

FROM MOTHERHOOD
TO MOTHERING

*The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's
Of Woman Born*

edited by

ANDREA O'REILLY

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
ALBANY

© 2004 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address
State University of New York Press
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production by Marilyn P. Semerad
Marketing by Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

From motherhood to mothering : the legacy of Adrienne Rich's *Of woman born* / edited by
Andrea O'Reilly.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-6287-0 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-6288-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Rich, Adrienne Cecile. *Of woman born*. 2. Motherhood. 3. Feminist theory. 4.
Motherhood in literature. I. O'Reilly, Andrea, 1961-

HQ759.F748 2004
306.8743—dc22

To Jesse, Erin, and Casey
For our journey from motherhood to mothering

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

2004041741

- Kligman, Gail. *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Censured's Romania*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.
- Kwok, D. W. Y. *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1965.
- Milwertz, Cecilia Nathansen. *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997.
- Morris, Andrus. "Cultivating the National Body: A History of Physical Culture in Republican China." Diss. U of California, San Diego, 1998.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976.
- Robinson, Jean C. "Of Women and Washing Machines: Employment, Housework, and the Reproduction of Motherhood in Socialist China." *China Quarterly* 101 (March 1985):32-57.
- Stevens, Sarah E. "Making Female Sexuality in Republican China: Women's Bodies in the Discourses of Hygiene, Literature, and Education." Diss. Indiana U, 2001.
- Wasserstrom, Jeffrey. "Resistance to the One-Child Family." *Modern China* 10.3 (July 1984):345-374.
- _____. *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991.
- Weiss, Sheila Francis. "The Race Hygiene Movement in Germany." *Oriens* second series, 3.193-236 (1987).
- Yun, Qin. "Hygiene during pregnancy and fetal education (*Renshenzhongde weishengyu taijiao*)." *Far Eastern Miscellany (Dongfang zazhi)* 34.7 (1937):257-260.
- Zhu, Wenyin. "Fetal education and eugenics (*Taijiao yu youshengxue*)." *The Ladies' Journal (Funü zazhi)* 17.8 (1931):11-19.

Murderous Mothers

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and *Toni Morrison's Beloved*

THREE

EMILY JEREMIAH

THE FIGURE OF THE murderous mother is profoundly disquieting. If a culture rests upon the assumption of women's innate passivity and selflessness, it must be unsettled by the assertion that this is not necessarily so. Myths and tales of mothers who kill their children can thus be seen as repositories for anxieties that are perhaps predominantly, but by no means exclusively, masculine. In feminist terms, such narratives are no less unnerving, but they may also be instructive, offering as they do valuable insights into the constraints that have historically been placed on mothers and into the desperation of individual women subjected to those constraints. In addition, as we will see, they raise the complex questions of choice, power, and agency, terms that will be discussed in the course of this chapter.

The notion of mothering as an ambivalent, even hostile undertaking has been a significant focus of recent feminist thinking about maternity. Such thinking owes an important debt to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, a groundbreaking¹ fusion of personal reflection on maternal experience and scholarly examination of what Rich terms the "institution" of motherhood, a body of practices and assumptions governing maternity, which Rich views as pernicious. Maternal hostility and violence are emphasized in Rich's account, an aspect of her text that she defends against criticism in a later introduction (1997:26-27, my pagination).² According to Rich, mothers are not naturally

or exclusively loving, and to perpetuate this view serves no useful feminist aim. As well as lending weight to traditional essentialist assumptions regarding women as docile and affectionate, such a gesture may also serve to obscure or romanticize what Rich perceives as their victimization. In Rich's view, "oppression is not the mother of virtue" (1997, 27, my pagination); it can, instead, bear violence and death.

This chapter is concerned to analyze and develop these important insights, in particular by means of a comparison of Rich with the novelist Toni Morrison. I look first at Rich's conception of maternal ambivalence and violence, and link it to more recent feminist perspectives on the issues. As well as posing a challenge to a key strand of masculinist thought that holds mothers to be naturally and rightly selfless, such perspectives also raise the issues of choice and power, which are crucial as far as feminist conceptions of mothering are concerned. I deploy the ideas raised and anticipated by Rich in this regard to examine Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, and I argue that Morrison's novel both complements and extends Rich's thesis.

