

## Reading Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* as a Queer Feminist Daughter

*This article develops a process of reading Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, three decades after its conception, from the perspective of a queer feminist daughter. I show how contemporary queer theories tend to reify the maternal by failing to engage with the nuances of desire and embodiment in the feminist texts on motherhood. To overcome such blind spots I reread *Of Woman Born* as a process of dialogue across generational and theoretical differences. Adopting a close textual and reflexive process of interpretation, I unfold moments within *Of Woman Born* in which the body exceeds binary and universal norms, evoking a more specific mode of corporeality that criss-crosses acts of feeling, desiring and thinking.*

My attempt to engage with and revalue Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1986b) almost three decades after its publication, involves a tricky process of thinking across time, becoming immersed in the sufferings and insights of past lives though the uncertainties of the present. Simultaneously intimate and distant, familiar and strange, words inscribed in the fray of particular struggles for self-representation and collective resistance are always already lost to transparent reclamation. *Of Woman Born* evokes powerful associations and multiple metaphors beyond its bounded pages, gaining monumental symbolic authority as a mother text of feminism while at the same time tracing transient details, memories and fragmented narratives of mothering experiences that refuse to be frozen in time. It becomes important to work against attempts to either uphold its truths or discount its partiality, working to open up spaces for rediscovery: carrying forth meaning-making as ongoing intergenerational encounters and translations of differences from respective times and places of their occurrences. Rather than treat *Of Woman Born* as an established text to be rediscovered, it's practice of questioning and conversing with others needs to

be fostered. In this spirit, Audre Lorde approaches Adrienne Rich's writings as a loving and responsive interlocutor mobilizing an exchange of voices spoken through differences of race:

Adrienne, in my journals I have a lot of pieces of conversations that I'm having with you in my head. I'll be having a conversation with you and I'll put it in my journal because stereotypically or symbolically these conversations occur in a space of Black woman/white woman where it's beyond the Adrienne and Audre, almost as if we're two voices. (1984: 103)

Lorde responds to Rich in ways that promote further engagements between readers, texts and contexts, suggesting chances to trace links without having to reach conclusions, beginning over and over again from new locations, desires and identifications, raising many questions: How do diverse positions constitute the contemporary relevance of Rich's *Of Woman Born*? What ways of reading enable permeable and ethical criss-crossings between the historical specificity of Rich's text and the urgency of future rearticulations?

Attentive to my location as a white queer feminist daughter writing through and for the "here and now," I find myself having to contend with gaps and tensions separating radical cultural feminism and queer postmodernism. I write out of the perplexities of forging a retrospective and anticipatory vantage point, looking back and forth between the historical recovery of maternal genealogies and the playful forgetting that spurs queer self-fabrication. Both moments are crucial for configuring an integrated feminist perspective that keeps desires open and unpredictable while being responsibly connected to everyday worlds of mothering. Yet dynamic doubleness often gives way to oppositional inertia, motherhood has become a locus of division between feminist valorizations of women's reproductive powers and pro-sexual transgressions of maternalist norms. Such splitting suggests and reinforces an historical amnesia, a forgetting of those historically ambiguous subjects that scramble binary logics and blur clear-cut boundaries. In contrast, Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1986b) strikes me as a deeply ambivalent text that defies either/or categorizations, combining contradictory elements of subjective introspection, fictional invention and institutional analysis. There is a unique interweaving of languages that invite readers into the text to follow up overlapping possibilities of being and thinking, to imagine maternity as a paradoxical locus of social control, creative labour and corporeal pleasure. This speaks to my own predilections for both/and relations, of embracing the indeterminate performativity of queerness along with grounded narratives of maternal experiences. And it is precisely Rich's reflexive open-ended process of experiential writing that solicits participatory readings that do not reify any single discursive form or content but rather propel further analysis, storytelling and shared learning. I return to Rich's text through theoretical detours of postmodern

queer feminist theories in order to reclaim mothering relations as fluidly signifying embodied practices. I use Teresa de Lauretis' (1984, 1987, 1994) expansive notion of experience as a dynamic activity of self-representation to highlight those moments in *Of Woman Born* that welcome and provoke a futurity of readings out of the past.

