

A Review of *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment and Transformation*

Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment and Transformation is an eclectic collection of essays ranging across diverse cultural contexts, academic disciplines and identity formations. It is a valiant and successful attempt to grapple with this central relationship in women's lives. Divided into four parts: Mothers Telling Their Stories; Dismantling Patriarchal Motherhood; Empowering Daughters and Connecting/Disrupting the Motherline, this collection traverses a path from the mother's voice to the daughters and finally moves towards synthesis with Lowinsky's concept of the "motherline." Identity and difference are central themes connected to the daughter's passage into adulthood and the mother's journey inside and outside the institution of "patriarchal motherhood." Following Adrienne Rich, a central postulate of this book is that "outlaw" mothers who insist on their economic, political, and personal independence provide powerful models for their daughters. (Rich, 1976) Emphasis is laid on connection rather than separation, conflict rather than rupture and struggle rather than acquiescence. The collection therefore revives the taboo of passionate attachment between mothers and daughters, drawing inspiration from the Demeter/Persephone myth as well as African-American styles of mothering.

Mothers telling their stories:

Elizabeth Johnson begins this section with an examination of literary texts that feature mothers as central protagonists. Reading subordinated ethnicities into "mothering work," Johnson finds a pragmatic heroism in the lone mother who struggles. Utilising Sara Ruddick's tripartite schema of maternal practice, Johnson examines the work of preserving, nurturing and training children in order to locate maternal subjects. When represented from the mother's own

perspective—as we see, for example, in the novels by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker—this work serves to ground the reader in the mother’s subjectivity rather than in her instrumentality. In her survival and the concomitant preservation of her children, the lone coloured mother therefore emerges a salient figure of empowerment. Her presence in the public sphere as breadwinner and caregiver (typically resisting adversity and discrimination) makes for a more interesting read, suggests Johnson, than the white middle-class mother whose privilege paradoxically works to silence her. Johnson speculates further that this may be the reason why mothers are more frequently represented from their own perspective in the literature on/by coloured women. In this sense, subordination is read as a paradoxical condition that may both thwart and foster autonomy; facilitate consciousness as well as suppress its expression. The exposure of maternal struggle from the vantage point of *her* labour, provides a central tool for change. We are forced to confront the mother as “self” rather than (silenced) “other.”

Departing from the narrative structure of “Oedipality,” the essays by Janet Burnstein, María-José Gámez-Fuentes and Cath Stowers also identify feminine voices connecting (rather than separating) literary mothers and daughters. In fiction as in life, the maternal protagonist is both agent and nurturer, provider as well as she who must socialise her child(ren) into culture. Importantly, it is the mother, as first carer, who provides her daughter with the tools of language. Thus Burnstein finds, in sharp contrast with Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” thesis wherein the son’s must “kill” their literary father’s,¹ many a Jewish woman writer coming to her craft precisely through identification with her mother. It is through the internalisation of her mother’s experience and the caveats this produces in the daughter’s sense of self, that she forges a path to literature. Experiential gaps create fruitful moments, even if these come to rest on an archetypal divide between domesticity and art. Novelist Tova Reich gives succinct expression to this theme: “My mother has been my muse ... She has fed me the words.” Burnstein elaborates, “Here there is neither usurpation nor ... revision. Instead ... language itself [is] her mother’s gift ... the very source of her own power with words” (42).

Similarly, Stowers examination of Michele Roberts’ fiction finds a “journeying back to mother” as the central literary device. These journeys are initiated by loss and return to “pre-Oedipal” symbiosis, albeit this time via the narrative twist of role reversal. Typically it is the daughter who cares for an ailing or otherwise incapacitated mother. The return home brings forth her mother’s story hitherto locked in a crypt of silence; a theme also elaborated by Gámez-Fuentes. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s concept of “permanent alteration: never one without the other,” Gámez-Fuentes analyses three short stories by three Spanish writers foregrounding “especially empowering and positive portrayals of the mother-daughter relationship” (48). Her texts are concerned with identity and difference and the extent to which mothers and daughters sustain connection through revolving identification. It is through the (femi-

nine) “Other,” Gámez-Fuentes contends, that identity is forged, relinquished, subverted and elaborated. The short stories all represent powerful instances of this relational flow, where empathy provides the grounds for recognition. Outside the Oedipal nexus, daughters and mothers speak a language of tenacious reciprocity. For example, Carmen Laforet’s maternal protagonist speculates on her daughter’s separation to the “white house.” Paradoxically, the move away will bring her closer to her mother’s experience. In this sense, separation invokes connection. In the mother’s voice,