In *Of Woman Born*, the institution of motherhood is defined by Rich as violently oppressive, and as giving rise to violent behavior on the part of mothers. The "anger and tenderness" of Rich's own experience of mothering was not sanctioned by popular views of mothers, and she was made to feel monstrous and unnatural (1997, 32). Rich's maternal ambivalence is largely depicted as resulting from the conditions in which her mothering took place; she is concerned with mothering "as defined and restricted under patriarchy" (1997, 14, Rich's emphasis). And she suggests that outside of "patriarchy," defined here as a "familial-social, ideological, political system in which men [. . .] determine what part women shall or shall not play," mothering would be quite different, as her evocation of a summery idyll with her children is intended to demonstrate (Rich 1997, 57, 194–195). Rich views the institution of maternity as leading to "the mutilation and manipulation" of the mother-child relationship (1997, 33); while offering up harmonious images of mother and child, it in fact distorts and, in some cases, fatally disrupts the relationships between them.

There is a problem here. Rich's conception of mothering as corrupted by patriarchal constructions of femininity occasionally suggests that there is an authentic type of mothering behavior that lies outside of patriarchy; Rich thus falls into an essentialist trap common in radical feminist thought, which frequently takes refuge in ideas of a fixed female or maternal self. For in attributing maternal ambivalence to the influence of patriarchy, Rich is suggesting that mothering is actually and essentially loving. In addition, to posit a utopian space outside of patriarchy, and thereby suggest a potential untroubled maternal subjectivity, is to ignore the complex psychological interaction between subject and ideology that later feminist thought has been able to probe more subtly. Poststructuralist feminism, in particular, has offered

nanced and helpful theoretical models that, crucially, allow for the possibility of change on the part both of social institutions and of individual agents (see Weedon 1987).

However, Rich does offer a complex and subtle interpretation of the phenomenon of infanticide. She writes of the "numberless women" who in the past have killed children they knew they could not rear, identifying as a chief historical reason for infanticide Christianity's demonization of unmarried motherhood (1997, 258 and 259). Rich emphasizes the social, economic, and legal factors that have led to infanticide (1997, 260–262), being concerned to contextualize it. Her treatment of the story of Joanne Michulski, who murdered two of her eight children in 1974, shows this awareness of social and ideological context. The beginning of Rich's account focuses on the newspaper coverage of the murders, that is, on the reaction to and construction of the event (1997, 257). Rich views Michulski as a scapegoat, "the one around whom the darkness of maternity is allowed to swirl," on whom blame can be easily pinned (1997, 276). Her treatment of the case is careful; on the one hand, she presents Michulski as a victim of "the violence of the institution of motherhood," whose love for her children was warped by despair; on the other, she acknowledges that Michulski's problems were not easily explicable or soluble (1997, 262 and 264). She is above all concerned with the issue of choice, with the enforced and constructed nature of motherhood in 1970s America that, in her view, means that women like Michulski are forced into motherhood and then silenced and trapped.

Despite the occasional lapse into a risky kind of essentialism, then, Rich poses an important challenge to traditional ideas regarding maternity as an instinctive and unproblematic affair. Her concern, as we have seen, is to show that mothering is by no means inevitably or wholly loving and harmonious; she mentions other women's revelations of maternal hostility and criticizes the association of women with pacifism (1997, 24 and 16, my pagination).³ Rich also offers a complex view of mothering as a process involving change and ambivalence, an idea which anticipates more recent poststructuralist views of maternity. She affirms, for example, that motherhood must be "earned," and that the mother is not merely a given, but a changeable subject (1997, 12, 36, 37), thereby lending weight to the recent idea of mothering as something one does, rather than something one is (see Rothman, 1989, 22). Mothering, in Rich's view, is an activity that involves change and contradiction, "anger and tenderness."

Such a view is echoed and supported by later examinations of motherhood. Elisabeth Badinter's historical survey of motherhood also suggests that mothering is shaped by social and political contexts and is not necessarily or unambiguously loving. Badinter, similarly, points to the numerous incidents of infanticide in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, to demonstrate that "maternal instinct" is a highly questionable and unstable notion.

