

# WASHING BLOOD

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This issue of *Feminist Studies* was conceived out of the curiosity and needs of this moment: the choices, the resistances. To combine feminism and motherhood! we say, leaping into the future. But this did not turn out to be a practical issue of the journal. Nothing here about child care, about parenting, about fathers, nothing about the choice not to parent, about the family as a unit. Somehow the questions raised here did not take on a problem-solving or strategy-laden dimension but rather concern the mothers, mothering, motherhood. As we found them inside us. No feminist theory of motherhood? Well, we will start to invent one. We start with our hands on our pulses.

So the poetics of this issue of *Feminist Studies* are the poetics of discovery and telling, exploring and naming: “these serpentine caves.” “That vast chamber.” The multiple lights, beaming. [Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*]<sup>1</sup>

I dreamed that the best gift for a new mother was to come and help her wash the blood. This with the implacability of the dream fact to be startling at my leisure. Communion? Cleansing? Saturation? Transition? All the dimensions of the image wake me.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote “Love will give her back her mother as well as her father, it will give her back her childhood.” [*The Second Sex*]<sup>2</sup> For me it was parenthood that brought me my parents: sudden, cataleptic as a seizure, parenthood not ever precisely replicated, though close to certain divorces and remarriages. Parenthood by adoption. Adoption of an older child, over eight, in fact, who was wretched, mourning, bitter, frightened, manipulative: all. For he had been rejected, first in many dimensions of his being, and then in front of a courthouse judge. By the mother, by the father. What other children dream of, fear is secretly true, happened. Now he faces us.

Then I got back my mother and my father, but the wrong ones. I became wrong, the nervous mother the wounded father. Where are the warm mother the witty father? As if they never were.

Expressed through me every day, can barely call them emotions, my vulnerability, my hardness, my insufficiency.

Adrienne Rich's book on motherhood (*Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*) was also in my thoughts; not only had it just been published, it was also "about" me.<sup>3</sup> Its first value was the palpable value of a life raft, as I swallowed the ocean. When I felt boredom, I opened her book, and she had written "boredom." When I felt anger, she had written "anger." Every part of that book described something I needed: the vulnerabilities and ambivalence, tidal washes as I struggled with this child and my life, the embittering fears of total inadequacy that sear down to a core and burn me out, the battle of wills and wits I hardly understood.

During my sudden immersion into mothering I became aware that if another child did something silly or arrogant, my response would be tolerance or patient amusement, but if my (barely my) child did the same thing I was angry, threatened. I felt the conservative imprinting of the mother role start coming out in me as if I were a wrong negative which a hand had dropped into a developing solution. Dead hand of the past. Embalming solution. No solution.

A piece of motivic and thematic literary criticism: Judith Gardiner in this issue speaks of the maternal deathbed in contemporary women's writing. "The dying mothers [in five novels] represent the shifting roles and negative personal traits that the daughters want to bury."

Some of the negative role, the wrong mother, the wrong father, was tension within the strained experience of the first year(s) of this adoption. For weren't we the "wrong" mother and father after all? Not the ones he wanted. And people were equally divided in their responses: those who said "O you're doing something wonderful" which translates, you're crazy, and those who said "Aren't you scared, after all, those first eight years of life," which translates, you're crazy. Why do this? To become more human. But I was feeling less human. So there is one strain, right off: of proving that you are not crazy. Also human. But why do mothers immobilize? why do they, why did I, say no?

what was I saying no to? those dumb things I hardly cared about. Is all motherhood battleground?

“I realize that I was effectively alienated from my real body and my real spirit by the institution—not the fact—of motherhood.” [Rich, pp. 38-39] Rich’s book now inside me makes figures like Gestalt images, I change, she changes. I see faces, she sees a vase; then suddenly I see the vase, then again the faces. As: is everything good about motherhood generated by the “real” woman’s self, and everything bad about motherhood generated by patriarchy? Is there a “pure” self which exists beyond the system in which it is immersed? How has it gotten there; what sustains it?

I need to be mothered. I tell people how sick I am. I seek them out to tell them. I haven’t been so sick since I really left home, then since I broke with one man and found the other. Laryngitis, unspeakable. I catch everything—from the child. He has brought it home. To me.

My friend told me: I have a dog. The dog had puppies. She said, I thought, it’s natural, it’s just a dog. Suddenly the dog rushed to my lap, whimpering, miserable, having deserted the puppies who lay stumbling on the floor.

“Can’t you take that out of here now and leave me alone?”

*two-headed river*  
*two-headed arrow*  
*breasts*

First he hates me, for months and months, with nuances and changes. I cannot bear it. And to realize it is not me he hates and still he hates me. (She locked him out, I take him in.) I have been ripped to the core. Does this give me nothing? No, it has given me

being ripped. My core is burning. I am not ironic. My human grief.

