

# Mothers, Daughters, and Empowerment, Agency,

BY ANDREA O'REILLY

*Cet article étudie l'écriture féministe contemporaine sur la relation mère-fille et en particulier les différentes facettes de cet enseignement qui théorise sur l'éducation féministe adressée aux filles.*

I have a good mother.  
Her voice is what keeps me here.  
Feet on ground, heart in hand, facing forward.  
Be yourself.  
—Jann Arden, "Good Mother"

The topic "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Mothers, Daughters, and Feminism" is an appropriate theme to commemorate and celebrate this twentieth anniversary of *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*. At the threshold of the new millennium as we reflect upon women's achievements of the past and the challenges of the future, our identities as feminists, mothers, and daughters are central to our vision of the world we live in and the world we want. We are all daughters and most women are mothers of daughters if we mean by this "othermothers" as described by Patricia Hill Collins, spiritual mothers as mentors of girls, or any woman who is deeply concerned about the lives of girls today. Our daughters are our future; yet their lives are shaped by our past. Thus, as we celebrate this twentieth-anniversary issue, we look backwards and forwards in a spiraling circle that ties the past with the future, daughters to their mothers.

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**Feminist attention to motherhood gave rise to interest in the mother-daughter relationship; feminists seek to implement a feminist mode of mothering daughters.**

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This article examines contemporary feminist writing on the mother-daughter relationship, in particular it looks at the various ways this scholarship theorizes feminist mothering of girls. My intent is *not* to draft a blueprint of feminist mothering: what mothers *don't* need is yet another normative discourse of the good mother. My aim rather is to describe, rather than prescribe, the themes of feminist mothering of girls as found in the literature—empowerment, agency, narrative, and motherline—with particular attention to how the mother-daughter bond has been constructed as a site of empowerment for mother and daughter alike.

At the age of 37 I am a mother, a feminist, and a feminist mother. My two daughters, Erin, age eleven and Casey, age nine, identify themselves as feminist.<sup>1</sup> I also have spent most of my adult life researching and teaching the subjects of motherhood and mothers and daughters, first as a graduate student and later as a professor.<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Rich opened *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, recognized as the first and arguably still the best feminist study of motherhood, with the observation that "we know more about the air we breath, the seas we travel than about the nature and the meaning of motherhood" (11). In the close-to-a-quarter century since the publication of *Of Woman Born* the topic of motherhood has emerged as a salient issue in feminist scholarship. In her recent book, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* Laura Umansky details the increasing centrality of motherhood to feminist activism and scholarship and challenges the frequently-made claim that motherhood, in the words of one critic, "is the problem that modern feminists cannot face" (Hewlett qtd. in Umansky 1). Feminist attention to motherhood emerged from and gave rise to a parallel interest in the mother-daughter relationship; specifically feminists seek to imagine and implement a truly feminist mode of mothering daughters. Today there is more written on mothers and daughters than on motherhood itself; from the highly theoretical psychoanalytic discourse of New French Feminism taught in universities to the pop-psychology of self-help manuals found at local bookstores, feminists celebrate the mother-daughter relation as a site of female renewal and feminist resistance.

The scholarship on mothers, daughters, and feminism falls under four interconnected themes—themes that correspond to the sections of this journal issue—empowerment, agency, narrative, and the motherline. All four centre upon and call for reciprocal mother-daughter identification to achieve a lasting politics of empowerment. The most popular of the four, particularly among lay feminists, is the first concern. Particularly big in the '70s and early '80s, this approach committed itself to non-sexist childrearing practices; its goal was to circumvent traditional gender socialization by destabilizing the assumed gender behaviour and assigned gender roles of girls and boys by way of an androgynous mode of childrearing. Girls handed over their dolls for trucks; boys traded in their hockey sticks for ballet slippers in the hopes that the masculine would be made more available to girls and

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## *Narrative, and Motherline*

likewise the feminine for boys. Most parents, aware of the damage inflicted by traditional gender socialization, have engaged in some form of non-sexist childrearing. I dressed my infant son in pink sleepers and at bedtime I revised traditional fairytales wherein Sleeping Beauty agreed to marry the prince only upon the completion of her Ph.D. In recent years the aim of feminist mothering has shifted and now focuses almost exclusively on the empowerment of adolescent girls.