... [W]hat she [my daughter] will learn every day in this white house, what will gradually separate her from me—work, friends, new dreams—will bring her so near to my soul, that eventually I will not know where my spirit ends nor where hers starts. (52)

However, while the essays in this section seek to subvert the hegemony of Oedipal narrative structures (as the rupturous paradigm for independence), the Oedipus story remains a ubiquitous reference point, forcing the reader to question the extent to which either: a) the Oedipus myth (as re-read by psychoanalysis) remains relevant for the “mother-daughter plot”; or b) whether the writers themselves are “unconscious” of their ongoing affinity with it. To put it bluntly, if Oedipus is so unimportant why do we keep hearing about him? Perhaps we could hear little more about his daughter Antigone and her relationship with her mother who was, of course, also her sister; an interesting symbolic position implying precisely the kind of mutuality across generational difference many of the authors are aiming at. Nevertheless, the concern to “write in the realities of mothering” (65) including ambivalence, breakdown, loss, poverty and abandonment alongside love, attachment, passion, journey and reunion, is the emotional territory traversed by these essays.

Dismantling patriarchal motherhood:

In this section—perhaps the book’s finest—the dichotomous categories that bind and alienate mothers are prised apart and set in new relation. Typically, “good” and “evil,” “madonna” and “whore,” “selfish” and “selfless” generate spurious divisions while minimising the range of subject positions available to women. Integration of maternal complexity is therefore explored by Susan Whitcomb in her analysis of the “maternal poets” (such as Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin) and by Jeanne Wiley in her dexterous re-reading of the Cinderella fairy tale. Both explore the “step-mother” and “fairy god-mother” as conduits for undiluted maternal rage and love respectively. In this sense, they exploit pre-existing dichotomies, albeit for subversive feminist ends. Similarly, Ivy Schweitzer examines the (black) “mammy” and the (white) “mummy” as caricatures of wholesome, loyal (though threateningly sensual) worker on the one hand, and pure, disembodied figurehead on the other. Both are reductive stereotypes organised to benefit existing power

relations: man over woman, white over black, rich over poor. The mechanism of “splitting,” similarly preserves maternal “goodness” while creating a dissociated category of evil. However, whereas the “maternal poets” speak as ambivalent mother, we see Cinderella speaking as frustrated, oppressed daughter.

Wiley analyses the “patriarchal script” behind this familiar tale brilliantly drawing on Angela Carter’s literary pastiche “Ashputtle” and Marianne Hirsch’s notion of the “female family romance.” Importantly, as the women vie for Cinderella’s coveted transformation and so compete themselves out of alliance and into aggression, we witness the destruction of mother-daughter (sister-sister) ties. Only the ephemeral fairy god-mother survives this filial carnage and she does so by having no needs of her own or, in other words, by being an archetypal “good mother.” By dint of magic she facilitates her daughters’ passage from nasty, self-interested women to loving, chivalrous men, and by doing so illuminates Cinderella’s path to adulthood. The lie, suggests Wiley, resides in the dream of independence via masculine agency. The promise of freedom evaporates the same moment as Cinderella’s (always already) vicarious surname. She has won precisely her mother’s place as someone else’s symbolic and domestic appendage. Of course the double-bind lies in the mirage of romance. For a courtly moment, marriage—or more properly the wedding itself—appears to transcend Cinderella (read: every bride) beyond her gender-specific limitations.

This is a theme explored by a number of the essays, particularly those concerned with adolescent depression in girls as well as the pervasive phenomenon of “mother-blaming.” When the daughter rejects her mother (or, as Paula Caplan more accurately reminds us, rejects her subordination and lack of identity) and uses marriage as her escape, she winds up in the same position herself, albeit minus her matrilineal kin. In this way, the daughter procures her freedom at the expense of her mother; an all too familiar trope implicating women in a cycle—or “family romance”—of rupture and betrayal (Hirsch, 1989). Mrs Prince Charming, it transpires, forfeits both her fiery “roots” and her feminine attachments. Cinder-ella might stop sweeping ashes for her (step) mother but one suspects her time at the conjugal castle would hardly be cause for celebration. Before long we all know she’d be washing his socks and bemoaning the day she let romance cloud her judgement. “It begins,” says *the old wives tale*, “when you sink in his arms and ends with your arms in his sink!”; a finding supported by Andrea Doucet and Gillian Dunne’s subsequent essay on the division of domestic labour between heterosexual and homosexual couples. No matter how hard they try, extensive literature indicate heterosexual couples typically end up with sexist divisions of labour disadvantaging women’s labour-market participation and self expression. Cinderella, it transpires, would be better off marrying her sister if she wants more equitable arrangements!