### Queer blind spots: Overlooking maternal specificities

Despite the theoretical lead taken by exponents of the new Queer Theory in deconstructing gender, the question of reproduction has largely been ignored. Partly, no doubt, this is due to the more distant relationship which the queer constituency—lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgenders—have to pregnancy and childbirth. I suspect, however, that it is also due to the difficulty of fitting the business of reproduction into the performative model of gender.... Had someone whispered into my ear while I was in the swearing stage of labour (the stage that lasts right the way through) that I was putting on a really convincing gender performance I think I'd have queerly bitten off their head. (Wilton, 1997: 73)

Postmodern feminist and queer theorists have confronted the limitations of heteronormative reproductive relations, analyzing sexual powers and desires as important elements of social and discursive formations of gender. My reading will attempt to negotiate between complex performative identities and desires, while also indicating blind spots where maternal subjects get read in abstract and negative opposition to subversive sexualities or else become completely left out of criticism. The innovative turn of contemporary queer feminist thinking promotes “projects precisely of *nonce* taxonomy, of the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world” (Sedgwick, 1990: 23). Such daring propositions work towards confronting normalizing and essentializing veins of feminism, making room for relations and languages that might supplement and disturb them. At the same time, queer revisionism often completely ignores or else forecloses the ways maternal subjects might elaborate their own subversive scenarios of embodied experience. While there does not seem to be a single reason why “the Mother” represents a static figure of sex/gender/sexual conformity across a range of contemporary texts designed to shake up the status quo, there exists a common tendency to overlook ambiguous corporeal and speech activities of maternal subjectivity. Reliance on symbolic abstractions of desire from specific histories reinforces binary divisions within queer theories between erotic and maternal subjects.

Although the goal is to democratize and pluralize sexual representations, maternal subjects continue to be invisible or marginalized within theoretical

movements privileging sexually transgressive subjects. In particular, queer theorists end up challenging moralistic tendencies within feminist maternalism without offering alternative representations of actively desiring maternal subjects. It is a tendency to rely upon unified feminine-maternal figures as the negative background of hip sexy queer alternatives that feminist critics have begun to question. Bidy Martin argues that not only do many queer texts underemphasize gender as changing historical relations, but they tend to generalize gender as an obstacle to transformative forces of desire. Martin writes that embodiments of gender are often seen as coincident with “the feminine” as “a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared and ensnaring” (1994: 105), in contrast to which sexuality signifies playful excess and mobility. It is disturbing that maternal embodiment continues to be negatively associated with heterosexist and gender essentializing norms within those texts that explore psychosexual transformations. Julia Creet falls prey to such dichotomous thinking when she reinscribes the fantasies and practices of lesbian sex radicals against a backdrop of feminist maternal prescriptions, writing: “We no longer call it ‘maternal feminism,’ but it lives on in a combination of morality and maternalism that is now directed toward other women as much as toward men, and where the feminist mother figure represents the source of sexual prohibitions, especially for women” (1991: 140). Such alignments of feminism and motherhood which foreground one-sided powers of control and prohibition against sexual risk-taking daughters tend to rely on prescriptive representations at the expense of contextualizations. This discounts maternal relations working to deconstruct and resist normalizing gender categories, overlooking precarious, “perverse,” and rebellious maternal desires lived in the gaps and margins of restrictive maternal moralities. Critiques of feminist maternalism often end up reproducing totalizing ideological formations at the expense of seeking out subjects who contest conservative conjugal ideals of mothering.

While sexual heterogeneity is valued, gender specificity gets overlooked in many postmodern and queer theorizations. They end up reifying motherhood within an identity-difference structure, leaving little room to consider those struggling against interlocking oppressions and negotiating multiple identities. In many ways, resistance to theorizing ambiguous genders and sexualities is indicative of the ways specific combinations of desires and identifications are obscured within generalizing conceptual methods. Any attempt to proliferate and complicate women’s subjectivities raises critical problems as to how to represent differences as located embodied social/discursive relations rather than dichotomous and a priori categories. As Shane Phelan argues:

Heterogeneity urges us toward specificity, its crucial element; without specificity, “heterogeneity” becomes such another word for difference. The focus on specificities aims at destroying white bourgeois hege-

mony by making it manifest...an emphasis on specificity in our analyses and practices aims at disrupting hegemonies, calling out differences for question, and rendering all people accountable for their positions and actions...Specificity demands the simultaneous exploration of categories of social marks and orders and attention to the unique individual. Specificity is the methodological guide to finding individuality in community. (1994: 8)

