by asking students to imagine they are stepping back into the lives of their mothers, grandmothers and foremothers ... into the "underworld in which our mothers sit with the ghosts of lost human meanings" (Lowinsky, 1992: 6).

Two films are viewed that illustrate the power of motherline stories. The first, set in a seaside town in Scotland on a cold winter day, is *Winter Guest* (1997, directed by Alan Rickman). It portrays the "motherline" tale of Frances, a woman who has recently lost her husband, and her elderly mother Elspeth who tries to support her. The story reveals the altering life changes that occur beneath the surface of ordinary people of different ages as they struggle with their own identities. Throughout the circle of life, mothers never stop needing and wanting others to need them as well. We get through life by leaning on each

other. The second film, *Terms of Endearment* (1983, directed by James Brooks) depicts the lives of three generations of mothers—neurotic, controlling Aurora, her free-spirited daughter Emma and her grandchildren. Looking backward to our mothers and forward to our daughters, compels us to face our own mortality and to honour life in all its forms. When she sees her granddaughter for the first time, Aurora says that "it is like looking in the mirror." I encourage students to gaze into their own maternal mirrors.

Conclusions

An intensive examination of film and media representations of mothers indicates that most of the films and articles about mothering are still written and directed by men. Several other significant revelations confirmed the current research on popular culture (Arnup, 1994; Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan, 1994; Hirsch, 1989; Umansky, 1996; and Walters, 1992). Firstly, students admit that they do not give much thought to the messages delivered through the media about acceptable and valued mothering practices and that they were generally surprised at how predominant and powerful this mode of communication can be. Narrow and hegemonic images of white middle-class mothering were conveyed in most of the films studied and most students assume these to represent "typical" family patterns until they are challenged to reexamine these assumptions. By the end of the course, students feel much more aware of persuasive tactics and hidden messages conveyed in film and begin to resist and question what is portrayed.

Students' analysis of media clippings from newspapers and magazines also resulted in clearly defined themes and patterns. Foremost, was the impression that the majority of news articles portrayed mothers negatively as bad or irresponsible, emphasizing actions that tended to disrupt the ideal patriarchal standards and blame mothers for everything that went wrong with society (Caplan, 2000; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998). The media tended to focus on sensational crimes or traumas that mothers were seldom able to cope with. Students pointed out that mothers were seldom given credit for the complex roles they undertook and that fathers were rarely mentioned or expected to be held accountable.

Equally obvious was the unrealistic image of the super-mom, held up as the validated ideal for society. While this selfless and other-focused care-giving role is inferred on the one hand, ironically it is seldom taken seriously or given powerful status on the other. Students come to realize how easily daughters could be persuaded to replicate these limiting maternal behaviours and that rigid gender divisions of labour were being perpetuated. It is assumed that mothering just came naturally to women, rather than profiling it as a genderless, learned behaviour. Many students remark that the course has "opened my eyes."

In their final course assignment, in which students wrote personal narrative about their experiences of being mothered or being mothers, significant themes emerged. Changing family structures resulting from a mother's ill-

ness, premature death, divorce or remarriage resulted in intense learning experiences for many students. Mothers who returned to work or gave up jobs to stay at home were frequently mentioned as well. Interrupting goals or restricting personal development seemed justifiable and warranted in most narrative portrayals. Focusing their attention on others at the expense of self appeared to be a valued maternal pattern of behaviour that daughters often required, craved and intended to follow in their own lives. Suprisingly few students questioned this giving up of personhood or matrophobic tendancies to resist or fear becoming like one's mother. Family secrets were often disclosed in the narratives themes as well—adopted siblings, unwanted teen pregnancies, or half-siblings with different fathers were often not confronted until daughters were adults or parents had died. In many of the stories fathers were absent or insignificant. Mothers were remembered as the dynamic force holding the family together, making the major decisions or being available unconditionally.

Educational relevance

Through the use of powerful film and media examples, this course sensitizes students to the many challenges and complex layers of mothering and media awareness. They become more aware of misrepresented binary dichotomies constructed mainly by those outside the experience itself and, for the most part, become committed to making more conscious choices about their own maternal behaviours in the future.

As the course progresses, students also gain more confidence in speaking out and sharing their feelings as well as more cautious about expressing opinions and judgments that might involve hegemonic bias. They begin to look for deeper meanings and persuasive implications in the media and also to question the standpoint of the "knower" and the "known" (Code, 1991). As a result of their new insights, many students have begun to question the role schools might play in media literacy as well as in changing and redefining maternal patterns for the next generation of parents.