The familiar trope of “cultural contradiction,” or, in other words, the difficulties of combining mothering with political and economic activity,

emerge with poignancy. No mother can do it alone. She needs some combination of partner, parents, a nanny, childcare, sisters, relatives and/or friends, yet how this is achieved reflects widely divergent socio-economic and ethnic positions. While a culture of “other-mothering” prevails in African-American culture minimising isolation, conflicts between home and work and, of course, the arduousness of childcare, this exists alongside pervasive discrimination. However, where a husband may bring ease of economic and social struggle, marriage typically ushers in dependence and isolation, compromised access to paid work and much more domestic labour. (Hochschild, 1989; Bittman and Pixley, 1997; Maushart, 2001). Despite the myth that women now “have it all,” there is no “feminine subject position” that comfortably accommodates relationships, children and work. Structurally we do not have a system that supports this position, because we do not yet have a society that reflects women’s interests as mothers. Combining motherhood with not only work but also relationships, creativity, leisure, even sleep, therefore remains intensely difficult in contemporary western societies.

Empowering daughters:

In this section, a focus on the daughter assumes centrality; while the kind of mothering most empowering to daughters is also advanced. In the articles by Andrea O’Reilly, Barbara Turnage, Sharon Abbey and Charlotte Harris we see a strong relationship to a strong culturally validated mother is integral to the self-esteem and independence of young African-American women. Lone coloured mothers in spite of, or perhaps because of, the hardships they face, tend to generate more extensive support networks, engage more fulsomely in paid labour and assume psychological and social centrality in the lives of their children. In this way, they model precisely the kind of autonomy that permits their daughters to assume likewise. Coming from a “long line of irate uppity black women,” to quote the poem in O’Reilly’s title, is likely to serve a daughter well. As Patricia Hill Collins has also noted, the issues that preoccupy white middle-class mothers (isolation and identity) are not the same as those confronting black mothers (employment and racism) (Hill-Collins, 1991). Concomitantly, there appears a greater degree of estrangement in more privileged, typically white, mother-daughter relations. (See, for example, the contrast between Sharon Abbey and Charlotte Harris in their co-authored autobiographical piece). Daughters, it transpires, are most empowered by “strong mothers” not, in echo of Miriam Johnson, by “weak wives.” (Johnson, 1988; O’Reilly, 1998).

Not surprisingly then, rejection of the mother epitomises second wave feminism’s first attempt—through the eyes of the (resentful) daughter—at maternal scholarship. Canonical feminist texts such as *The Reproduction of Mothering* by Nancy Chodorow and *My Mother/My Self* by Nancy Friday promulgate the daughters independence from the mother given the structural subordination of mothers and their concomitant investment (however uncon-

scious) in “reproducing” this same oppression in their daughters. The mother is here configured as an emotional obstacle, the dead weight of tradition, obstructing her daughter from the newfound spoils of freedom. We return invariably to Cinderella: out of the frying pan and into the fire!

Re-read by Marilyn Hirsch and Paula Caplan, however, interdependence and attachment to the mother are interpreted as signs of psychological health rather than pathology (Hirsch, 1989; Caplan, 1989). Similarly, taken out of a model of Oedipal rupture, synthesis of attachment and independence (or identity and difference) remains the prevailing psychological goal for daughters. Remaining attached without boundary collapse (and loss of identity) is also taken up in an interesting philosophical essay by Deborah Orr. Using Wittgenstein’s idea of the socially embedded individual, Orr aims to challenge the “illusion of the autonomous and isolated willing and choosing ego of liberal ethics” (164). In Caplan’s account it appears typical and advantageous for the daughter to remain emotionally attached to her mother, notwithstanding the western cultural emphasis on separation. She must, however, be respected as “her own person” and, in turn, respect her mother’s “own person.” As the authors of *Mother-Daughter Revolution* write, “Separation and autonomous are not equivalent: a person need not separate from mothers emotionally to be autonomous” (de Bold, Wilson and Malave, 1994: 36).