In order to address the gaps and closures within and between feminist theories of motherhood that fall prey to normativity and queer abstractions of desire from women's embodied relations, I seek out experiential languages of specificity. It is significant that Phelan (1994) refers to Adrienne Rich's article "Notes on the Politics of Location" (1986a) as a starting point of a difficult and ongoing elaboration and bridging of women's differences. With regard to mothering as specific bodily and social locations of address, Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1986b) bears valuable insights of a reflexive experiential text that refuses the simplifications of binary symbolic conventions. What seems forgotten in many postmodern feminist queer treatments of motherhood are precisely those multi-layered and ambivalent inscriptions of daily experience explored within Rich's texts which defy charges of essentialism or moral conformity.

Before turning to Rich's book with an interest in exploring how it unfolds nuanced ways of thinking through embodied desiring maternal relations, I want to sketch Teresa de Lauretis' social semiotic notion of experience as providing a transitional space between poststructuralist preoccupations with textual disruptions and the dynamic material worlds, affects, perceptions, habits and interpretations of everyday life. De Lauretis calls attention to how ideological systems interlock objectified sexual and maternal images of "Woman" while she also searches for ways to "resist confinement in that symbolic space by disturbing it, perverting it, making trouble, seeking to exceed the boundary" (1984: 139). Through a notion of "semiosis of experience," she affirms resistance and subversion at the level of women's relational praxis, and symbolic creativity in women's ordinary life worlds and languages. This involves an elaboration of Charles Peirce's efforts "to account for the subjective and social aspects of meaning production, or whether indeed it can be said to mediate between them, will determine its usefulness in mapping the relations of meaning to what I have proposed to call experience" (de Lauretis, 1984: 168). De Lauretis goes on to construct a feminist theory of "experience" away from appeals to empirical transparency toward a vision of subjectivity as an "ongoing construction." Sign activity is presented as inseparable from located corporeal/imaginative/theoretical activities, such that both subject and object are seen to be reciprocally transitive, and it is this entwining of mobile signifying activities and sensuous social experiences that presents some interesting alternatives for reading situated subjective knowledges. De Lauretis highlights "the weight of the object in semiosis, an overdetermination wrought into the work of the sign

by the real, or what we take as reality, even if it is itself already an interpretant” (1987: 41-42). She reclaims the status of “the object” not as a given factual reality but as a “dynamic object” which engages physical bodies, emotive responses and signifying practices. Peirce’s work becomes useful in its consideration of various modes of interpretants (interlacing sign, object and meaning), including an action oriented “habit-change” and collectively engaged interpretations of oppression and transformation.

According to de Lauretis, subjects of experience involve socially embedded, discursively mediated and collectively negotiated interactions between self, others and the world, shifting back and forth between hegemonic and reflexive modes of consciousness and cultural representations. Unique aspects of this process include a continual reworking of discourses by feeling, thinking, imagining and desiring subjects, allowing for multiple perspectives of how selves are shaped through the socio-ideological contexts they are immersed in while also seeking to change them. This resonates with Miriam Hansen’s call for “a concept of *experience* which is not the opposite of socially constructed signs and systems of representation, but rather mediates between individual perceptions and social determinations and emphatically entails memory and an awareness of its historical diminishment” (qtd. in Bergstrom and Doane, 1990: 172). Recognizing forces of “contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy” both within and between women’s experiences becomes a basis for moving beyond hegemonic knowledges so as to elaborate “a view from ‘elsewhere’.” De Lauretis goes on to writes:

that “elsewhere” is not some mythic distant past or some utopian feminist future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations ... in the micropractices of daily life and daily resistances that afford both agency and sources of power or empowering investments ... that movement in and out of ideology, that crossing back and forth of the boundaries—and of the limits—of sexual difference(s). (1987: 23)

De Lauretis offers a point of departure for thinking about “experience” as neither empirically transparent nor abstractly discursive, but as a perpetual struggle of living within and against (inside/out) ideological formations through intimate and dialogically honed acts of self-representation.

