

# Between the Baby and the Bathwater

## *Some Thoughts on a Mother-Centred Theory and Practice of Feminist Mothering*

*Opening with a reference to the Goddess Demeter, herstory's most celebrated empowered mother, the article provides an overview of current feminist thought on empowered mothering. The article goes on to argue that as feminist literature on motherhood has allowed for new progressive styles of childrearing and generated maternal activism, it has not gone far enough in its attempts to transform motherhood for the mother herself, to realize fully the maternal power and fury promised in the Demeter archetype. More specifically, the paper contends that current thinking on feminist mothering, in its emphasis upon child-rearing and in its strategy of rationalization, fails to develop a revolutionary model of mothering that takes as its aim and focus the empowerment of mothers. The paper asks that we consider a more radical and militant politic that is, in the style of the Demeter archetype, more discordant, direct, and defiant in our critique of patriarchal motherhood. The aim of this paper is to alert readers to what I see as a worrisome trend in contemporary writing on feminist mothering and to appeal for a more mother-centred mode of feminist mothering.*

In 2005 *The Association for Research on Mothering* launched a publishing division, Demeter Press, the first feminist press to publish books on and about motherhood. As founder of *ARM* and Demeter Press, I authored the first book for this new publishing initiative.<sup>1</sup> This book, entitled *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering* (O'Reilly, 2006), explores, what most agree, is the central issue in motherhood studies today, namely the oppressive and the empowering aspects of maternity, and the complex relationship between the two. While feminist research on motherhood has focused on many topics over the last 15 years—work, family, sexuality, cultural differences, public policy, images of motherhood, to name

but a few—these studies and reflections have been informed and shaped by larger questions: namely, how do we challenge patriarchal motherhood? How do we create feminist mothering? And, finally, how are the two aims interconnected?<sup>2</sup> *Rocking the Cradle* explores these central questions by way of a section on motherhood and another on mothering. The first section is concerned with identifying, interrupting, and deconstructing the patriarchal discourse of motherhood while the second examines the formulation and articulation of a counter maternal narrative, one that redefines mothering as an empowered and empowering practice. In its concern with imagining and implementing a empowered theory/practice of mothering, *Rocking* serves as appropriate inaugural text to celebrate and commemorate ARM's new publishing division because the Goddess Demeter, for whom the press is named, was herself an empowered and resistant mother.

Adrienne Rich (1986) in *Of Woman Born* interprets the Demeter/Persephone myth, particularly as it was enacted in the Eleusinian mysteries, as representing every daughters' "longing for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death" (240). As well, the myth, Rich continues, bespeaks "every mother's [longing] for the power of Demeter [and] the efficacy of her anger..." (240, emphasis added). In patriarchal culture where there are so few examples, in either life or literature, of empowered mothering, Demeter's triumphant resistance serves as a model for the possibility of mothering first imagined by Rich in *Of Woman Born*. A central aim of *Rocking the Cradle*, published in 2006, the thirtieth anniversary of *Of Woman Born*, is to, likewise, envision and achieve a feminist model of mothering, in both theory and practice. *Rocking*, concerned as it is with empowered mothering, seemed like a suitable text to launch a press named after herstory's most celebrated empowered mother, the Goddess Demeter. However, as I re-read *Rocking the Cradle* in preparation for the book's publication, I reflected upon the triumphs and tribulations that I and other scholars have experienced in our attempts to imagine and implement a truly feminist theory/practice of mothering. In particular, I began to question whether my research and that of feminist scholarship on motherhood more generally, has truly and fully actualized the potential of the Demeter archetype, and more specifically "her power and the efficacy of her anger." I want to suggest that while the new feminist literature on motherhood has allowed for new progressive styles of childrearing and generated maternal activism, it has not gone far enough in its attempts to transform motherhood *for the mother herself*, to realize fully the maternal power and fury promised in the Demeter archetype.