Philosopher Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* also makes the point that "in any given culture, maternal commitment is far more voluntary than people like to believe" (22). And a recent examination of motherhood from a sociobiological perspective confirms the contingent nature of maternal commitment, in animals and in humans, mothers' investment in their offspring is extremely variable and dependent upon numerous factors (Hrdy xv).

These views bear out Rich's insights into mothering as complex and ambivalent, and, crucially, they highlight the constructed and changeable nature of maternity, as an experience and as an idea. This idea is significantly shaped by prevalent ideas of women, as Estela V. Weldon demonstrates. Weldon detects an ideological bias operating in traditional psychoanalytic discourse, which has meant that maternal hostility has been deemed unthinkable and glossed over. Rich herself makes clear that motherhood as an experience and an idea is not static. Her notion of the "institution" of motherhood performs such a gesture. It highlights motherhood as a construct with its own history (and, therefore, with the capacity to change and be changed). In addition, Rich points out the way in which ideology masks its own constructedness (1997, 43), a notion that allows for the possibility of unmasking and unfixing conventional practices, of choosing alternatives.

Choice is an important notion in Rich's account, signifying here the decision making involved in becoming a mother. Rich points out that "most women in history have become mothers without choice," and she spells out the psychological effects of this entrapment: "Motherhood without autonomy, without choice, is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control" (1997, 13 and 264). Infanticide, in her view, is an extreme and terrible manifestation of such a sense. Rich locates the solution to mothers' traditional lack of "autonomy" (here understood as the prerequisite for "choice") in the repression by women of their bodies, which in Rich's view have been wrested away from them by patriarchy. In particular, she foregrounds the issue of birth control as a vital factor in this proposed reclaiming of female corporeality (1997, 76). Rich's stress on the body is an important and productive one, as recent debates surrounding new reproductive technologies would suggest (see Raymond 1994). At the same time, however, it leads her to a neglect of the complexity of individual psychology and its interdependence with social structures and institutions, as Rich herself acknowledges in her later introduction (1997, 9–10, my pagination). Female corporeality, she admits, can only be liberated and validated if women are granted meaningful social status, and it is only in such a context that "choice" can occur.

And while Rich offers a nuanced view of maternal power, an issue inevitably raised by infanticide, her conclusions on the subject are a little weak. Rich regards mothering as involving both power and powerlessness; the mother is oppressed by society, but has immense power over her child, not least the capacity to nourish or to deny nourishment, to sustain life or to

destroy it (1997, 38 and 67). Rich's awareness of the ambiguous power of mothers is echoed in the work of psychoanalysts Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jessica Benjamin, who argue that it is fear of maternal power that is at the root of male oppression of women, an idea that underscores the fearful, unsettling nature of infanticide, which I mentioned earlier. Rich's view of power is not developed, however, her productive ideas concerning the body and, another solution to mothers' oppression proffered here, female community and collective action, are somewhat undermined by her problematic proposal that we need to "destroy" the institution of motherhood (Rich, 1997, 280), rather than, as poststructuralist feminism would argue, subvert it from within by means of discursive challenges. "Power" is understood by Rich as something that is either possessed or denied, and not, as in feminist poststructuralism, as polymorphous and performative.⁴ Rich's treatment of infanticide and the issues linked to it is thus both useful and limited. While she fruitfully (and, in her time, originally) reveals motherhood to be a shifting ideological construct and a complex experience, and while she highlights the need for choice in maternity, her conclusions bear refinement.

Morrison's novel *Beloved* does validate Rich's conclusions in several ways. Morrison's protagonist Sethe murders her baby girl out of desperate love, wanting to keep her safe from the horror of slavery. Like Rich, Morrison suggests that maternal love is shaped, or, as here, distorted by the context in which it takes place, and that it has historically been bound up with loss of control and despair. But unlike Rich, who offers a sometimes sweeping view of the "institution" of motherhood, Morrison deals here with a particular type of oppression and its particular effects upon a mother. Specifically, she locates infanticide in the context of the "institution" of slavery, demonstrating its workings upon one mother. As one critic points out, "the slave mother is interpellated first and primarily into the institution of slavery" (Hirsch 95). Morrison's concern here is not with the (white, middle-class) institution of motherhood, but with black maternal experience as constructed by slavery, an "institution" that, in the present of the novel, is coming to an end. Morrison's deployment of historical sources means that the experience of motherhood is implicitly yet significantly historicized.⁵