It is by tracing the tensions between and across experiences of maternity, listening to desires and pleasures voiced in defiance of domestication and normalization that maternal views from “elsewhere” emerge. What becomes striking are a myriad of mothering languages and relations exceeding the boundaries of (hetero)normalization articulated against ideological definitions. So that while dominant codes and categories of motherhood deny women powers and pleasures of desire, experiential representations of mothering can be understood as eliciting sexual contradictions. In Shari Stone-

Mediatore's words, "narratives that reckon with these tensions do not report spontaneous consciousness but create images and narrative forms for rearticulating experience in such a way that the narrated images enable the writer to confront those experienced tensions more constructively" (1998: 128). According to this view, experience becomes a locus of a participatory questioning and rewriting rather than the discovery and expression of self-evident individual truths. Such experiential languages do not stabilize subjectivity but activate and explore the conditions and contours of sensual living, enabling a coexistence and interplay of relations institutionally separated or glossed over. They provide a basis for theorizing mothering as enacted, imagined and represented by subjects of experience in realms of family, work, love, sexuality and politics, undercutting mutually exclusive and prescriptive maternal identities by paying attention to multifaceted speech acts.

De Lauretis (1994) explores how experiential knowledges are capable of inciting inter(con)textualizations, making it possible to think about subjugated relations of mothering across times and places. This allows for understandings of individual idiosyncrasies poised towards new communal meanings in their invitation to include alternative languages of personal and political maternal expressions. Such possibilities mark an exciting departure point for rereading *Of Woman Born*, as a semiosis of experience that displays its historical contingency and embodied vulnerability as part of broader feminist conversations and coalitions. I become attuned to my fascination with the tellings of a feminist mother whose narratives encompass much more than a repressive foundation against which I might define my queer daughterly differences. On the contrary, they transmit unruly passionate tendencies I have claimed as a driving force of my desire for alternative connections. That maternal experiential knowledges might offer surprises, transgress expectations of reproductive sameness, is a message that compels me to read *Of Woman Born* by understanding what I bring to this text—what I notice, elide, select and resist—as part of how I evaluate what is already there in glimpsing an elsewhere.

### **Adrienne Rich's dialogical and reflexive semiosis of maternal experience**

I am intrigued by the way *Of Woman Born* brings together manifold maternal discourses which are not assimilated into a closed system of thought but are creatively and reflexively articulated by Adrienne Rich. This is marvelously in keeping with contemporary innovations such as Della Pollack's attempts to "invite the reader into a double-play: into performing the book and the stories it conveys inside out, participating in the conversational dynamics the book replays and taking them again, into a heightened, amplified, expanding alchemy of birth/body stories" (1999: 23). Similarly, Rich transcribes her own experiential stories in relation with those of others, exploring various aspects of mothering as a "continually changing dialogue." Rather than focus on the metanarrative dimensions of Rich's argument I am more interested in her

engagement in a collaborative interpretive process which attempts to read a self mediated through shared and contested historical texts and institutions. Rich's method and style works to interplay commonalities and differences between maternal subjects alongside the often discordant perspectives of daughters. And as a daughter unsure of how I fit into this process, I feel encouraged by an intermingling of voices throughout Rich's book, allowing doubts and uncertainties to coincide with more confident exegesis. Rich's text is open to multiple narratives and perspectives that enable me to enter this text as a curious and questioning reader. In a speech given on the subject of motherhood a year after *Of Woman Born* was published, Rich asserts:

I begin tonight by urging each of you to take responsibility for the voicing of her experience, to take seriously the work of listening to each other and the work of speaking, whether in private dialogue or in larger groups. In order to change what is, we need to give speech to what has been, to imagine together what might be. (1979: 260)

Rich calls for a reflexive experiential process that situates the trials of a self attempting to participate along with others in constructing new maternal languages—"the words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking" (1986b: 24-25). Some of the most important features of Rich's own attempts to overcome years of silence are her autobiographical narratives which not only work to personalize mothering, but textually perform the social and affective complexity of her subjectivity in contradistinction to attempts to rationalize and homogenize motherhood. The very effort of remembering her maternal experiences confronts historical forces pressuring her to forget:

When I try to return to the body of the young woman of twenty-six, pregnant of the first time, who fled from the physical knowledge of her pregnancy and at the same time from her intellect and vocation, I realize that I was effectively alienated from my real spirit by the institution—not the fact of—motherhood. (1986b: 39)

While Rich appeals to a concretely lived realm of motherhood set against coercive institutional powers, her writings enact the impossibility of stability, transparency and objectivity. There is no easy or direct process of return back through Rich's experiences as a young mother, as gaps and opacity in her memory/body/speech work to fragment primary autobiographical texts read by Rich as symptoms of her psychic dissociation and social alienation as a mother. Rich opens *Of Woman Born* with a flood of impressions and story lines linked loosely through journal writings quoted as a way of unpacking an intensity of feelings lived at the time she was mothering small children:

April 1965

Anger, weariness, demoralization. Sudden bouts of weeping a sense of insufficiency to the moment and to eternity....

Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relations, between e.g. my rejection and anger [my eldest child], my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean its broadest significance, not merely physical desire)—an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately—Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs. (1986b: 30)

Writing ten years later, Rich (1986b) becomes able to mobilize such instances of emotional paralysis through a cultural and political analysis of her “mesh of relations” without discounting the rawness and singularity of her affective responses in the past. She works to recontextualize them in ways that facilitate a critical process of revision. In this way she transfers maternal experience into acts of rewriting with an awareness of social and cultural determinations of her psychic crisis and her counterdiscursive revelations of maternal angers, habits and perceptions. Experience becomes an unfinalizable activity of naming a sensuous, socially situated and mediated self across time, enabling Rich to begin to signify her complexities and changes simultaneously as daughter and maternal subject.

Whereas dominant cultural forces are seen to perpetuate “visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity” (1986b: 23), Rich’s own attempt to graph disparate memories, incidents and feelings reveals the limitations of prescriptive identities, displaying highly volatile and conflictual relations of identification and disidentification. Allowing for temporally dynamic self-definitions, Rich approaches motherhood as “only a point in the process” (1986b: 182). Personal testimony is elaborated as part of an interconnected web of events and consciousness that comprise maternal experiences. Rich does not take up a single and decidable authorial identity, but moves between shifting, and at times conflicting, positions of address as a mother, daughter, feminist, poet, lesbian. Undermining naturalizing absolute values of maternal sacrifice and norms of “goodness,” Rich attempts to actively rewrite her own maternal self in the stream of her changing political and poetic positions.

Rejecting “the-personal-for-its-own-sake,” which characterizes liberal individualism and conventional autobiographical genres, while also refusing to become an “absentee author” (1986b: x) whose voice is obscured by detached speculations, Rich invokes a self in the flux of living, thinking, writing. She struggles to think through the importance of maternal subjectivity while at the same time questioning hegemonic notions of subjectivity premised on the denial of bodily relations and erotic feminine alterity. Her text interweaves perspectives as daughter and mother, she destabilizes knowledges which seek to unify and erase contradictions within and between women. But while autobiography lends individual uniqueness to Rich’s writing, she is careful to

mark the partiality and limits of her words in relation to the development of collective knowledges:

I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world.... I am keenly aware that any writer has a certain false and arbitrary power. It is her version, after all, that the reading is reading at this moment, while the accounts of others—including the dead—many go untold.

This is in some ways a vulnerable book. I have invaded various professional domains, broken various taboos. I have used the scholarship available, without pretending to make myself into a specialist. In doing so the question, *But what was it like for women?* was always in my mind. (1986b: 16)

Rich suggests a precarious and tentative activity of narration. Speaking of her book as “tangled with parts of my life” and experiences “the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I have ever traveled, a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings,” Rich indicates the difficulties of self-naming. This cautions against closures and exclusions occurring throughout *Of Woman Born*, signaling the impossibility of representing mothering as a coherent entity. In the midst of her trials and errors of naming, Rich inaugurates exchanges with other women so as to promote efforts in which “others like her, with different training, background, and tools, are putting together other parts of this immense half-buried mosaic in the shape of a woman’s face” (1986b:17). The constructive social activity of giving shape to “woman’s face” becomes a motif for theorizing experience. Embodiment gets depicted as an inventive realm of perception and cognition through which to connect and communicate with others. Writing of the maternal body as a relational movement between self and others, Rich refuses passive and solipsistic reductions of corporeality for connected empathic engagements. Against mythologies that romanticize a symbiotic unity between mother and child, Rich writes of her fierce desires to move beyond exclusive relations with her children, writing that a mother “needs to struggle from that one-to-one intensity into new realization, or reaffirmation, of her being-unto herself” (1986b: 36).