Rich’s book outlines the dynamics of motherhood as it is. She triangulates the area in which motherhood occurs: misogyny, powerlessness, the pitiless *lex talonis* which exacts the mother’s life for the life of her child. Motherhood as a “culturally-produced event” [Rich, p. 177, citing Brigitte Jordan] determines our relations to our children.

The institution of motherhood cannot be touched or seen.[ . . .] It must go on being evoked, so that women never again forget that our many fragments of lived experience belong to a whole which is not of our creation.

[Rich, p. 276]

All the social, sexual, economic, psychological and legal constraints on women contribute to the oppressive system of patriarchal motherhood. These constraints

are the connecting fibers of this invisible institution, and they determine our relationship to our children whether we like to think so or not.

[Rich, p. 276]

For Rich, motherhood is the most galling site where patriarchal controls are expressed, for here are combined the natural, biological capabilities, and the historical forms into which these are organized. But Rich works and talks half-historically. She is interested in a level of generalization which would trace all to patriarchy.

While attracted by this global and all-encompassing word, I would like to begin building a picture in my mind that could show the nuances and changes in patriarchal institutions over the course of time. Without that picture and some analysis of why changes have occurred, it will be impossible to fit any analytic wedge into our situation either to begin to conceive of changing it or to understand why it is changing. Ruth Bloch's historical article, published here, confronts us with the notion that motherhood had "not always been a dominant feminine ideal" when a somewhat retrograde theology of infant depravity was in force, but motherhood came to be viewed much as it is today when the contraction of female helpmeet activity brought in its train the expansion and specialization of the maternal role. To historicize our thinking.

Rich's book is the first document in a feminist world history: Herodotean, it incorporates cosmogony, utopia, chronicle, myth.

Dreaming: that I have found and descended into the other side of the library. Where there are the other books. Not the culture I know, but the one I would invent.

"Much talk about my idea [writes Frances] that 'She puts on his knowledge with his power'—that when a woman writes a female perspective in 'male' or 'conventional' prose style, she inevitably is writing male knowledge, and better a poor prose style in the effort to get the feminist or female thing said than too much effort

to say it ‘perfectly’ and somehow in the process risk not saying it at all.”

[Frances Jaffer, letter, 14 February 1978]

The other side: where she takes off his knowledge, where she takes off his power (and those feathers!).

“Do I move toward form, do I use all my fears?”

[Muriel Rukeyser, *The Gates*]<sup>4</sup>

Enter. The parents. Thread the camel self through the eye of the parental needle. Come out

on the other side.

Interruption: have you finished with Sunday’s paper? Should I toss it out?

Goddamn it!

angry sensuous practice

“It’s not two minutes since Daddy left and you’ve started picking a fight with me.”

the certitudes dissolve into questions. We regard them

with love.

*The parents step out of the sea,  
out of themselves. Step  
onto themselves, the sand.*

Washing the blood. To adopt is to live with another mother: the emotional disaster, the psychic violence, the past. This child’s concrete past inscribed—deeply.

But every mother has the past of the mother, that emerges mother upon mother like great sacrificial pyramids. For Eve is first, since Lilith skulks on the other side of the library, and we are given her graven image in hegemonic culture. She embodies “the female fall (as Sandra Gilbert says in her article here) from the lost paradise of art, speech and autonomy into the hell of sexuality, silence and filthy materiality.”

The split, the split between heaven and hell, speech and silence, the angelic overview and the bestial immersion: we have played these out on our bodies, these have saturated our minds: an oppo-

sition that does not serve us but enslaves us, that we do not control, but suffer. . . .

So the poetics of this issue of *Feminist Studies* repeats and affirms one of the tenets of an epistemology that includes us. Motherhood, like most of women's experiences, has been viewed from the outside: from a "patrivincial" perspective. (Rich's word) To end patrivincial description is a stress shift, sight shift, paradigm shift, shift of the ground of our knowing. We become the subjects and objects of our own totalizing analysis. For this endeavor, the imagery of the law courts, the laboratory, the witness rising in church to testify. The serpentine cave. But even more: an experience of conversion. For as Thomas Kuhn says in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, any knowledge is immersed in its own value system. To make a new analysis involves conversion, a sudden re-seeing, as material present but unstressed, as material not given value in another context suddenly is made visible. And even more: as theory is remade, fact is also. Things not even visible, things that were not there before rise from the perspective of a new organizing principle, called into being by the theory which can, for the first time, pose them, because it can for the first time understand them. A dialectical relation between fact and theory. For a "fact" is not an isolated phenomenon, but is only given value and visibility by virtue of its status in a theory that purports not only to explain its prior existence but to bring it into being. To give it existence. In the first place.