Groundbreaking books, such as *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads* by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, and *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher, document the loss of the female self in adolescence, investigate the various reasons for this self-effacement, and strategies on ways that such may be resisted. Mary Pipher in *Reviving Ophelia*, for example, argues that “with puberty girls crash into junk culture.... This culture is just too hard for most girls to understand and master at this point in their development” (13). The solution for Pipher “is to strengthen girls, guide and protect them, and most importantly to create a culture that is less complicated and more nurturing, less violent and sexualized and more growth-producing” (13). In Virginia Beanne Rutter’s *Celebrating Girls: Nurturing and Empowering Our Daughters* self-esteem is emphasized; mothers, through affirmation and celebration of the feminine in everyday practice and ritual, allow girls to claim power and gain self-worth in and through their female identity. She writes:

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We are all aware of the severe pressures and dangers that diminish girls’ self-esteem as they approach adolescence. As concerned mothers, we read all this depressing news and wonder if there is anything we can do about it. I believe the answer is a decided yes: Mothers and other adult women in girls’ lives can raise girls with vital, intact feminine spirit.... [T]he mother-daughter relationship is the ground for teaching, taking, and sharing the feminine experience and the more we empower that

experience, the healthier our girls will be. We need to secure our daughters’ sense of self-worth, in their mind and their bodies, so that they will not turn away from us and from themselves. (2, 9–10)

Rutter, along with Pipher, maintains that the daughter’s empowerment through either cultural critique/change and/or the valuation of the feminine depends upon a close and vital mother-daughter relationship: a strong mother-daughter connection, for these writers, is what makes possible a strong female self.

However, western culture in general, and normative psychological theory in particular mandates separation from parents in adolescence to enable the merging adult to achieve an autonomous sense of self. Recent feminist writers on adolescent girls’ empowerment, most notably Elizabeth deBold, Marie Wilson, and Ideisee Malave in *Mother Daughter Revolution* call into question this “sacred cow” of developmental theory—the equivalency of separation and autonomy—and argue that it constitutes a betrayal of both mothers and daughters. They explain:

Separation and autonomy are not equivalent: a person need not separate from mothers emotionally to be autonomous. Under the domain of experts, mothers are urged to create a separation and disconnection from daughters that their daughters do not want. Early childhood and adolescence are the two stages of life where separation has been decreed as imperative to the independence and autonomy of children. To mother “right,” women disconnect from their daughters and begin to see them as society will. Rather than strengthen girls, this breach of trust leaves girls weakened and adrift. (36)

What is most disturbing about this pattern of separation and betrayal is its timing. “In childhood,” they write, “girls have confidence in what they know, think, and feel” (11). With the onset of adolescence girls between the ages of nine and twelve come up against what they call the wall. “The wall is our patriarchal culture that values women less than men.... To get through the wall. Girls have to give up parts of themselves to be safe and accepted within society” (12). Daughters are thus abandoned by their mothers when they need them the most. Central to *Mother-Daughter Revolution* is the belief that mothers can aid daughters in their resistance to the wall.

The key to the mother's resistance is the reclamation of her own girl self:

If mothers decide to join with daughters who are coming of age as women, mothers first must reclaim what they themselves have lost. Reclaiming is the first step in women's joining girls' resistance to their own dis-integration. Reclaiming is simply a process of discovering, describing, and reappropriating the memories and feelings of our preadolescent selves. (101)

This reclamation empowers the mother and enables her to aid the daughter in her resistance.