In her book *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*, Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1997) argues that "the story of feminists thinking about motherhood since the early 1960s is told as a drama in three acts: repudiation, recuperation, and, in the latest and most difficult stage to conceptualize, an emerging critique of recuperation that coexists with ongoing efforts to deploy recuperative strategies" (5). I want to argue, using Hansen's meta-

phor, that as feminist theory moves from a repudiation of patriarchal motherhood to a recuperation of motherhood (i.e., the formation of feminist mothering) we must not lose sight of what must be the primary and central aim of our challenge to patriarchal motherhood, namely the empowerment of mothers. In other words, as repudiation and recuperation define the first two acts of the feminist resistance to motherhood, the final act must be expressed more specifically as a revolution of motherhood for mothers themselves. As of late, we have lost this focus and our tone has become tame and timid and our manner cautious and circuitous. Instead of demanding change for mothers, we are now requesting them on behalf of children.

This paper asks that we problematize this rhetoric of rationalization and consider a more radical and militant politic that is, in the style of the Demeter archetype, more discordant, direct, and defiant in our critique of patriarchal motherhood. More specifically, the paper will argue that current thinking on feminist mothering, in its emphasis upon childrearing and in its strategy of justification, fails to develop a revolutionary model of mothering that takes as its aim and focus the empowerment of *mothers*. However, the intent of this article is not to blueprint a model of mother-centred empowered mothering—this will be the subject of a future paper—but rather to alert readers to what I see as a worrisome trend in contemporary writing on feminist mothering and to appeal for a more mother-centred mode of feminist mothering.

In *Of Woman Born* Rich distinguishes “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (1986: 13, emphasis in original). The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women. In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power.

It has long been recognized among scholars of motherhood that Rich’s distinction between mothering and motherhood was what enabled feminists to recognize that motherhood is not naturally, necessarily or inevitably oppressive, a view held by some second-wave feminists. Rather, mothering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change if, to use Rich’s word’s, women became “outlaws from the institution of motherhood.” However, in *Of Woman Born*, however, there is little discussion of mothering or how its potentiality may be realized. The notable exception is the brief reference Rich made to her summer holiday in Vermont when her husband was away and she and her sons lived “as conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood” (1986: 195). However, while mothering is not described or theorized in *Of Woman Born*, the text, in

distinguishing mothering from motherhood and in identifying the potential empowerment of mothering, makes possible a feminist theory and practice of mothering.

However, as Fiona Green (2004) notes, still missing from discussions on motherhood is “Rich’s monumental contention that even when restrained by patriarchy, motherhood can be a site of empowerment and political activism” (31). A review of motherhood literature reveals that only two books have been published specifically on the topic of feminist mothering: the edited collection *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering* (Reddy, Roth and Sheldon, 1994) and Tuula Gordon’s book, *Feminist Mothers* (1990), books now ten-plus years old.<sup>3</sup> This omission, I found puzzling for several reasons. Feminist scholarship on motherhood is now an established field. Why, I wondered, is the topic of feminist mothering not explored in scholarship that is explicitly about feminism and motherhood. As well, feminist mothering is an evident example of empowered mothering and so provides a promising alternative to the oppressive institution of patriarchal motherhood, first theorized by Rich and critiqued by subsequent motherhood scholars.

Feminist mothering, whether it be termed resistant, courageous, hip or rebellious, operates as a counter narrative of motherhood. It seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is *empowering* to women. A review of the scholarship reveals two central themes in feminist mothering literature: anti-sexist childrearing and maternal activism. Both perspectives emphasize maternal power and ascribe agency to mothers and value to motherwork. As a consequence, mothering in feminist theory and practice, becomes reconfigured as a social act. While patriarchal motherhood defines motherwork as solely privatized care undertaken in the domestic sphere, feminist mothering regards such as explicitly and profoundly political and public.