Morrison's black perspective is of itself challenging. Rich makes fleeting mention of motherhood under slavery (1997, 35, 44, 203), and she is aware of class as a factor in defining mothering (1997, 81–82); she is, however, more concerned to underplay differences between women (1997, 34, 58). As Morrison points out in an essay, "the act of enforcing racelessness [...] is itself a racial act" (1993, 46); Rich, then, is open to criticism on the grounds of white color blindness. In this, she is again of her time; throughout the past two decades, feminism has become increasingly aware of its own white, middle-class bias.⁶ A powerful corrective to this bias has come from black feminism. By thematizing motherhood under slavery, Morrison contributes to this correction.

Nonetheless, Rich's conception of maternal murder provides a useful way of reading *Beloved*. The novel, in its turn, challenges and extends Rich's notion of a fixed and damaging "institution" that needs to be destroyed for a happier form of motherhood to emerge, by offering a complex and, I would contend, potentially liberating depiction of maternal subjectivity as shifting, relational, and communal. Where Rich occasionally ignores or simplifies the links between psychology, society, and politics, Morrison puts forth compelling suggestions on the issues. My examination of *Beloved* focuses first upon the ways in which Rich's and Morrison's treatments of maternal murder resemble each other; then points out and elucidates how Morrison can be seen to go further than Rich in terms of the strategies of liberation that she offers.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich had written of the "Great Silence" surrounding motherhood (61). Her concern with infanticide forms a significant part of her uncovering of the taboos with which motherhood is "hedged" (15). In *Beloved*, Morrison is similarly concerned with that which has been hushed up. Central to this novel is absence, not least the absence of Sethe's murdered daughter, now present only as a ghost. This sad, jealous, disruptive presence is, on one level, a symbol of a "Great Silence" that has been violently achieved—the muteness of black slave women and their children. Like Rich, Morrison exposes the gaps and silences in traditional accounts of the world, which are constructs of the powerful. The narrator asserts: "definitions belonged to the definer—not the defined" (1997, 190), a statement reminiscent of Rich's reference to "the makers and sayers of culture, the namers, [. . .] the sons of the mothers" (1977, 11)?

Like Rich, Morrison shows how maternal subjectivity and corporeality have been abused, setting infanticide in the context of such abuse. The "tree" of scars on Sethe's back, from the whipping inflicted upon her when she was pregnant, is a visible imprint of slavery. The maternal body under slavery was, as Rich also points out (1997, 35), viewed as a resource, as "property that reproduced itself without cost," as it is expressed in the novel (1997, 228). The theft of Sethe's milk is of great significance in the novel, as her repeated lament "And they took my milk" (1997, 17) suggests. Both Rich and Morrison, then, are concerned with the maternal body as a site of oppression, and both affirm female corporeality in defiance of the violence to which it has been subjected. Sethe is motivated in her escape journey by the desire to nurse Beloved, for example; the biological act of breastfeeding is a provocation to action.

Rich and Morrison are both concerned with how oppression distorts maternal love, which thus emerges as contingent and manipulable, though powerful. In *Beloved*, slavery renders love, particularly maternal love, a risk (23, 45, 92). At one point, it is spelled out: "Unless caretice, motherlove was a killer" (132). In the case of Sethe it leads to a literal killing. Elsewhere, Paul D recalls a "witless colordewoman" jaited and hangd for stealing ducks that

she took for her children (66); the rupture of the mother-child bond brought about by slavery here leads to a punishable insanity. That insanity, that despair, is subject to white interpretation. The murder of Beloved is narrated from the point of view of the schoolteacher and his nephew, that is, from a white, racist perspective (149–150); Morrison shows by means of her narrative technique how black experience is appropriated and constructed by dominant perspectives. And by means of ironic citation, she parodies these perspectives, in a manner reminiscent of Bhaktin (Morrison 1997, 151; Bhaktin 1988, 132). There is a parallel here with Rich, who also focuses on the reaction to infanticide, upon its construction by dominant (male) interpretations, and who also offers an alternative reading: one that concentrates on both the powerlessness and the love of the mother.