We are the knowers and the terms of the known. We make ourselves. Dangerous. We must not be self-deceiving. It is creative labor.

How to make the dialectical fusion between subject and object, between thought and feeling, between fact and theory becomes the secret topic of much of the writing published here. This is epitomized by Carol Poston's critical article which begins, "What follows is a description of one of my childbirths." Washing blood.

Trying for a unity not insulated from the conflicts that structure our experience: the practice, the sensuous human activity. For the chief defect of all [analysis] up to now is that the object, reality, what we apprehend through our senses, is understood only in the form of the object of contemplation; not as sensuous human activity, as practice; not subjectively.

[Karl Marx, "Theses on Fuerbach"]<sup>5</sup>

Mercurial, I am weeping, I cannot do this, my whole self blocks my way to another self. I stand in my own way. Bring this home to me. Negative image. Wrong doorway. I am my own antithesis. This is inside me, not outside only; it is in myself and in the fibers of my being, I have no trans-historical self to turn to.

Must find a birth sufficient for this blood.

As I read the retrospective analyses of motherhood published here, it is clear that naming is hardly finished. There is no ready-made solution to the problem of being a feminist mother, and this was expressed, with comic accident, in the word "toward." Toward a feminist theory of motherhood, meaning, we haven't gotten there yet.

*In my bed, I dream of the murderous mother.*

*In bed dead father, black as a puppet.*

*Under the scummy pool, she holds her dark-haired daughters.*

*Two precious pearls, these parents.*

*Who has love enough to meet them*

*At the ever-increasing crossroads?*

So, much of the writing here stands at the antithesis of a dialectical process. We have taken the culturally mandated picture of motherhood (nurturance only in Jane Flax's terms; read her article here), taken that name tag and examined it. We have placed our ambivalence, our vulnerability, our naming in the antithetical position. On the other side of the library. But we have not yet made a synthesis.

I was getting a name tag. They gave me one with my mother's name. I said openly, "Sorry, this is the wrong one. This isn't me." Q: what was I rejecting? my mother? the role of mother? stereotypes of mother? the adoption?

Stop worrying. "You will need guts of iron."

I remember myself at 15, desperate; on my lap is a wild and intelligent child. I am the only one who can calm him, because I poured the whole transfixing intensity of need, my life without focus, on his 4 year old head. One source of power: I could mother. I could calm him. I do not experience the same totality of giving now. Was I a better "mother" when I had no other life?

No. There must be a way of saying no. Rich, again: that children (she says sons) must not be asked to “live under the burden of their mother’s unlive lives” [p. 207], that we must create “mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not be the vessels of another woman’s self-denial and frustration.” [p. 247]

Then too, birth and death, washing blood. (The birth-deaths in Poston’s, the death-births in Gardiner’s matching articles.) One nexus that we can identify in this issue of *Feminist Studies* is motherhood and death. There is so much death, for example, in the poems, in the “personal essays.” (I don’t know what to call them. Or this.) Which makes me wonder about the topos of the dead baby in nineteenth century women’s poetry—whether it speaks to some prime crossing of material necessary to elucidate: giving life and giving death. The ultimate contradiction. For one of the features that distinguishes women as a group is that women are the site of intense contradictions. Between social and cultural scripts and private resilience, between role and vocation, between residual ideas, like romantic love, and dominant ways of perceiving the realities of love and marriage. Between nurturance and autonomy, as Jane Flax shows. And then between these two biological polarities, which are always mediated historically (see Janet Bogdan) yet still are stark, absolute experiences. Birth and death.

Why death? In times of lowering infant mortality, infant death is a shock, calling for heightened consolation. If women are supposed to bear live children, death, womb death, child death is the shock to the system of beliefs through which we define our value, and we must console ourselves. Why death? Because motherhood is a psychic reminder of human mortality. (Dorothy Dinnerstein uses that idea; Ann Snitow introduces *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* later in this journal.) Why? Because the social organization of motherhood is destructive, because motherhood under patriarchy means the death of the self: Rich.

The face, the vases. Vessels. Faces. Which do I see? Motherhood under patriarchy, Rich says, is “powerless responsibility” [p. 52], epitome of the female condition in the patriarchal order. In motherhood you take personal blame for failures, your responsibility is individualized and concrete, guilt-filled. (But surely this is a culture-bound observation. We know that for us, children are viewed as personal possessions, property. And children are seen as tests of our success or failure as women. Competitiveness and



product-orientation, privatization, possessiveness, property—don't these values begin to sound familiar? being the ideology linked to an economic and social system. Therefore historical, mutable.) However, you, the mother, also lack the political and social power to alter the conditions of life which you and your children are touched and shaped by. (And men? your man? surely all men do not have all power at all time, to revert to that old, necessary argument.) Further you, the mother, lack the power of consciousness; you are mystified. Motherhood is culture's sacred cow. When women criticize it, they are challenging all institutions that have axiomatic status, institutions which appear natural. Woman as mother translates into woman/nonquestioner; woman/nature; woman/sufferer, woman/madonna. So motherhood is the key role, the keystone in the patriarchal arch. For it is also the site of the wresting of power from women. This is Rich's argument.