This political-social dimension of mothering is manifested in two ways. The first occurs in the home wherein these mothers bring about social change through the anti-sexist childrearing of children.<sup>4</sup> Termed “A Politics of the Heart” as I do, or “Home is where the Revolution is” as Cecelie Berry (1999) does, this perspective regards the motherwork undertaken in the private sphere as having social consequence and political significance. The second way that mothering, in feminist practice, becomes a public act is through maternal activism. Motherhood, in Western culture, is most often seen as a private, and more specifically an apolitical enterprise. In contrast, feminist mothers understand motherwork to have social and political import. For many feminist mothers, their commitment to both feminism and to children becomes expressed as maternal activism. Mothers, through maternal activism, use their position as mothers to lobby for social and political change, usually for and on behalf of children. Central to the feminist challenge to patriarchal motherhood is this redefinition of motherwork as a political act, undertaken at home and in the world at large.

Anti-sexist childrearing and maternal activism are significant and essential tasks of feminist mothering. However, I want to suggest that maternal activism on behalf of children and feminist childrearing for children, does not in any real manner address the needs of mothers. More specifically, I would argue that in defining feminist mothering in this manner we have, consciously or otherwise, discounted and disregarded what must be the first and primary aim of feminist mothering; namely the empowerment of mothers. Feminist scholarship has documented well how and why patriarchal motherhood is oppressive to mothers; however when this same scholarship seeks to imagine a feminist mode of mothering the focus inexplicably shifts from the mother to children (anti-sexist childrearing) and/or to a world apart from the mother (maternal activism). In its first stage, a repudiation of patriarchal motherhood, the mother, and her discontent, was our foremost concern; however in the second stage, recuperation, as we seek to re-conceive and reclaim mothering, the mother, while still crucial, frequently becomes instrumental to larger and seemingly more important objectives of social change. In other words, mothers are accorded agency to affect social change through childrearing or activism but little attention is paid to what this agency does or means for the mother herself in the context of *her own life*.

Equally troubling is the way much of this literature justifies and rationalizes the reasons for empowering mothers. Too often, the demand to empower mothers is recast as a strategy for more effective parenting. Erika Horwitz, in her article, “Resistance as a Site of Empowerment: The Journey Away from Maternal Sacrifice” (2004) argues, for example, that empowered mothering is characterized by women insisting on “the importance of mothers meeting their own needs” and the realization that “being a mother does not fulfill all of women’s needs.” However, in most instances, the mothers’ demands for agency and autonomy are repositioned as requirements of the children. One woman in Horwitz’s study remarked that “If I was going to love that baby, have any quality of time with that baby, I had to get away from that baby. I had to meet my own needs” (48) Another woman explained that she resisted patriarchal motherhood, “to make me a better mother for my children” (52).

In *A Potent Spell: Mother Love and the Power of Fear*, Janna Malamud Smith (2003) does reference the myth of Demeter and Persephone but does so to argue that children are best served by empowered mothers. Demeter, Smith argues “is able to save her daughter because she is a powerful goddess who can make winter permanent and destroy humankind” (59). “Demeter,” she continues, “possesses the very qualities that Mothers so often have lacked—adequate resources and strength to protect their children, particularly daughters” (59). Therefore, and contrary to patriarchal, or more generally accepted, wisdom what a child needs most in the world, Smith argues, “is a *free and happy* mother” (167, emphasis added). Ann Crittenden, who is cited by Smith, elaborates further: “Studies conducted on five continents have found that children are distinctly better off when the mother possesses enough income and authority

in the family to make investing in children a priority" (120). "The emergence of women as independent economic actors," Crittenden continues, "is not depriving children of vital support; it is giving them more powerful defenders. Depriving mothers of an income and influence of their own, is harmful to children and a recipe for economic backwardness" (130). To return to the story of Demeter: "It is only because Demeter has autonomy and independent resources," as Smith explains, "that she can protect Persephone" (241). Conversely, "when a culture devalues and enslaves the mother, she can [not] be like Demeter and protect her daughter" (244).

