

This text is taken from Andrea O'Reilly's keynote speech and induction into the Motherhood Hall of Fame at the Museum of Motherhood in NYC (2014)

Over the last forty years, as feminist theory and women's studies have grown and developed as a scholarly field, they have incorporated various and diverse theoretical models to represent the specific perspectives/concerns of particular groups of women; global feminism, queer feminism, third wave feminism and womanism. In contrast, I will argue that women's studies has not likewise recognized or embraced a feminism developed from the specific needs/concerns of mothers, what I have termed matricentric feminism. The paper will consider possible reasons for the exclusion of matricentric feminism in feminist theory and why this school of feminism must be accorded the same legitimacy and autonomy as other feminist theoretical models in the discipline of women's studies.

The title of this paper paraphrases two central and significant quotes from Feminist Theory. One from Sojourner Truth's speech at an abolitionist meeting:

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud- puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

And the 2nd from Virginia Woolf, drawn from her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

For me, these quotes serve to appropriately situate and frame what I will be arguing in

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this talk, and what has been a passionate concern of mine over the past 3 decades as I have sought to do feminism as a mother and do motherhood as a feminist: namely that we need a feminism --in both theory and practice-- specifically for mothers. In this paper, when I use the term 'mothers' I refer to individuals who engage in motherwork, or as Ruddick theorized: "maternal practice". Such a term is not limited to biological mothers, but to anyone who takes upon the work of mothering as a central part of her or his life. This paper will argue that as feminist theory and women's studies have grown and developed as a scholarly field, it has incorporated various and diverse theoretical models to represent the specific perspectives and concerns of particular groups of women; global feminism, queer feminism, third wave feminism, and womanism. In contrast, as I will go on to argue, feminist theory and women's studies more generally have not likewise recognized or embraced a feminism developed from the specific needs or concerns of mothers, what I have termed 'matricentric feminism'. The paper will consider possible reasons for the exclusion of matricentric feminism in feminist theory and demand this school of feminism must be accorded the same legitimacy and autonomy as other feminist theoretical models in the discipline of women's studies.

In the introduction to my edited volume *The 21st Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers Speak out on why we need to change the world and how to do it*, published in 2011, I coined the term matricentric feminism to describe a mother- centred feminism. I use the term matricentric feminism to distinguish it from maternal feminism and to mark it as a distinct motherhood politic and theory specific to its 21st century context. While matricentric feminism does borrow from maternalism in many of its strategies, it does so strategically and in ways specific to its 21st century context. Moreover, matricentric feminism also comprises the perspectives and philosophies of equal rights feminism and an ethics of care framework. Similar

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to Elaine Showalter, who coined the term gynocentric to signify a woman-centred perspective, I use the term matricentric to denote a mother-centred standpoint and emphasis to designate it as particular, long overdue and urgently needed mode of feminism.

It has been said that motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism. For example, a cursory review of recent scholarship on mothers and paid employment reveals that while women have made significant gains over the last three decades, mothers have not. Mothers in the paid labour force find themselves “mommy tracked,” making sixty cents for every dollar earned by full-time fathers (Williams, 2000, p. 2). Indeed, today the pay gap between mothers and non-mothers under thirty-five years is now larger than the wage gap between young men and women (Crittenden, 2001, 94). And while the “glass ceiling” and the “sticky floor” are still to be found in the workplace, most scholars would argue that it is the maternal wall that impedes and hinders most women’s progress in the workplace today. “Many childless women under the age of thirty five,” Ann Crittenden writes, “believe that all the feminist battles have been won” (88), but, as Crittenden continues, “once a woman has a baby, the egalitarian office party is over” (88). A discussion of the reasons for such ‘stalled feminism for mothers’ is beyond the scope of this paper; however, what needs to be emphasized here is what mothers need is a feminism that positions their needs and concerns as the starting point in theory and activism on and for women’s empowerment.

This is not to suggest that a matricentric feminism should replace traditional feminist thought; rather, it is to remind and emphasize that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman, and that many of the problems mothers face—socially, economically, politically, culturally, psychologically and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mothers. Indeed, mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers. Consequently,

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mothers need a mother- centred or matricentric mode of feminism organized from and for their particular identity and work as mothers. I would argue further that a mother-centred feminism is urgently needed and long overdue because mothers, arguably more so than women in general, remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism.

However, as mother scholars and activists have been engaged in matricentric feminism for two plus decades (the former in creation of a canon of Maternal Theory and the latter through the formation of a Motherhood Movement), the work of such matricentric feminism (in both theory and practice) has not been, I argue, recognized by or incorporated into mainstream feminist thought. This paper will attempt to answer why this specific “identity based” theory and practice of feminism, i.e. matricentric feminism, still remains marginal to Feminist Theory and Women’s Studies more generally.