While mothering offers chances for physical pleasures and spiritual awakenings, they are shown to be overlaid with feelings of guilt and frustration under the pressure of normative ideals of the self-sufficiency and plenitude of the dyad. This is the crux of Rich’s ambivalence: living the “physical, fleshly changes” that bring about self awareness along with institutional “self-discipline and self-cauterization, those qualities which are supposed to be ‘innate’ in us: patience, self-sacrifice, the willingness to repeat endlessly the small, routine chores” (1986b: 37). Rich explores the psychic pain this produces in

relation to her own internalization of disciplinary maternal ideologies against the disruptive force of her desires. Speaking about maternal sexuality, incited and inhibited by cultural fantasies, taboos and fears, Rich does not replace or reverse patriarchal notions of maternal irrationality and passivity with a rationally willed subjectivity. Instead, she struggles to think through the vicissitudes of her psychosexuality: "I remember thinking I would never dream again, (the unconscious of a young mother—where does it entrust its messages, when dream-sleep is denied her for years?)" (31-32). In response, she attempts to recollect dissonant desires, exploring them within her poetic writings where she redefines a feminine-maternal imaginary in constant flux. Rich never fully identifies with hegemonic maternal scenarios, actively writing through her experiences of rupture and disidentification—"for me, poetry is where I lived as no-one's mother." (31)

Reproductive relations are theorized by Rich in conjunction with the sexual body, interrelating and complicating heteronormative maternal ideals. Unlike many radical feminist denunciations of motherhood as irredeemable for women's sexual emancipation, Rich presents a much more unsettling questioning of dichotomies between maternal and non-maternal subjects claiming that "the childless woman' and the 'mother' are a false polarity, which serve the institutions of both motherhood and heterosexuality. There are no such simple categories" (1986b: 250). "These polarizations imply a failure of imagination" (251). Although *Of Woman Born* only begins to acknowledge interlocking class and racial hierarchies which structure maternal sexualities, this text gestures to make links between heterosexism, racism and sexism that reinforce processes of "doubling thinking" between the female body as "impure, corrupt ... dangerous," or else "beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual" (1986b: 34). Against these totalizing assumptions Rich sketches the living ambiguities of maternal desires deprived of rational symbolic currency and requiring the subterfuges of marginal experiential texts. She affirmatively invokes those abjected from mythological realms of "goodness" to speak maternal desires for and about themselves.

Rich's interest in motherhood as an ongoing corporeal relational process—"We are neither inner nor outer constructed; our skin is alive with signals, our lives and our deaths are inseparable from the release or blockage of our thinking bodies" (1986b: 284). Such a process propels dissonant interpretations which throw into question her previous claims to an unmediated female commonality: "we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (1986b: 40). Rich actively challenges representations of the body as a uniform and passive material substance, encouraging responsive and situated languages which contend with psychic alterity and social contingencies. She argues for ethico-political choice and embodied agency, calling for the production of "self-knowledge to move from a centuries old 'endurance of suffering' to a new active being" (1986b: 129). This emphasis on embodied acts of thinking and politi-

cization is extended in Rich's later writings in which she becomes more and more conscious of the partiality of her location as a feminist writer and the need to turn from declarations of "the body" toward inscriptions of "my body":

To write "my body" plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me. Bones well nourished from the placenta; the teeth of a middle-class person seen by the dentist twice a year from childhood. White skin, marked and scarred by three pregnancies, and elected sterilization, progressive arthritis, four joint operations, calcium deposits, no rapes, no abortions, long hours at a typewriter—my own, not in a typing pool—and so forth. To say "the body" lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say "body" reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions. (Rich, 1986b: 215)

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich names her experiences as part of a critical interpretive process activating memory and speech by "thinking through the body" which is part of her larger understanding of "thinking as an active, fluid, expanding process; intellection ... knowing are recapitulations of past processes" (1986b: 284). Rich writes her desiring experiential body as a site of revision and improvisation, as a sensuous mode of interpretation, a performative enactment of a maternal/daughterly self putting out into the world gestures and words that make up new ways of being and thinking. This is not to deny that Rich sometimes diminishes the innovative force of her text by appealing to a unifying category of woman focused around "female biology—the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from the clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body" (1986b: 39). Yet there are countervailing signs of sex/gender instability that catch my attention as a queer daughter, especially those dialogical instances when Rich incites multivalent responses rather than pinning down preconceived truths.

