

Andrea O'Reilly

Inaugurating the Association for Research on Mothering

The Association for Research on Mothering is the first feminist international organization devoted specifically to the topic of mothering-motherhood. A.R.M. was officially launched in September 1998; in the six months since, close to 300 members have joined this new and vibrant association; we aim to have a membership of 1000 by the new millennium. A.R.M. members include: scholars, writers, activists, social workers, midwives, nurses, therapists, lawyers, teachers, politicians, parents, students, and artists from over 15 countries; as well as numerous local and international agencies, governmental and social, and community groups that work for, and on behalf of, mothers. Our mandate is to provide a forum for the discussion and dissemination of maternal theory and praxis and to establish a community of individuals/institutions working and researching in the area of mothering-motherhood. A.R.M., first and foremost, seeks to promote maternal scholarship, both at the university and community level, by bringing together interested individuals to share their insights, experiences, ideas, stories, studies, and concerns about mothering-motherhood. A.R.M. is committed, in both membership and research, to the inclusion of *all* mothers, First Nations mothers, immigrant and refugee mothers, working-class mothers, lesbian mothers, mothers with disabilities, mothers of colour, and mothers of other marginalized groups.

To date, A.R.M. has undertaken numerous initiatives to build and sustain a community for individuals/institutions working and researching in the area of motherhood-mothering. In September 1997, a year before A.R.M. was "officially" launched, 150 women from Canada, the United States, and Europe participated in the first international conference on mothering and motherhood coordinated by Andrea O'Reilly and sponsored by the Centre for Feminist Research (CFR) at York University, Toronto, Canada that focused on

"Mothers and Daughters: Moving into the Next Millennium." The interest and enthusiasm generated by the "Mothers and Daughters" conference motivated Andrea O'Reilly and the CFR to host a second conference in September 1998 entitled "Mothers and Sons Today: Challenges and Possibilities." Three books and a special journal issue have been and/or will be published from the two conferences: Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly's *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*, (Second Story Press, 1998); Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, Transformation*, (Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming 1999); Andrea O'Reilly, *Mothers and Sons: Feminist Perspectives*, (Routledge, forthcoming 2000); "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Mothers, Daughters, and Feminism" *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme's* special 20th Anniversary issue, (Summer/Fall 1998). The overwhelming response to the conferences and the subsequent publications demonstrate the compelling need for women to come together and to "talk" motherhood, as it is lived and researched. And so in response to this demand, A.R.M. was formed.

During the fall/winter of 1998/99 the National Advisory Board of A.R.M. was established; members include Andrea O'Reilly, (Founding President (York University); Sharon Abbey (Brock University); Andrea Doucet (Carleton University); Susan McCallum-Whitcomb (University of New Brunswick); Dolana Mogadime (Graduate Student Representative, OISE/UT); and Alison Thomas (University of Victoria). We are currently seeking board representatives from Quebec, the Prairies and the Territories, and board representatives who research and/or work on behalf of First Nations mothers, Lesbian mothers, mothers of colour, and mothers with disabilities. The board, for at least the next few years, will be Canadian-based though we have links with individuals and institutions from around the world.

A.R.M.'s commitment to the creation of a community of individuals/institutions working and researching in the field of motherhood has been the primary aim of A.R.M. in its first six months. In the fall and winter of 1998/99 A.R.M. undertook a major membership drive; Christy Taylor, A.R.M.'s administrative assistant, Jennifer Conner, A.R.M.'s graduate assistant and, myself, Andrea O'Reilly, Founding President of A.R.M., as well as Andrea's family spent countless hours stuffing envelopes; while our membership information was posted on numerous list serves. The winter months also saw Sharon Abbey, conference coordinator of the third annual A.R.M. conference, finalize programming for what promises to be a landmark conference; over one hundreds speakers from around the world will be presenting at "Mothers and Education: Issues and Directions for Maternal Pedagogy" October 1st-3rd, 1999, at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario.