Murder signifies rupture, disturbance, but Sethe's act is also one of resistance and love: "And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono. Nonono. Simple" (163). Morrison's evocation of despairing love is again reminiscent of Rich, who cites Michulski's view of the murder of her children as a "sacrifice," and describes the suffering that prompted the act as "honorable" (262, 264). In *Beloved*, Sethe's act of murder represents both her attempt to protect her child from slavery and her desire to "outher the hurter" (234). According to Sethe, the real abomination is not murder, but "that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind" (251). Like Rich, then, Morrison is concerned with how individuals are interpellated by institutions in violent and oppressive ways, and with maternal murder as a desperate reaction to this interpellation. Neither Rich nor Morrison are concerned with condemnation or with easy exculpation of the murderous mother; rather, they seek to delineate the background against which her crime takes place and to reveal mothering as an ambivalent and complicated process.

In several ways, then, Morrison's novel resembles Rich's text in its exploration of murderous maternity. But Morrison's novel expands upon a strategy of empowerment touched on but not developed by Rich: collectivity. While Rich makes a powerful case for what might be termed a strategically essentialist (see Spivak 176)⁸ view of mothers as an oppressed group who must come together to combat "patriarchy," her arguments are, as I have argued, undermined by her occasional overlooking of important differences between mothers and her somewhat reductive view of the "institution" of motherhood as homogeneous. Morrison, on the other hand, offers in her tale of maternal murder a more nuanced depiction of the mothering subject, one that allows for the notion of a feminist-maternal community founded upon difference and multiplicity, and which, in its complexity and promise, echoes the work of Judith Butler, as we will see.

It would be possible to read the ghost of Beloved and her relationship with Sethe as occupying a "semiotic" realm, in Kristevan terms (1980), that is, as situated in and participating in a repressed, pre-oedipal, pre-discursive space.

The sensual, lyrical monologues of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver, the living daughter, are reminiscent of such ideas, recalling, in particular, Irigaray's notions of plenitude and connection between mother and daughter (1981b). The murder of Beloved could be viewed as symbolic of the violent operations of the Law of the Fathers, which serves to rupture the mother-daughter bond. Such a view would, in addition, tie in with Rich's notion of the "Kingdom of the Fathers" (1977, 56) as oppressing mothers.

But such psychoanalytic theories, it has been pointed out, rest on traditional Western European notions of kinship (see Plaza 133), and it is just such notions that Morrison can be seen to challenge, as I will show a little later. In addition, Sethe and Beloved do not exist "outside" of history, memory, and culture. Indeed, Beloved embodies both the collective experience of slaves and the act of recollecting this experience (Barnett 73). As has been pointed out, Morrison engages in a revision of history, revealing accepted accounts of the past to be contingent and partial (Edwards 19). In doing so, she does not reject the necessity of "history," abandoning the category; rather, she opens it up for scrutiny. And while this is "not a story to pass on" (Morrison 1997, 275)—such is its unspeakable horror—it *has* been passed on. Sethe and Beloved are thus implicated in "the symbolic order," to borrow from Lacan.

Like Rich, Morrison examines infanticide as a manifestation both of power and powerlessness. But she also challenges the power-powerlessness dichotomy, going further than Rich's (albeit important) stress on the issues of "choice" and "power," to develop what might be termed a notion of maternal "agency," where agency is defined as "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler 1993, 15). That is to say, Morrison is concerned not to identify slave mothers as a group at the mercy of an oppressive institution, as Rich does with mothers in general, but rather to open up space for a notion of maternal subjectivity as operative within institutions (which are themselves in flux), and as relational and communal, in complicated ways.