Feminist writers on daughters all agree that mother-daughter connection is vital for young women's empowerment. However, the perspective of this literature is quite often daughter-centric; the mother's identity, particularly as it is lived outside of motherhood is rarely, if at all, examined. Earlier feminist writers on the mother-daughter relationship, most notably Judith Arcana and Adrienne Rich, recognized the importance of the mother's empowerment for her own life and that of the daughter. Mother-daughter connection empowers the daughter if, and only if, the mothers with whom the daughters are identifying are themselves living lives of agency, authority, and autonomy. "We must live as if our dreams have been realized," Arcana writes,

we cannot simply prepare other, younger daughters for strength, pride, courage, and beauty. It is worse than useless to tell young women and girls that we have done and been wrong, that we have chosen ill, that we hope they'll be more "lucky." (33)

Adrienne Rich goes on to ask:

What do we mean by the nurture of daughters? What is it we wish we had, or could have, as daughters; could give, as mothers? Deeply and primarily we need trust and tenderness, surely this will always be true of every human being. But women growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves. But this loving is not simply the old institutionalized, sacrificial, "mother-love" which men have demanded; we want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children's books. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim; and then to go on from there. (246)

Kate, a daughter who contributed to Karen Payne's *Be-*

*tween Ourselves: Letters Between Mothers and Daughters*, attributed her empowerment to that of her mother:

When Mum finally left Dad she was giving up female martyrdom; she was waving farewell to that womanly virtue of self sacrifice. And if she could escape that bondage than so could I... In setting herself free, [my mother] set me free. (244)

Another daughter in Payne's collection eloquently described the inspiration and joy she felt as she came upon her mother dancing alone in the living room.

[A]s I watched you I suddenly saw a different Eunice. I saw you before you met Dad, before you had two children. I saw you dancing before the onset of responsibilities.... For once I didn't see you as the parent or the wife, but as the woman yourself, unfettered by any lack of confidence or distrust. You were yourself that night dancing in the living room, joyous, spontaneous, full of life, smiling. (306)

In the same collection renowned sociologist Jesse Bernard wrote to her daughter: "For your sake, as well as mine, I must not allow you to absorb me completely. I must learn to live my own life independently in order to be a better mother to you" (272).

What daughters need, therefore, in the words of Rich:

[are] mothers who want their own freedom and ours.... The quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. (247)

Writing of lesbian mothering in *Politics of the Heart*, Baba Cooper describes "radical mothers [as] involving children in disloyalty to the culture the mother is expected to transmit at the expense of woman-bonding and female empowerment" (238). Reciprocal mother-daughter empowerment depends upon mothers claiming, in the words of Mary Kay Blakely, an identity as "[an] outlaw from the institution of motherhood" to engage in gynocentric mothering that nurtures the power of her female self and that of her daughter. Whether it be termed courageous mothering as Rich describes it, or radical mothering as defined by Copper, this practice of mothering calls for the empowerment of daughters *and* mothers and recognizes that the former is only possible with the latter. As Judith Arcana concludes: "If we want girls to grow into free women, brave and strong, we must be those women ourselves" (33).

The transformation of mothering to effect change both inside and outside the home underpins most feminist



Kass Elan Morgain, "You Gotta Learn to Love Yourself," collage, 16" x 13", 1991.  
Photo: Cranbrook Photo

thinking on the empowerment of daughters. Advocates of reciprocal mother-daughter empowerment however, recognize that knowledge of mothers' lives, and female history generally, needed for this connection, is often difficult to come by. As girls need to experience firsthand their mothers' struggles against patriarchy, they also need to be told female narratives of resistance. In *Writing a Woman's Life* Carolyn Heilbrun observes:

Lives do not serve as models, only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by stories we have heard.... Stories have formed us all: they are what we must use to make new fictions and new stories. (32)

In earlier times the ancient lore of female talk was told around the village well or at the quilting bee; today the oral tradition of old wives' tales is shared through oral and

written narratives. In 1976 Adrienne Rich lamented the dearth of maternal stories; in 1992 journalist Marni Jackson called maternal space "the mother zone; [the] hole in culture where mothers [go]" (13). Motherhood, Jackson writes, "is an unexplored frontier of thought and emotion that we've tried to tame with rules, myths, and knowledge. But the geography remains unmapped" (9). Feminist scholarship on motherhood in the '80s and '90s sought to give voice to maternal subjectivity. While recognizing how difficult it is to speak that which has been silenced, disguised, and marginalized, feminist maternal theory, since the publication of *Of Woman Born*, has been concerned with making the maternal story narratable.