In the Spring of 1999, Andrea O'Reilly started organizing an international conference entitled "Mothering in the African Diaspora: Literature, Society, History, Popular Culture, and the Arts" which will take place February 4th-6th, 2000, as part of A.R.M.'s congress grant application to the Social Science

and Humanities Research Council of Canada, (SSHRC). Spring 1999 also saw the birth of *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, the first and only journal publication devoted specifically to scholarship on motherhood. *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* will be published twice annually and its issues will focus on a particular topic or theme of motherhood. Future issues include: "Lesbian Mothers" (Winter 1999), "Mothers and Education," "Mothering in the African Diaspora," and "Mothers and Sons." In the summer of 1999, and subsequent summers, A.R.M. will also publish a Member's Directory, as well as an A.R.M. list serve and web page.

As A.R.M. expands globally, it remains committed to local programming through the collaborative development of community-based initiatives with agencies that provide services and programs for mothers in Toronto. To consolidate this local and community base of A.R.M. in Toronto we have established a "daughter" organization called Community and Academic Research on Mothering Association (C.A.R.M.A.). C.A.R.M.A. is under the umbrella of A.R.M. and is composed of two groups; community and academic. Our efforts towards responding locally have resulted in hosting a four-part lecture series entitled "Redefining Motherhood" during the month of March in celebration of International Women's Day. C.A.R.M.A. and 519 Church Street, a local community group, are also co-sponsoring an international symposium on Lesbian Mothers which will be held June 12, 1999, in celebration of Pride Day. C.A.R.M.A. will host a fundraising Mother's Day dance on May 8th, 1999 in celebration of Mother's Day and to launch the inaugural issue of *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*. Future events include a lecture series for Women's History Month (October 1999) as well as programming for Disability Awareness Week in January 2000. These, and other C.A.R.M.A. sponsored events, are free for C.A.R.M.A. and A.R.M. members. All members will be informed of all these events through A.R.M. mailings.

C.A.R.M.A. is committed to bridging the gap between community work and academic research on mothering. Our mandate is to provide a forum wherein knowledge can be shared and dialogue fostered between the community and academics so that we can best learn how to address the diverse experiences, insights and concerns of mothers. A.R.M. hopes to establish other local C.A.R.M.A. associations across Canada during 1999/2000 .

A.R.M. will remain committed to the development and promotion of a community of individuals/institutions who research and work in the area of mothering-motherhood through an ever-expanding membership base, an annual A.R.M. conference, as well as thematic conferences, a list serve, web page, annual membership directory, the bi-annual publication of the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, C.A.R.M.A. events in the Toronto area, and in other Canadian cities by 2000, and finally by creating a network of maternal researchers that will span the globe, bridge academe and activism, and link lived mothering to examined motherhood.

Over the last year, as A.R.M. was being born, I found myself, as mothers will often do, describing in the minutest detail the labour of this beloved child, every contraction, rush, pain, thrill I have shared with colleagues, friends, family, acquaintances, and, more often than I care to admit, passerbys at airports, restaurants, in taxis and at the mall. And while most people listened patiently and congratulated the birth, many expressed puzzlement: “Why would I want such a ‘baby’”; or more to the point, was such a baby really needed, in other words, “Why do we, society, university, government depending on the context, need or want an association about motherhood?” Such remarks while certainly not welcome were hardly surprising.

Adrienne Rich opened her now classic work *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” (Rich, 1976: 11). In the close to three decades since the publication of *Of Woman Born* the topic of motherhood, as Laura Umansky has documented in *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*, has become increasingly central to feminist activism and scholarship (Umansky, 1996). However, as motherhood scholarship has found a place in Women’s Studies, it still remains, in many disciplines, at the margins of scholarly inquiry. Most maternal scholars can recall and recount an instance where their motherhood research was viewed with suspicion if not outright dismissal. Real academics do not *do* motherhood (either in research or in life); at least not ones who seek a “real” tenured job.