In *Beloved*, the relationship between Sethe and her murdered daughter is characterized by connection and separation, nourishment and withdrawal. Beloved's fierce desire for her mother recalls Butler's speculation, prompted by Lacan, that "it may be that we desire most strongly those individuals who reflect in a dense or saturated way the possibilities of multiple and simultaneous substitutions, where a substitution engages a fantasy of recovering a primary object of love lost—and produced—through prohibition" (1993, 99). In this case, the "prohibition" on love is the result not (only) of oedipal constraints, but (also) of slavery. Morrison thus demonstrates the violence of such prohibitions *and* the potentially subversive nature of the desire they produce. While slavery led Sethe to murder her daughter, it cannot remove memory and love. The idea that "nothing ever dies" (36), borne out by the ghostly presence of Beloved, strengthens this notion.

The shifting relationships between Denver, Sethe, and Beloved point to a view of subjectivity as relational, as defined by interaction with others, an idea reminiscent of recent conceptions of maternity (Benjamin, Evening-ham). Beloved, it has been noted, has to be willed into being by Sethe; her existence depends upon the recognition of others (Boudreau 114). While Rich and Morrison both stress autonomy, the latter's view of it is more complex. Sethe may be her own "best thing," an idea that recalls Rich's search for an identity beyond motherhood (1977, 31), but it takes Paul D to acknowledge that fact (273). This view of subjectivity as defined by others is, however, problematized and complicated by the destructive nature of Sethe's intensely symbiotic relationship with Beloved, who begins to drain her. Paul D's anxious reflection that "this here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (164) implies the need for a kind of autonomous maternal self that exists alongside or within the relationships in which the individual mother is engaged.

Butler, referring to the problematic nature of identity politics, which can tend to enforce rigid identity categories, points out, on the other hand, that "None of us can fully answer to the demand to 'get over yourself'" (1993, 117), and not, she adds, should we. Morrison too is concerned with collective identities and strategies, an aspect of the novel that has been convincingly examined by April Lidinsky. Lidinsky argues that Morrison develops here a post-modernist notion of identity as communal, arguing that the figure of Baby Suggs, in particular, is used to call for "a conceptual shift from the totalized to the multiplicitous subject" (192). The support given to Sethe on her escape journey, Denver's increasing contact with the world outside, the community's shared memories of Baby Suggs, and the collective effort to exorcise the ghost lend weight to this reading. In particular, I would argue, we can fruitfully read this postmodernist identity as a feminist one. In the echoes and connections between Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, Morrison suggests the existence of an Irigarayan "female genealogy" (Irigaray 1981a; see also Horvitz 60–61). When Denver tells the story of her birth to Beloved, reference is made to Baby Suggs's quilt, which Beloved likes to have near her: "It [the quilt] was [. . .] feeling like hands—the unrested hands of busy women" (78). Here, storytelling, birth, female labor, and creativity are linked to each other and to the ideas of intergenerational female connection and the sharing of memory, key themes of the novel.

But while Morrison may focus upon female experience, insisting upon gender as a key category in shaping lives, she also illustrates the ways in which gender is unstable, open to revision, in particular in the scene in the clearing: "It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced, men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried" (1997, 88). Marianne Hirsch has usefully pointed out how Morrison disrupts traditional Western notions of

the patriarchal family in her novel (1994); in this quotation, the roles of men, women, and children merge and cross, to suggest a liberating view of gender roles within family units as open to change, as shifting. Where Rich views the patriarchal family as serving a key role in the oppression of mothers (1977, 60), Morrison is concerned with a revision of the very notion of "family." In her novel, women like Baby Suggs, Ella, and Amy Denver "nurture across biologically and racially constructed borders," and men are shown acting in "maternal" ways (Lidinsky 212). In addition, Morrison challenges the boundaries between public and private by means of her stress on collectivity.

Morrison's novel echoes and supports Rich's *Of Woman Born* in several ways, then, but it also goes beyond it. Morrison thematizes maternal murder in order to raise and explore the questions of maternal subjectivity and agency, offering, as we have seen, complex and compelling insights on the issues. Here it is worth noting again the contingent nature not only of mothering, but also of conceptions of maternity. For example, it is only recently, with the advent of widely available birth control and women's increased financial independence from men, that the (Western) mother can be construed as an agent; as both Rich and Morrison show us, motherhood has, in many cases, spell insanity and despair. Rich's text, then, must be viewed in context. While there are problems with it, in particular the notion of motherhood as a fixed and monolithic "institution," these problems are both understandable and forgivable, given the novelty of Rich's thesis. Rich's project was one of defiance and assertion; at the time of its gestation, it was important, and even necessary, to affirm women as mothers and to define the forces that constructed and curtailed their experience, even if that meant risking essentialism. As Diana Fuss recommends, we should not, in any case, dismiss essentialism out of hand, but rather consider what motivates its deployment (xi). In addition, Rich's awareness of the constructed nature of maternity tempers aspects of her account that might be considered essentialist. It anticipates a central insight of post-structuralism—the mutability of social structures and of the self—and it allows for the possibility of change, for the continuous fulfillment of Rich's prediction that "thinking itself will be transformed" (1997, 286).