The demand for a theory or practice based on a specific identity of women is hardly an innovative or radical claim. Over the last 40 plus years many groups of women have argued that mainstream feminism –largely understood to be Liberal Feminism—has not adequately represented their perspectives or needs. I think particularly of women of colour and their call for feminism that understood the intersectionality of their oppression as racialized women: a feminism now known as Womanism, or women from the global south and the development of a theory of global feminism, or queer/lesbian/bi/trans women and their call for queer feminist theory and activism. Likewise, the development of 3rd wave feminism in the 90s grew out of young women's sense of alienation from the aims of 2nd wave feminism.

When such women demanded a feminist theory of their own, the larger feminist movement acknowledged, albeit often reluctantly, that such women had been excluded from the larger canon of feminist thought and feminist theory was revised accordingly to include these

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different positions and perspectives within feminism. Most introductions to feminist theory textbooks now include chapters on socialist feminism, global feminism, queer feminism, 3rd wave feminism, and womanism.

However, over the last decade, as mothers began to call for feminism for mothers, such, I would argue, was not met with the same respect or recognition. More often than not the claim was dismissed, trivialized, disparaged, and ridiculed: why would mothers need such (implying I assume that mothers do not have needs or concerns separate from their larger identity of women). It troubles me deeply that feminists are able to understand the intersectionality of gendered oppression when it comes to race, class, sexuality, and geographical location but not so for maternity. But I would argue, and I suspect most mothers would agree, that maternity needs to be likewise included in, and understood in terms of, theories of intersectionality. Mothers do not live simply as women, but as mother women -- just as black females do not live simply as women but as racialized women-- and mothers' oppression and resistance under patriarchy is shaped by their maternal identity just as a black woman is by her racialized identity. For me this seems self-evident; why then is maternity not understood to be a subject position and hence not theorized as we do with other subject positions, in terms of the intersectionality of gendered oppression and resistance? Is it because maternity is seen to be less significant in determining our lives as women, that it doesn't count somehow, simply doesn't matter; that somehow as mothers we can see ourselves, and live our lives outside of our maternal selves? Non-racialized women understand that race and gender cannot be separated out; that black women's sense of who they are is simultaneously racialized and gendered. Why then can non-mothers not recognize the same for mothers?

I am not sure that I have the answers, but I think that the non-recognition of maternity as

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a subject position may be attributed to the larger marginalization, if not invisibility, of motherhood in Women's Studies. Further, such marginalization is the result of the low numbers of mother-professors in academe, particularly in positions of power and influence. Thus the women who are designing women's studies courses, setting the curriculum, deciding what books are to be read by students and more generally writing the feminist theory that informs feminist scholarship are not mothers. As non-mothers, these scholars fail to understand or appreciate how fully maternity is constitutive of mothers' gendered selves. Such is similar to the early years of the 2nd wave when white women wrote feminist theory as if all women lived their gender the same way: black women rightly corrected white women on this. The difference between now and then is that feminists recognized the legitimacy of black women's concerns and responded accordingly (though there is still work to be done on making feminism more inclusive of racial difference) but the same recognition, respect and response has not been accorded to mothers as they have made this same claim. Significantly, during the 2nd wave when white women were rightly challenged for their white bias and privilege, they recognized the need for change though they were not themselves racialized women. So I am left still asking questions: Why are non-mother feminists not capable of doing the same for mothers today? Why are non-mothers not able to appreciate and respond to the demands of inclusion made by mothers as white women did for racialized women in the early years of the 2nd wave? Why is motherhood not acknowledged as a subject position in constituting gendered identities? Why do we not see maternity as an interlocking structure of oppression as we do with race and class and include it in our gendered analysis of oppression and resistance? Why do we not recognize mothers' specific perspective as we do for other women whether they are queer, working-class, racialized, et cetera? Why doesn't motherhood count or matter?

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In my now close to 3 decades of mothering, researching, writing, and teaching on motherhood, I have sought to make sense of this particular and peculiar exclusion of motherhood in theorizing women's gendered oppression and resistance. The reasons for such as I discuss above, include 1) non-mother feminists fail to understand how fully motherhood matters because they themselves are not mothers and relatedly 2) the topic of motherhood is peripheral in the courses and curriculum of most Women's studies departments (a marginalization that has only worsened as Women's Studies become Gender Studies: but that is a subject for another day). But, again as I discuss above, such can only partially account for the absence of maternity in theorizing gendered oppression and resistance: racialized and queer subject positions are theorized by non-queer and racialized feminist theorists: so such should be possible by non-mothers for mothers. So what is going here?