Feminist interest in maternal narrative may be attributed to the realization among writers on girls' empowerment that girls need to hear their mothers' stories in order to forge a strong mother-daughter bond and to construct a female-defined identity. The authors of *Mother-Daughter Revolution* maintain that the compromise of female selfhood in adolescence may be resisted or, at the very least, negotiated, when the mother connects with the daughter through story. The mother, in recalling and sharing with her daughter her own narrative of adolescence, gives her daughter strategies of resistance, and hence constructs an alternative script of coming into womanhood. As my girls mature, I am made more and more aware of the importance of female narrative in strengthening our relationship and in aiding their own growth into womanhood. These stories unite mothers and daughters as girls realize that their mothers were once girls and young women; additionally they provide, by lived examples,

road maps of the journey into womanhood. What I have also discovered is that as I tell my narrative, my daughters construct their own. When my eldest daughter turned ten I gave her the journal I kept as a teenager; she now is writing her own journal that someday may be passed on to her daughter. My daughters are both avid storytellers; in either a fictional or autobiographical voice they narrate their own dreams and struggles as girls at the end of the millennium. When I asked my nine-year old daughter Casey, as I was writing this piece, to describe what it means to be the daughter of feminist mother she, not surprisingly, put it in narrative form:

*She teaches me a lot of things. Like what sexism means. So I know a lot of things. I try to tell my friends. One time we were studying fishing and my teacher kept saying "He caught the fish or fisherman"! So I raised my hand and asked if women could be fishers. She said "I can't think*

*of why not, can anybody tell me otherwise?" and a boy in my class said they can't because they look in the mirror too much and they are scared of fish and water. That is what sexism means.*

"Mothers and daughters," Rich writes,

have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other. (220)

Told and retold, stories between mothers and daughters allow us to define female experience outside the phallogocentric narrative of patriarchy.

Maternal narrative, the third theme in current feminist writing on the mother-daughter relationship, brings us to the final theme; namely the importance of herstory or more specifically the motherline in the empowerment of daughters. In *Stories from the Motherline: Reclaiming the Mother-Daughter Bond, Finding Our Souls* Naomi Lowinsky describes her book as being "about a worldview that is as old as humankind, a wisdom we have forgotten that we know: the ancient lore of women—the Motherline" (1). She goes on to say:

Whenever women gather in circles or in pairs, in olden times around the village well, or at the quilting bee, in modern times in support groups, over lunch, or at the children's party, they tell one another stories from the Motherline. These are stories of female experience: physical, psychological, and historical. They are stories about the dramatic changes of woman's body: developing breasts and pubic hair, bleeding, being sexual, giving birth, suckling, menopause, and of growing old. They are stories of the life cycles that link generations of women: mothers who are also daughters, daughters who have become mothers; grandmothers who ... remain granddaughters. (1-2)

Daughters today, at least among the middle class, are living lives radically different from those of their mothers. These daughters, Lowinsky argues, "[have] paid a terrible price for cutting [themselves] off from [their] feminine roots" (31). Severing their motherline, these daughters have lost the authenticity and authority of their womanhood; to reclaim that authority and authenticity they must reconnect to the motherline. She writes:

When a woman today comes to understand her life story as a story from the Motherline, she gains female authority in a number of ways. First, her Motherline grounds her in her feminine nature as she struggles with the many options now open to women. Second, she reclaims carnal knowledge of her own body, its blood mysteries and their power.