Mother-blame is therefore located within the “script” of patriarchy and a central means by which women are cut off from their mothers. In an interesting essay by Astrid Henry, feminism itself crops up as a “bad mother” for “third wave” feminists such as Naomi Wolf, Rene Denfield, and Katie Roiphe. While ostensibly in good relations with their own mothers, the feminism of their mother’s generation is disparaged as collectivist and sexually repressive. A short step suggests Henry, from overt maternal rejection. We see traces of Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” here, as *mother figures* are toppled from their bra-burning thrones. (Has Naomi Wolf inadvertently re-written Cinderella as she takes unceremonious leave from Gloria Steinem’s castle for her own special marriage with feminism? Her book was after all entitled *Fight Fire with Fire!*)

However, while the essays in this section advocate “strong mothers” and caution wisely against “mother blame,” there is a crucial discussion missing. What of the daughter who cannot find resonance with her mother’s experience but who does not blame her? Or of the mother who provided opportunities (through her own life choices and struggles) that were neither utilised nor appreciated by her daughter? What of the adult daughter who cannot find or obtain satisfaction in “attachment” with her mother because their differences are too large, their personalities too “different,” their experiences too divergent? I have known of two cases in apparent reverse: one where—counter intuitively—the daughter (still in her twenties) has opted for a traditional marriage and quiet suburban life raising children while her mother (in her 50s) is an outspoken academic feminist; the other, where the daughter’s conflict with her father has leaked into all family relationships, including with her mother who

is unable or unwilling to countenance her daughter's position.

These estrangements are painful to all parties, do not involve mother blaming or escape, but do involve relational complexity and breakdown. While inevitably caught within the nexus of patriarchal subject positions (self-interest versus self-sacrifice), the breakdowns contain unique interpersonal features in which resonance and connection simply cannot be found despite concerted efforts. The interpersonal ramifications of estrangement beyond the simplistic framework of overt rejection *by the daughter of the mother* would have proved a useful addition to this collection. The inability to be heard, mirrored, supported or comprehended by one's mother *or* daughter exists as one relational possibility on a continuum from attachment through separation and beyond. While Nancy Friday may have sensationalised this issue, it has not lost its relevance for contemporary mothers and daughters, especially those who remain estranged from one another.

Connecting/disrupting the motherline:

This problem is at least partly ameliorated by Naomi Lowinsky's (1992) concept of the "motherline." Lowinsky contrasts separation with narrativised continuity, though provides a key place for "disruption." The "motherline" is a genealogy of embodiment as well as an origin myth. In Lowinsky's terms, women and adolescent girls benefit immensely from their mother's (and mother's mothers) "coming of age" stories, including stories of girlhood, menstruation, adolescence, sexual experience, relationships, romance, marriage, pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, birth, lactation, loss, divorce, suicide, friendship, education, career, work, immigration, menopause and death.² For Lowinsky, the motherline situates a woman in her femininity, animates, contextualises and supports her own experiences and is especially useful at key turning points in her life. She highlights middle age as a unique moment in the motherline where a woman may have the privilege of knowing herself in the tripartite position as adult daughter, mother of an adult daughter and grandmother. She knows the experience of wrestling for separation (from her own mother) and hankering for attachment (with her daughter). In this way, she can know herself, her mother and her daughter through significant life-cycle transitions. This unique experience puts her between three generations and signals her corporeal past and future.

The articles by Joonok Huh and Andrea Liss explore—again through the prism of ethnic "difference"—the possibility of disruption to this line. With Huh a complex transition from traditional Korean femininity to educated western(ised) woman generated a disruptive level of complexity. Huh's mother assumed a traditional position as wife and mother within the hegemonic framework of "Asian" domesticity. She was a "good" woman who sacrificed for her family. Part of this sacrifice, however, involved supporting her daughter to study abroad, in a western country (America) where, inevitably, she liberalised her views. When Huh became pregnant with her first child, however, old

stories returned as she felt full with internalised Asian culture. Returning to questions of normative Korean femininity clarified her sense of an identity caught “between cultures.” Giving birth to a daughter who has an ambivalent relationship to her Korean heritage again situates Huh between cultures. She writes,

Whenever I visit my mother in Korea and need to play the daughter role for her, I wish my mother would let me be my own person instead of insisting that I be a Korean woman. She asks me at least to pretend I am a Korean woman while in Korea. When I resume my mother role upon coming back to the United States, I am confronted by my daughter’s question, the same one that I raise to my mother while on the other shore. She is not happy with me for reminding her that she is Asian-American, not American ... I locate myself between my American daughter and my Asian mother ... in a space that is neither Korean nor American but is both ... On a personal level, I lose myself and gain my mother or lose myself and gain my daughter. (268-9)

Huh finds points of disjuncture with both her mother and her daughter given the geographic, cultural and educational divides between them. She stands at the cross roads between tradition and modernity, between Asia and “the west,” between mother and daughter. Yet through her a crucial bridge is formed.