It is my view that non-mothers fail “to get it” because of a larger and pervasive feminist discomfort with all things maternal. Much of 2nd wave feminism--in particular that of Liberal and Radical Libertarian feminism-- see motherhood as a significant, if not the determining, cause of women's oppression under patriarchy. To explore this argument fully is beyond the scope of this talk, but I will draw upon quotes from two well-known feminists to illustrate the argument I am making here. Betty Friedan's now infamous quote from the classic *Feminine Mystique*, “the problem that has no name” quickly became a tag or trope for the dissatisfaction supposedly felt by stay-at-home mothers. Friedan wrote that “in lieu of more meaningful goals, these women spent too much time cleaning their already tidy homes, improving their already attractive appearances, and indulging their already spoiled children”. Focusing on this unappealing picture of family life in affluent U.S. suburbs, Friedan concluded that “contemporary women needed to find meaningful work in the full-time, public workforce.”

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And this quote from Radical-Libertarian Feminist theorist Shulamith Firestone:

"No matter how much educational, legal, and political equality women achieve and no matter how many women enter public industry, nothing fundamental will change for women as long as natural reproduction remains the rule and artificial or assisted reproduction the exception. Natural reproduction is neither in women's best interests nor in those of the children so reproduced. The joy of giving birth- invoked so frequently in this society- is a patriarchal myth. In fact, pregnancy is barbaric, and natural childbirth is at best necessary and tolerable and at worst it is like shitting a pumpkin." (92)

In other words, motherhood is seen as a patriarchal institution that causes women's oppression, and thus the feminist 'solution' to such is avoiding motherhood both in theory and practice. Relatedly, because feminists are uncomfortable with anything that suggests gender essentialism --i.e. men are naturally this way; women naturally this way-- motherhood becomes highly problematic, as motherhood, more than anything else, is what marks our essential gender difference; only biological females can biologically become mothers. And because gender difference is seen as structuring and maintaining male dominance, many feminists seek to downplay and disavow anything that marked this difference; the main one being of course motherhood. Thus for many feminists, to talk of motherhood, to acknowledge women's specific gendered subjectivity as mothers, to develop a mother-centred feminism, is to play into patriarchy; acknowledge and affirm that is which is seen as marking and maintaining gender difference and hence the oppression of women.

However, as Motherhood scholars and mothers alike have rightly argued, such reasoning is deeply flawed in its failure to take into account the important difference between the institution of motherhood and women's experiences of mothering. In her ovarian work *Of*

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Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Adrienne 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” (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. The reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of feminist mothering. To critique the institution of motherhood therefore “is not an attack on the family or on mothering except as defined and restricted under patriarchy” (Rich, 14). 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. Rather, mothering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change if, to use Rich’s words, women became “outlaws from the institution of motherhood.” However, in much of feminist thought this crucial difference between the institution and the experience is not recognized or understood: hence mothering is conflated with motherhood and, maternity is regarded solely and exclusively as a patriarchal entity. The baby, in other words, has been thrown out with the bathwater.

Related to and informing this feminist discomfort, if not disavowal, of motherhood is the larger issue of what is to be done about the thorny issue of gender difference. With the exception

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of Radical-Cultural feminism and some 3rd wave feminist writing, gender difference, as I noted above, is understood to be the cause of women's oppression in mainstream feminist theory.

Liberal feminists, believing such, advocated what has been called sameness feminism --making women more like men-- while post-modern feminists seek to destabilize and deconstruct gender difference. I agree that gender is constructed --sex does not equal gender or as DeBeauvoir said “one is not born a woman but made one--”, and thus we cannot define ourselves or limit our lives to that which is socially constructed by gender. However, I likewise believe that feminists should not disavow motherhood to facilitate this destabilizing of gender. I believe we can simultaneously argue that gender is constructed and that motherhood matters; that maternity is integral to mother women's sense of self and her experience of the world. Maternal scholars do not reduce women's sense of self to motherhood, say that this is what makes her a woman, or that motherhood is more important than other variables that constitute self; only that motherhood matters and that it is central and integral to understanding mother women's oppression in patriarchy and their resistance to it.