Third, as she makes the journey back to her female roots, she will encounter ancestors who struggled with similar difficulties in different historical times. This provides her with a life cycle perspective that softens her immediate situation.... Fourth, she uncovers her connection to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient world view, which holds that body and soul are open and all life is interconnected. And, finally she reclaims her female perspective from which to consider women are similar and how they are different. (13)

Writing about Lowinsky's motherline in her book *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*, Hope Edelman emphasizes that

motherline stories ground a ... daughter in a gender, a family, and a feminine history. They transform the experience of her female ancestors into maps she can refer to for warning or encouragement. (61)

They enable daughters to derive strength from their identities as women. These stories, made available to daughters through the female oral tradition or what we disparagingly call today gossip and old wives' tales reunites mothers and daughters and reconnects the daughter to her motherline thus making possible the gynocentric mother-daughter bond needed to effect change in the home and in the larger patriarchal culture.

My eleven-year-old daughter Erin, when asked her thoughts on feminism, quickly corrected me and explained that she was not a feminist, she was an equalist. "I believe that all creatures (not just people) on this planet are as good as each other. There is no better species." My daughter is a vegetarian and is deeply engaged with environmental issues. Her words inspired and humbled me: the feminism I have taught her and lived by has indeed been accepted, but on different terms. It is as if she returned the dress I selected for her and chose one of the same design but in a style more befitting her self and world. But this is ultimately the success of feminism; chameleon-like, it changes its hues as each generation recasts it in its own image. Commenting on feminism further, Erin remarked:

*My friends at school often make fun of me because of my belief in equalism and feminism.... I don't have many friends but I know that it is important to be yourself. That is what is important! This is what my parents have taught me.*

Her words again comfort and sadden me. I am pleased and proud that her sense of self is so strongly grounded. But the aloneness of her feminist awareness concerns me. I can only hope that the empowerment, agency, voice, and motherline that is affirmed in the feminist literature is enough to sustain her and other girls as they grow into

womanhood. I believe it is. To return to the quotation by Jann Arden that opens this article: it is the voice of the mother in agency and narrative that empowers the daughter by returning her to the motherline so that she may claim the authority and authenticity of womanhood to face forward, with feet on ground, and be herself.

*Andrea O'Reilly is the co-editor (with Sharon Abbey) of two books: Motherhood Redefined: Changing Patterns and Identities (Second Story Press, 1998) and Mothers and Daughters at the New Millennium (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999). Her book Toni Morrison on Mothering is forthcoming from Ohio State University Press. She was the coordinator of the first international conferences on "Mothers and Daughters" (September 1997) and "Mothers and Sons" (September 1998), sponsored by the Centre for Feminist Research, York University. She is the founding president of the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM).*

<sup>1</sup>I am also the mother of a 14-year-old son, Jesse. He, along with his sisters, has been raised in a feminist household. This article addresses only feminist mothering of daughters. My research on feminist mothering and sons appears in my article in progress, "Mothers and Sons and Feminist Theory." While this essay refers to feminist mothering the themes discussed may be applicable to fathers: men can practice feminist mothering. In our household my spouse and I both practice feminist mothering in the raising of our daughters and our son.

<sup>2</sup>I designed and taught a first course on "Mothers and Daughters" from 1993 to 1997; my third-year "Mothering-Motherhood" has been taught at York since 1992. In 1996 and 1997 the course was redesigned and taught in the Distance and Education Program; over 200 took the course, studying the material through audio and video lectures.

## RISHMA DUNLOP

### Poem for a Daughter on Her Thirteenth Birthday

In the mirror  
the small bones  
of my daughter's body,  
slim hips curving  
bird wings

her eyes catch me  
my breath in her throat  
my face hers.

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*Luciana Ricciutelli and Jennifer Liptrot, cohorts, colleagues, friends—CWS/cf's amazons-in-the-office.*

*Photo: Trish Swanson*