NOTES

1. Before *Of Woman Born* (1976), motherhood had largely been dismissed or sidestepped by second wave feminists (as in de Beauvoir 1997 [1949], Firestone 1979 [1970], Friedan 1992 [1963], and Miller 1977 [1970]).
2. This introduction was written in 1986, for the tenth anniversary edition. It appears without pagination; hence, "my pagination."
3. But compare Sara Ruddick, who defends the notion on the grounds that "there are maternal practices in which ideals of nonviolence actually govern" (183).

4. These terms are taken from Foucault (1990, 11) and Butler (1993, 20).
5. See Rushdy, 142–143 on the sources of the story.
6. Rich herself exemplifies this development (1997, 16–17, my pagination).
7. Compare Morrison's statement: "I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language" (1993, xii). Compare also Rich, 1979, 35: "the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative."
8. But see also Butler: "strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended" (1990:4).
9. A consideration of the term "postmodernism," and its relationship to "post-structuralism," is beyond the scope of my enquiry.

WORKS CITED

- Note: Where the first date of publication differs from that of the edition used, the former is given in parentheses at the end of the reference.
- Badinter, Elisabeth. *The Myth of Motherhood: A Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*. Trans. Roger DeCarris. London: Souvenir, 1981 (1980).
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London and New York: Longman, 1988:125–156 (1967).
- Barnett, Pamela E. "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." Pp. 73–85 (1997).
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Penguin, 1997 (1949).
- Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. London: Virago, 1990 (1988).
- Boudreau, Kristin. "Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Extract in Pp. 105–115 (1995).
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
- . *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.
- Dinnerstein, Dorothy. *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991 (1976).
- Edwards, Thomas R. "Ghost Story." Extract in Pp. 19–21 (1987).
- Everingham, Christine. *Motherhood and Modernity: An Investigation into the Rational Dimension of Mothering*. Buckingham: Open UP, 1994.

- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. London: The Women's Press, 1979 (1970).
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1990 (1976).
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Penguin, 1992 (1963).
- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Representations of Motherhood*. Eds. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Myrtle Mahner-Kaplan. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1994:92-110.
- Horvitz, Deborah. "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*." Extract in Plasa 59-66 (1989).
- Hrdy, Susan Blaffer. *Mother Nature: Natural Selection and the Female of the Species*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1999.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Le corps à corps avec la mère*. Montreal: Les éditions de la pleine lune, 1981a.
- . "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other." Trans. Hélène Vienne. *Wenzel signs* 7, 1 (1981b):60-67 (1979).
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980 (1977).
- Lidinsky, April. "Prophesying Bodies: Calling for a Politics of Collectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *The Discourse of Slavery: Alpha Beta to Toni Morrison*. Eds. Carl Plasa and Betty Ring. New York and London: Routledge, 1994:191-216.
- Miller, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago, 1977 (1970).
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador, 1993 (1992).
- . *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 1997 (1987).
- Plasa, Carl, ed. *Toni Morrison: "Beloved." A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Cambridge: Icon, 2000.
- Raymond, Janice G. *Women as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle over Women's Freedom*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1994 (1993).
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago, 1997 (1976).
- . "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York and London: Norton, 1979:33-49 (1972).
- Rothman, Barbara Katz. *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society*. New York and London: Norton, 1989.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon, 1995 (1989).

MURDEROUS MOTHERS

- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "Daughters Signifying History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Ed. Linden Peach. Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1998:140-153.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989:175-195.
- Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1987.
- Wellton, Estela V. *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Demigration of Motherhood*. New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1993 (1988).