With Andrea Liss cultural difference between mother and daughter are explored in Ngozi Onwurah’s film *The Body Beautiful*. Grand differences of race, age, beauty and health are conflated inside an intensely intimate mother/daughter bond. Difference is subverted through identification yet revealed through structural constraint: the mother is plain, the daughter beautiful; the mother is white, the daughter black; the daughter growing, the mother “disfigured” by cancer and partial mastectomy. Deploying unusual cinematic techniques, including maternal voice over inside the daughter’s reminiscences, Onwurah generates a clever pollination of mother-daughter selves. In Liss’s terms, “the two women’s voices are rarely spoken through their bodies and are not directed at each other as in the relay of traditional dialogue” (281). As one interprets the others life, a unique synthesis is crafted. Nevertheless, racial difference between the mother and daughter highlight points of incommensurability. As the daughter nestles into her mother’s breast she reflects poignantly, “to a world that sees only black and white, I was made only in the image of my father. Yet she has molded me, created the curves and contours ... I may not be reflected in her image but my mother is mirrored in my soul” (278)

Ngozi Onwurah, a Nigerian-British woman, cast her own white mother in what Liss calls a “narrative documentary style with a courageous and strategic use of autobiography” (280). Like Onwurah’s mother, the maternal protagonist “Madge” has undergone a partial mastectomy. The film therefore examines

both the taboo of the “disfigured” woman and the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship through the turbulence of adolescence. As others recoil in horror at the mother’s scarred remains of a breast, the teenage daughter confronts her mother’s subjectivity as if for the first time: seeing her as others see her. Madge adds, in what Liss calls “one of the film’s most wrenching admissions,” “Somewhere between the rheumatism and the mastectomy, I had been muted” (283). The mother and the daughter confront each other in part through the patriarchal standard of female beauty. There is both polarity and symmetry in their “aging/ripe” bodies and sadness in the mother’s loss of the male gaze. Liss highlights the accommodations that must be made by women while bringing us back to the awareness of the filmmaker daughter and her actor mother. Boundaries always “fluctuate between intense intimacy and painful separation” (286).

Motherline stories—of love and loss, of health and illness, of work and creativity, of happiness and despair—may anchor mother-daughter relationships otherwise vulnerable to silencing or estrangement. Typically, the mother and daughter are connected by a common surname belonging to the male head of household. The mother has lost her “maiden” (read: father’s) name and the daughter will also. This practice—integral to the institutionalisation of patriarchy—works to maintain symbolic divisions between women. The “motherline” acts as its own bridge linking grandmother to mother to daughter to granddaughter through narrative. Oral history is here the antidote to an otherwise pervasive destruction of symbolic ties.

Conclusion:

The abiding theme in this collection of essays on mothers and daughters is connection through conflict and difference. It foregrounds the tension of maintaining closeness through generation, through difference, through structural constraint and through emotional turbulence. The mother’s voice and life story as well as her body constitute the physical, emotional and social context within which her daughter can claim a grounded female identity in the world. In this sense, the critique of “patriarchal motherhood” exists coterminous with the empowerment of daughters. As the mother is conceived an agent in her own right, so the daughter can claim this agency for herself. The mother can expand her daughter’s horizon, quite simply and quite difficultly, by expanding her own (Rich, 1976). That is, by being the woman she hopes her daughter can become. Like Persephone, the daughter too must return in cycles to her mother’s house of stories, for it is through these stories that she will create her own.

This essay is dedicated to my mother Jenny and my daughter Mia.

¹Bloom postulates the “anxiety of influence” model as an explanation for the male writers’ “coming of age” typically predicated on a creative rejection of his predecessors. In this model, the literary sons must kill their literary fathers in

order to find their pens (or is that their pen(ise)s?)

²Interestingly, one of the most beautiful things my father did when I became pregnant was write me a story about his mother. It was a traumatic story of her passage from Eastern to Western Germany at the close of the second world war. My grandmother and her three small children, including my infant father, confronted a Russian soldier at the border. On orders to shoot Germans trying to get to the west, my grandmother pleaded for her life and for permission to return home. She was given both after a tense and emotional exchange. Neither could understand the other's language but fortunately armistice prevailed. As a mother, I imagine my grandmother in this situation and feel immense admiration for her bravery and sadness at her struggle to care for small children under gruesome wartime conditions. In the motherline (which I believe may also be transmitted by sons (of mothers) to the daughters (of mothers)) are found stories so crucial to one's experience, it seems remarkable how easily they are forgotten.

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