In the end, however, this course forced me to confront my own assumptions about "typical" families. I have come to appreciate that very few students who sit in my classes come from problem-free, traditional nuclear family structures. Once a trust is established between us, they write about incest, abuse, jealousy, resistance and rebellion, childhood illness, alcoholism, adoption, premature death of a mother, infertility, single parenthood, teen pregnancy and giving up their babies, conflict and estrangement, fear, isolation and grief. While many students describe their mothers as "best friends," others admit that they have never established close maternal bonds and a few address their regrets or secret wishes to be hugged or respected by their mothers. This personal writing is therapeutic and emancipating for many and provided a way to confront and question significant maternal issues deeply and authentically.

References

Abbey, S., J. Castle and C. Reynolds. 1998. "Comparing How Mothers Influence the Education of Daughters and Sons." *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* S. Abbey and A. O'Reilly, eds. Toronto: Sumach Press. 29-58.

Abbey, S. and Harris, C. 2000. "Motherline Connections Across Cultures and Generations." *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment and Transformation.* A. O'Reilly and S. Abbey, eds. New York: Rowman and Littlefield. 247-266.

Abbey, S. 1999. "Researching Motherhood as a Feminist: Reflecting on My Own Experiences." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering: Mothering and Motherhood* 1 (1): 45-56.

Abbey, S. and O'Reilly, A. Eds. 1998. *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* Toronto: Sumach Press.

Arnup, K. 1998. "Does the Word LESBIAN Mean Anything to You?" *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* S. Abbey and A. O'Reilly, eds. Toronto: Sumach Press. 59-68.

Arnup, K. 1994. *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bassin, D., Honey, M., and Kaplan, M. Eds. 1994. *Representations of Motherhood.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bell-Scott, P. Eds. 1996. *Double Stitch.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* London: Routledge.

Caplan, P. 2000. *Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship.* New York: Harper and Row.

Chodorow, N. 1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Code, L. 1991. *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Coll, C., Surrey, J. and Weingarten, K. Eds. 1998. *Mothering Against the Odds.* New York: Guilford Press.

Daly, A. 1982 *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal.* New York: Shocken Books.

Estes, P. 1992. *Women Who Run with the Wolves.* New York: Ballantine Books

Faludi, S. 1991 *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women.* New York: Crown Publications.

Heilbrun, C. 1988. *Writing a Woman's Life.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Hirsch, M. 1989. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kaplan, M. 1992. *Mother's Images of Motherhood.* New York: Routledge.

Ladd-Taylor, M. and Umansky, L. 1998. *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America.* New York: New York University Press.

Lowinsky, N. 1992. *Stories from the Motherline.* Los Angeles: Tarcher Press.

Maushart, S. 1999. *The Mask of Motherhood.* New York: The New Press.

Miedema, B. 1998. Mothers for "Hire": Why Do Mothers Foster?" *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* S. Abbey and A. O'Reilly, eds. Toronto: Sumach Press. 304—311.

Nelson, F. 1996. *Lesbian Motherhood.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Nemiroff, G. 1994. "Reflections on Motherhood." *Mother Journeys: Feminists Writing About Mothering.* M. Reddy, M. Roth and A. Sheldon, eds. Minneapolis: Spinsters Ink.

O'Brien, M. 1981. *The Politics of Reproduction.* New York: Routledge.

O'Reilly, A. 2001. *Mothers and Sons: Feminism, Masculinity, and the Struggle to Raise Our Sons.* New York: Routledge.

O'Reilly, A. 1998. "Across the Divide: Comtemporary Anglo-American Feminist Theory on the Mother-Daughter Relationship." *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns.* S. Abbey and A. O'Reilly, eds. Toronto: Sumach Press. 69-91.

O'Reilly, A. and Abbey, S. 2000. *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment and Transformation.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Pope, D., Quinn, N., and Wyer, M. 1990. "The Ideology of Mothering: Disruption and Reproduction of Patriarch." *Signs* 15 (3): 441-446.

Reddy, M., Roth, M., and Sheldon, A. Eds. 1994. *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering.* Minneapolis, MN: Spinsters' Ink Press.

Rich, A. 1986. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution.* New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

Ruddick, S. 1994. "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth." *Representations of Motherhood.* D. Bassin, M. Honey and M. Kaplan, eds. New Haven: Yale University Press. 29-45.

Ruddick, S. 1989. *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace.* Boston: Beacon.

Spender, D. 1985. *Man Made Language.* Boston, MA: Routlege and Kegan Paul.

Umansky, L. 1996. *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties.* New York: New York University Press.

Walkerdine, V. and H. Lucey. 1989. *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socializing Daughters.* London: Virago Press.

Walters, S. 1992. *Lives Together. Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press.