Despite the challenges described above, I believe we can and must develop a specific feminism for mothers. Even if my arguments above have failed to convince, the reality is that the majority of women worldwide --over 80 percent-- become mothers and that such mothering is central to how they see and live in the world. Thus, a specific feminist theory for mothers is urgently needed and long overdue. So how do we create matricentric feminism? Integrate it into mainstream feminism? We need more women doing motherhood scholarship; need more mother professors in the academe; demand that motherhood research be made more integral to Women's Studies in the form of articles published in Women's Studies journals, motherhood books reviewed in such, and motherhood issues and topics be included in Women's studies courses and

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textbooks. Ironically, as I make this claim for mother-centred feminism in theory and practice, it can be seen as a case of shutting the barn door after, in my case, the donkeys are out. What I mean by this is that despite motherhood being marginalized, if not ignored, in feminist theory, we do already have a feminist theory and scholarship of our own. It does exist! As with other feminist schools of thought we have our intellectual and theoretical tradition established, know the central terms, concepts, issues, debates and so forth. We have it, so let us name it and then demand that motherhood feminism, what I have termed matricentric feminism, be acknowledged as a legitimate, viable, independent school of feminist thought. That matricentric feminism have a chapter of its own as do other schools of feminism theory -- queer, global, womanist, 3rd wave- - in our Feminist Theory readers, that introduction to women's studies courses include a unit on motherhood, as they do for transgender issues, violence, health and so forth, that Women's Studies journal include articles and book reviews on motherhood as they do for other Women's Studies topics. In other words I ask of feminism that matricentric feminism be recognized as a distinct feminist standpoint and that it be included in the theory, scholarship and teaching of feminist theory and Women's Studies more generally. And that as mother centred feminists we are recognized as feminists, and that, as such, we are entitled to a feminist scholarship and theory of our own: indeed, a room of our own in the home of Feminism.

Speech Upon Award

I would like to thank [Joy Rose](#), the conference committee, and to my sister inductees Phyllis and Barbara for their ovarian research and activism on and for mothers that has so greatly influenced my own scholarship and that of each and every one of us in this room.

Thirty years ago, at the age of 22 and in the fourth year of my Honours B.A., I learned that I wasn't just late...I was pregnant. Motherhood was something I had planned to do at 30-

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something after the career and the guy were established. I was not supposed to get pregnant now, and certainly not in this way: young, poor, and in a dating relationship. I thought, well though not planned, it is doable: the guy and I will move in together (30 plus years later we are still together) and I will continue on with my life as arranged: Finish my Honours English/Women's Studies BA and in 8 months' time begin my Master's Degree and be a smart and successful graduate student who could do literary theory as good as the boys. I did not know then, could not have known, how completely pregnancy, and later motherhood, would change my life. In the early months of pregnancy, I was horribly ill with unrelenting nausea, and in the later months I developed a quite serious case of pre-eclampsia which necessitated the daily monitoring of my blood pressure. I wrote a brilliant paper on the plight of fallen women in Victorian literature as my feet swelled and my back ached. I went into labour having just completed a major paper on sexuality and the empowerment of women; the ironies in retrospect are splendid. Labour destroyed any remnant of complacency left over from my pre-pregnant self. I hemorrhaged during labour and I have never before felt such pain, terror, or aloneness; nor have I since. When my son was finally born, pulled from my body with forceps, my spouse held him in his arms as I watched the doctor attempt to repair my ripped and torn self.

Nothing, as any new mother will tell you, can prepare you for the numbing exhaustion and the physic dislocation of new motherhood. Nor can anyone warn you about how deeply you will fall in love with your child. "Motherhood", as writer Marni Jackson so aptly puts it, "is like Albania-- you can't trust the description in the books, you have to go there".

So why have I shared this story with you? To render real and personal that argument I was making in my keynote: that motherhood matters; that it changes forever and always who we are and who we become. And thus we need a feminism for and about mothers. In my talk I said that

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matricentric feminism needed a room of its own in the house of feminism. I would like to suggest as I end these words that while we may not yet have this room of our own, we do have a museum of our own....and for all you that has made that happen I am so very very grateful.

Bio: **Andrea O'Reilly**, PhD, is Professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University and is founder and director of *The Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, founder and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* and founder and editor of Demeter Press, the first feminist press on motherhood. She is editor and author of 20 books on motherhood including most recently *21st Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (2010) *The 21st Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers speak out on why we need to change the world and how to do it* (2011); *Academic Motherhood in a Post Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies, Possibilities* with Lynn O'Brien-Hallstein (2012); and *What do Mothers Need: Motherhood Activists and Scholars Speak out Maternal Empowerment for the 21st Century* (2012). She is editor of the first encyclopedia on Motherhood (2010). In 2010 she was the recipient of the CAUT Sarah Shorten Award for outstanding achievements in the promotion of the advancement of women in Canadian universities and colleges. She is twice the recipient (1998, 2009) of York University's "Professor of the Year Award" for teaching excellence. She is the proud mama of three fabulous and feminist adult children. *Andrea O'Reilly*, aoreilly@yorku.ca

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The 21st Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers Speak Out on Why We Need to Change the World and How to do it, 2011

Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies and Possibilities, 2012

What do Mothers Need? Motherhood Activists and Scholars Speak out on Maternal Empowerment for the 21st Century, 2012

Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences: A Reader (forthcoming, May 2014)