In her introduction written ten years after the initial publication of *Of Woman Born*, Rich offers a criticism of her earlier lack of engagement with the writings by women of color, non-western histories of motherhood, and lesbian mother discourses, confronting powers of exclusion and privilege within white feminist thinking. Emphasizing her rejection of the concept of "patriarchy-as-catchall" Rich insists that "to view patriarchy as a pure product, unrelated to economic or racial oppression, seems to me today to skew the lines of vision along which we proceed to act" (1986b: xxiv), Rich questions her own text and supplements it with new readings that go further in elaborating political contexts of crisis and conflicts of mothering, attending to research, activism and writings by those who have followed her as a way of moving forward without relinquishing the value of past knowledges. Rich's

contributions as a feminist mother to others needs to be appreciated not as a static symbolic origin but as part of a mobile exchange that calls forth critical insights and alterations. Rich's later writings such as her essay "Notes toward a Politics of Location," assert the importance of rejecting monolithic visions of a feminist "we" for self-conscious investigations into the locatedness of the "I" as a place from which to launch experiential discourses as a basis for collective affiliations.

### **Notes towards a politics of queer-feminist-maternal locations**

My reading of Adrienne Rich is mediated through the specific locations, intellectual investments and desires of a queer daughter, attentive to maternal knowledges constructed through struggle, questioning and transformation. Listening for something besides heteronormative reproductions of motherhood, I seek out those moments within Rich's writing that evoke "gender trouble," detailing ambivalent discourses that refuse to be reduced to biological and socially normalizing powers. Running throughout *Of Woman Born* are dialogically complex subjective languages at thresholds of body and mind, self and others, that dislocate patriarchal projections of maternity but do not solidify a single feminist alternative. Through the vulnerable relational openness of Rich's text it becomes possible to enter at an oblique angle as a feminist shaped through postmodern uncertainties without forgetting or foreclosing maternal legacies. An intriguing space opens up that defies polarities separating cultural feminism and queer readings, unfolding shared personal interests and political projects. This is not to deny ongoing tensions and historical differences, but to learn to keep alive traces of subversive embodiment and speech in Rich's writings on maternal experience rather than simplify and dismiss them as essentialist, as a conventional backdrop against which daughters name themselves as outlaws. Such reactive formulations indicate failures of imagination and generosity towards intergenerational learning and innovation, stopping short of recognizing just how mutually implicated mothers and daughters are in sustaining and disrupting oppressive systems.

It is up to queer postmodern readers to respond with a respectful curiosity that does not flee the memory of maternal histories for the sake of decontextual transgressions. By returning to Rich's grounded and intimate explorations of mothering, the body and its speech acts are made specific, challenging binary symbolic institutions and codes that split apart maternity and desire. It is the restless dialogical activity of Rich's self-representation that poses a challenge to queer interlocutors to account for how, when and why maternal subjects are erased and marginalized in the discursive frenzy to subvert and pluralize gender identities. Through textual enactments of experience as a relationally responsible and reflexive process, *Of Woman Born* calls forth future engagements from the past into the now of feminist inquiry. Through playful recollections of maternal narratives, an awareness and bridging of differences becomes possible which neither fixates on what has been nor leaps forward in defiance of the

personal and cultural legacies of *woman born*.

## References

- Bergstrom, Janet and Mary Ann Doane. 1990. "The Spectatrix." *Special Issue of Camera Obscura* 20-21: 5-27.
- Creet, Julia. 1991. "Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy." *differences* 3 (Summer): 135-159.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. 1984. *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. 1987. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. 1994. *The Practice of Love*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.
- Martin, Bidy. 1994. "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias." *Diacritics* 24 (2/3) (Summer): 104-121.
- Phelan, Shane. 1994. *Getting Specific*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Pollock, Della. 1999. *Telling Bodies: Performing Birth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1979. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1986a. *Blood, Bread and Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1986b. *Of Woman Born*. New York: Norton.
- Sedgwick, Eve. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stone-Mediatore, Shari. 1998. "Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of 'Experience'." *Hypatia* 13 (2) (Spring): 116-133.
- Wilton, Tamsin. 1997. *Engendering AIDS: Deconstructing Sex, Text and Epidemic*. London: Sage.