Re-reading my own work, I recognize that I too have been complicit in this questionable tactic of rationalization and justification. In both theory and practice, my demands for empowered mothering are defined and defended as necessary and essential *for children*. Like much of feminist scholarship on motherhood my campaign for empowered mothering centred upon how this would benefit children. In *Mother Outlaws* (O'Reilly, 2004b) I argued that empowered mothers are more effective mothers. Most notably, I used the metaphor of a airplane safety procedure to illustrate this argument. Anyone who has been in a plane knows the routine if oxygen masks are required: put on your mask and then assist children with theirs. This instruction initially seems to defy common sense; children should be helped first. However, the instruction recognizes that parents must be masked first, because only then are they able to provide real and continued assistance to the child: unmasked they run the risk of becoming disoriented, ill or unconscious due to lack of oxygen and then of course would be of no use to the child. This instruction, I argued, serves as a suitable metaphor for empowered mothering; mothers, empowered, are able to better care for and protect their children.

Moreover, in my writings on Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (O'Reilly, 2004a) I argued that Rich was one of the first feminist writers to call for anti-sexist childrearing and women-centred practices of mothering.<sup>5</sup> I go on to explore how the two, in Rich's view, are intrinsically linked in so far as the goal of anti-sexist childrearing depends upon the abolition of patriarchal motherhood and the achievement of feminist mothering. Anti-sexist childrearing—a challenge to traditional practices of gender socialization for both daughters and sons—Rich argues, depends upon motherhood itself being changed. Only when mothering becoming a site of power for women is feminist childrearing made possible. In other words, I see empowered mothering as a means to an end; rather than an end in and of itself.

While I do believe that empowered mothers are more effective mothers and that anti-sexist childrearing and maternal activism are worthwhile aims, I still wonder and worry why the rhetoric of rationalization has become the strategy of choice among feminist activists and scholars today and why our campaigns for social change centre on children, and not ourselves as mothers. Why can we not simply demand that motherhood be made better for mothers themselves? Why are our demands for maternity leaves, flex-time, greater

involvement of partners in the home etc. always couched and explained as being for and about the children? Why are mothers' demands for more time, money, support and validation only responded to when they are seen as benefiting children? I realize that this rhetoric is often employed strategically by feminists to make gains for mothers that otherwise would not be possible in a patriarchal culture. Patriarchal culture will accord mothers resources if they use them on behalf children; i.e., the mother can take time for herself if this makes her a better mother for her children. While I appreciate the utility of this tactic, it still deeply troubles me. Such a strategy will certainly backfire. Moreover, and most importantly, real change for mothers can not be achieved if such is always defined as for, and about children. While I am not suggesting that we do away with a strategy that has proven effective, I do believe that we must, likewise, lobby for and on behalf of mothers; to secure and guard a place for mothers between the proverbial baby and the bathwater. Only as an empowered and enraged Demeter, can we achieve a truly transformative and transgressive feminist theory and practice of mothering.

<sup>1</sup>Future titles to be published by Demeter Press include: a book on Aboriginal mothering (Fall 2006); *White Ink*, a collection of motherhood poetry (Spring 2007); and a Motherhood Reader (Spring 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Please visit The *Association for Research on Mothering* (ARM) website [www.yorku.ca/crm](http://www.yorku.ca/crm) for a listing of the various topics explored by maternal scholars. ARM, founded in 1998 and now with more than 500 members worldwide, is the first international feminist organization devoted specifically to the topic of mothering-motherhood. ARM hosts two international conferences a year and publishes *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, bi-annually. For more information please visit the ARM website.

<sup>3</sup>Two of my recent books have sections on feminist mothering. *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (2004a) and *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (2004b). A few books have looked at the topic of being a daughter of a feminist; see in particular Rose L. Glickman's *Daughters of Feminists* (1993) and Christina Luper Baker and Christina Baker Kline, *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism* (1996). As well, several books have examined the relationship between feminism and motherhood. For two important works on this topic, see Laura Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacy of the Sixties* (1996) and Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers, *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analysis and Personal Narratives* (2001).

<sup>4</sup>In my scholarship on African American motherhood I argue how, in the instance of African American mothers, the political-social dimension of motherwork assumes as its central aim the empowerment of black children. Please see my book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004c).

<sup>5</sup>Please see my edited volume, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (2004a).

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