

Andrea O'Reilly, ed. *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's "Of Woman Born."* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. 251pp.

Reviewed by Monika Lee

This book is a thought-provoking array of disparate though wide-ranging essays, some of which are only tangentially connected to Adrienne Rich's seminal work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). The strength of the volume, however, lies in the diversity of perspectives and disciplines addressed: the fields of sociology, law, feminist theory, literary criticism, sexual politics, poststructuralist theory, and autobiography are all brought to bear on the discussion. Unfortunately, the reader is often left wishing for more thematic consistency or focus on the subject of the collection. The volume's introduction, for instance, might have established some of the lines of Rich's book's huge influence on culture and critical thought. Nonetheless, O'Reilly's introduction is readable and provides a comprehensive overview of the terminology of motherhood/mothering that has emerged from the legacy of Adrienne Rich's "ovarian" text. Insofar as O'Reilly documents her emotional and visceral response to *Of Woman Born*, the introduction is quite compelling; her reactions of outrage and awakening are clearly more than individual responses for they have occurred in many of Rich's readers. O'Reilly also provides the requisite preview of the essays which constitute the rest of the book.

Even essays little concerned with Adrienne Rich are well worth reading. Margaret Morganroth Gullette's, "The Broken Shovel: Looking Back at Postmaternity at Co-Parenting," has little overt connection to Rich, but is a well-written and moving retrospective account of feminist co-parenting. Similarly, Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke's essay stands out as nuanced and provocative, although it too treats *Of Woman Born* only tangentially. Watson-Franke

provides an anthropological overview of the few extant matrilineal societies in the world today and the ways in which these societies are empowering of mothering.

The collection is divided into three parts with part one, “Motherhood as Institution: Maternal Power and Maternal Outrage,” focusing on the political implications of state reproductive control. Diana Ginn’s essay offers a persuasive analysis of connections between Rich’s ideas and Canadian court decisions in 1997 and 1999 which help to protect women from the institutionalized patriarchal constraints of cultural mother-blame. Sarah E. Stevens critiques the dangerous schism between public and private that, in China, has reinforced patriarchy at the expense of maternal power. Emily Jeremiah’s essay on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* considers both the advantages and the limitations of Adrienne Rich’s thinking in relation to the racial and violent instances of mothering depicted in Toni Morrison’s novel about child murder.

Part two, “Mothering as Experience: Empowerment and Resistance,” takes up the bulk of the volume with seven essays, and draws attention to the many ways in which *Of Woman Born* has or can empower mothers. Dannabang Kuwabong’s feminist and matrilineal reading of Mojica’s play, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, provides a valuable corrective to Rich’s focus on European patriarchal constructions of history, but it does so with occasionally distracting stylistic and grammatical errors which more rigorous editing could easily have eliminated. Fiona Green’s essay on “Feminist Mothers” presents interesting anecdotal evidence of patterns of feminist mothering, albeit with some intellectually woolly identifications of patriarchy with every other form of social injustice. Karin Voth Harman’s “Immortality and Morality in Contemporary Reworkings of the Demeter/Persephone Myth” examines the explosion in literature dealing with the mythic mother/daughter pair as a collective response to Rich’s cry for the unwritten stories of mothers and daughters. Editor O’Reilly’s own

constructive essay on “Mothering against Motherhood” draws our attention to Rich’s unique role as the theorist of an integral connection between feminist child rearing and the emancipation of mothers and, by building on Rich’s argument, proposes actual strategies for achieving better results than mothers have achieved in the past. The best discussion in this section is Kate McCullough’s “Motherhood outside Institutionalized Heterosexuality”; it is well researched and well organized, and it integrates Rich’s work throughout its own argument that resistance to institutional motherhood is “a work-in-progress.” The specific question of the extent and nature of Rich’s influence is convincingly addressed here.

Part three, “Narrating Maternity: Writing as Mother,” is the strongest section of the book with three of its best essays: D’Arcy Randall’s reading of *Of Woman Born* as a text of literary criticism, Jeanette E. Riley’s fine overview of Rich’s poetry, and Ann Keniston’s theoretical analysis of the authenticity and candour in the “prose articulation of a lyric impulse,” *Of Woman Born*. Riley’s “A ‘Sense of Drift’: Adrienne Rich’s Emergence from Mother to Poet” is a model of rigour and thoroughness with respect to Rich’s actual historical impact and provides an excellent summary of Rich’s poetic development while integrating *Of Woman Born* into her discussion. Keniston in “Beginning with ‘I’: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*” picks up Rich’s and O’Reilly’s autobiographical threads to analyze the element of memoir in Rich’s text. Keniston’s is one of the best essays in the collection, and its conscientious reading of Rich through balanced and sophisticated treatments of feminism, autobiography, and theory is most welcome and, because it raises questions for further consideration, such as feminism’s own essentializing tendencies, a suitable finale to a comprehensive volume.