When I wrote my dissertation on motherhood in Toni Morrison’s work in the early ’90s, as a mother of three young children I encountered many a raised eyebrow among my male English colleagues whether it was for the “upchuck” stains on my blouse, my chosen topic of study, or both I am still not certain. As an undergraduate student and later a graduate student, motherhood was seldom discussed, even in my Women’s Studies courses. And when motherhood was considered in the classroom the frame of reference for theoretical discussion it was, more often than not, the “prison of domesticity” theme of late nineteenth-century literature or the “motherhood-as-patriarchal trap” paradigm of early 1970s feminist thought. When I began to teach Women’s Studies in 1989, and brought the topic of motherhood into the classroom I discovered two things; the students had not studied motherhood, and two, they were most eager to do so. In response, I designed in 1991 a full, third-year Women’s Studies course on *Mothering and Motherhood*, the first of its kind in Canada.¹ When colleagues and acquaintances, inquired why I was designing a course on motherhood (they never seem to ask such questions of historians or political scientists who develop courses on war) I reflected upon a comment made by Toni Morrison: “I wrote the books ... I wanted to read” (qtd. in Russell, 1998: 43). My course on mothering-motherhood was the course I had always wanted—and needed—to take.

Over the last decade I have heard similar stories from maternal scholars

from across Canada, the United States, and Europe. I am currently conducting, as part of my SSHRC-funded research on “Motherhood and Feminism,” interviews with faculty who research and teach the subject of motherhood in order to assess the positioning of this topic in Women’s Studies curriculum; exploring questions such as: is the subject of motherhood taught? from what perspective? for what purpose? and to whom? What I discovered is that, despite the increasing centrality of motherhood in feminist scholarship since the publication of *Of Woman Born*, scant attention has been paid to motherhood in the Women’s Studies classroom and at feminist conferences. Motherhood, compared to topics such as work, sexuality, violence, or images of women, remains marginal to feminist study at both conferences and in the classroom. My research attempts to explain this.

I open my research interviews with the question do you teach the subject of motherhood in your Women’s Studies courses? and if not, why not?. In answering this question, many professors discussed how they did not consciously exclude the subject of motherhood; it just did not occur to them to include it. Others worried out loud that a specialization in a subject like motherhood could harm their career advancement in securing tenure or promotion. Still others expressed concern that if their colleagues viewed them as the “woman who did motherhood,” they and their scholarship would be dismissed as essentialist, particularly by feminists of the post-modernist persuasion. Some admitted to me that they do teach and research motherhood “on the side”; however they seldom make their colleagues privy to this information. Maternal scholarship, as these comments aptly demonstrate, remains largely invisible to a large number of academics, so much so that scholars trained in Women’s Studies, have not even considered that motherhood could and should be a topic of investigation in a Women’s Studies course. And scholars who do research and teach motherhood often downplay and conceal their work; or encounter ridicule and resistance for pursuing their chosen area of study.

A.R.M. was formed to promote, showcase, and make visible maternal scholarship and to accord legitimacy to this academic field. Most importantly A.R.M. exists to provide a community for like-minded scholars who research and work in the area of motherhood. Scholarship, both at the university and community level, as we all know, is enriched by dialogue and debate, broadened through knowledge /resources sharing and sustained by a sense of belonging.

As A.R.M. exists to simultaneously build a community of maternal scholars, academic and grassroots, and promote maternal scholarship, it developed in recognition of the centrality of motherhood in most women’s lives. We are all daughters and most women are mothers if we mean by this “othermothers” as described by Patricia Hill Collins (1990), spiritual mothers, as mentors, or any woman who is deeply concerned about children. As well, many other women engage in work, paid or otherwise, that is deemed, culturally and politically, as an extension of the maternal function; teaching, nursing and, in particular, child care and elder care. This view is neither

essential nor pro-natalist; it simply acknowledges that discourses of motherhood script all women's lives whether they are biological mothers or not. Normative ideologies of the "good mother," public policies on maternity leave, child care, legal rulings concerning same-sex adoptions, governmental decisions about children's education and maternal healthcare, workplace policy on mothering and employment and so on and so forth affect all of us, albeit in different ways. A.R.M. exists to provide a forum for women to discuss with one another their "maternal" experiences; both as they are structured by these controlling discourses and how they are lived in resistance to them. A.R.M. was created in the hope of creating a maternal community that Sara Ruddick (1989), among others, has argued is essential for the empowerment of mothers.

The *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* is an integral part of this community building for both researchers, academic and grassroots, and for mothers. The journal will showcase the newest and best in maternal scholarship and will feature numerous book reviews. As well through poetry, photography and artwork the journal will give voice to women's lived experiences of mothering in all their complexity and diversity. The inaugural issue that you hold in your hands is the first of many splendid issues to come. This issue explores many and diverse mothering-motherhood themes and issues from a multitude of perspectives; testimony to the depth and breadth of current maternal scholarship. The inaugural issue, as a way of introduction to A.R.M. and maternal scholarship generally, provides a cross-disciplinary sampling of motherhood research; future issues will highlight a particular motherhood theme or topic.

As the proud mother of A.R.M., I would like to take this opportunity, here in the introduction to our inaugural issue, to thank you for being part of this herstoric event; the publication of the first and only feminist journal devoted specifically to motherhood, and of course to welcome you to A.R.M., the first and only feminist mothering-motherhood association. Appropriately enough, the journal is being launched on the eve of Mother's Day at a fundraising Mother's Day dance in Toronto. Mother's Day thus marks the official birth day of the *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*: a most fitting tribute to honour and celebrate both mothers and maternal scholarship; better indeed than breakfast in bed!

Finally, as it should be for all births, A.R.M. had many attentive and devoted midwives. I would like to thank the office of Michael Stevenson, Vice President Academic at York University for its generous funding of the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*; as well as the Social Science Research Council of Canada for their financial support of the "Mothers and Daughters" and "Mothers and Sons" conferences and my "Motherhood and Feminism" research project. Special thanks are due to the Center for Feminist Research at York University for hosting the above two conferences and for providing A.R.M. with office space and subsidizing our mailing costs throughout the fall/winter 1998/99. Students in my Mothering-



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Motherhood courses, particularly the class of 1998/99, bear special mention as they laboured alongside me as A.R.M. was born. Thanks are also due to Dr. Nancy Mandell, former director of the CFR, for her initial vision of a Mothering conference and for her characteristic energy, enthusiasm, and expertise that helped make the vision a reality. I also would like to thank the members of A.R.M.'s national advisory board: Andrea Doucet, Susan McCallum-Whitcomb, Dolana Mogadime, Alison Thomas, and in particular, Sharon Abbey for their belief and commitment to A.R.M. Thanks are also due to the Guest Editorial Board of this inaugural issue, Christine Bellini, Jennifer Conner, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Ruby Newman, and Christy Taylor; their hard work ensured that the journal was delivered on its scheduled due date.

Jennifer Conner, my Graduate Assistant, has been a second mother to A.R.M. since its infancy; as an othermother she tended to A.R.M.'s growth the times I could not. My deepest appreciation to Luciana Ricciutelli, responsible for the production, design and layout, was handed a huge stack of manuscripts by someone, i.e., me, who knew nothing about journal publication and with little more than two weeks notice, Luciana created from this chaos and stress the absolutely splendid journal you hold in your hands. Thanks also to Jennifer Liptrot whose hard work enabled us to meet our production deadline. My family, Terry Conlin and children Jesse, Erin, and Casey O'Reilly-Conlin, also deserve thanks; they stuffed hundreds of envelopes, have been a part of dozens of A.R.M. discussions at the dinner table, and have given sage advice and unfailing support that sustained A.R.M. and myself during its most critical periods.

Special thanks are due to Christy Taylor, administrative assistant of A.R.M. and designer of A.R.M.'s official poster and logo (as featured on this issue's cover). Christy, more so than anyone else, laboured diligently and patiently to bring A.R.M. into the world; her intelligence, and sheer grit ensured that A.R.M. grew and grew well.

Finally thanks are due to the contributors of this issue and to all A.R.M. members; A.R.M. exists because of you. In appreciation and celebration, this inaugural issue is dedicated to the members of A.R.M. for their commitment to maternal scholarship and their support of this association.

¹For a detailed description of the designing and teaching of this course please see my article, "Talking Back in Mother Tongue: A Feminist Course on Mothering-Motherhood," *Feminism and Education: A Canadian Perspective*, Vol. 2, eds. Paula Bourne, Philandra Masters, Nuzhat Amin, Marina Gonick and Lisa Gribowski, Toronto: Centre for Studies in Education, 1994.

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