To make the transformation of that institution, we must take back our former power. At the heart of the book, does Rich's argument change? From being an argument about the cultural power of definition, and the dialectical formation of self, within culture and society, experience and institution, does it become an argument about a persistent female spirit, unshatterable, pulsing under the strata of patriarchy, alive

and this spirit, this spirit is incarnate in body. A religious vision. Transfixing. Thus "The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers." [Rich, p. 285] If Rich means that socialism as we've seen it does not necessarily embody feminism, she is totally correct. But if she means that one cannot have a socialist vision (about economic transformation, the transformation of class relations) and be a genuine feminist, this seems a gratuitous slap at an analytic model which differs from her own. The controversy is very fecund. Is body organization more potent, more potentially revolutionary, more "essential" than economic organization? Vases, faces: I say yes, I say no. Is body organization as others appropriate it the material basis for the oppression of women? Does repossession of our bodies occur as an act of will and mind, or as an act of social transformation? If this repossession is a spiritual act of definition alone, I feel it will not have sufficient momentum: for as patriarchy is affirmed economically, politically, culturally, the overthrow of a patriarchal system must be affirmed in legal, medical, political, economic spheres.

But it seems to me that when Rich approaches the question what will transform motherhood, she approaches it not through the social organization of life but through the biological and organicist nexus. Blood tells.

Rich: a woman's physiology was the original source of her pre-patriarchal power. This mana was the biological phenomenon of physical changes: pregnancy, childbirth, lactation. This was feared, and consequently was appropriated and controlled. (Here Rich fills in with the thin holding mortar of a conspiracy theory; because we had power, we had it wrested, from us, by them.)

Motherhood, seen as the production of children, was the key institution for the self-conscious definition that patriarchy made of itself. Biological motherhood and its assumed concomitant, female political power, were seized or appropriated, and this seizure of control was the defining moment in the creation of, or in the political consolidation of, patriarchy.

Therefore women need now to dethrone patriarchal definitions of the experience and institutions of motherhood. (It is as if through that act we leap the barrier between pre-history and ourselves?)

By making this demystification we will therefore and necessarily (this does not follow, but may tell on our pulses) connect with the long buried power of our bodies, bringing about a healing unification of body and mind based not only on the lived experiences of motherhood as a social institution (sensuous human activity, practice) but also on a biological power speaking through us.

As a woman thinking, I experience no such [dualistic] division in my own being between nature and culture, between my female body and my conscious thought. In bringing the light of critical thinking to bear on her subject, in the very act of *becoming more conscious* of her situation in the world, a woman may feel herself coming deeper than ever into touch with her unconscious and with her body. . . . [Reading] she has to ask herself, not merely, "What does my own prior intellectual training tell me?" but "What do my own brain, my own body, tell me—my memories, my sexuality, my dreams, my powers, and energies?"

[Rich, p. 95 n.]

The manifesto. The end of dualism. Yes, I breathe, the end of dualism. But by what means? For certainly there are several ways to end dualism? different ways, with different meanings. No philosopher, I cannot catalogue. But I have experienced two.

Unification, unity of all, an appeal to blood knowledge, to a racial or spiritual mystery, to intuition that rises in us. An organicist appeal. And then the other. Contradictions, being pulled viscerally in two different directions, feeling two options so live that they are me, define me. Being sited, as a woman, to experience the maximum impact of cultural and social contradictions. The pain of living in doubt, confusion; the pain of live options without resolution. We are living at the cusp of the antithesis. All elements have precipitated. The force of contradiction lives within us.

The end of dualism? always possible, but never permanent. Other contradictions will be born, come forward. If I have one quarrel with Rich it is this. That she talks of dualisms that must be forever, permanently dissolved in the welling up of body knowledge, and I want to speak of active dualisms that work in relation, that are sublated and transformed, where the process will be endless because historical.

If, by the process of touching physicality, Rich wants to find that essence beyond conflict, the place where all women necessarily meet, the essence of the woman, pure blood, I cannot follow there.

Washing blood.

I try to think what I have felt. Layers of death, agony of the biological wall: resentment, resistance, grief. Then paths. The stubborn choice of a path ("but your genes!" "he will not have your genes"). With a baby, first you have love, milky, then you have resistance, wills, the adversary. With an older child, first you have resistance, wills, the adversary. There is grim, unquenchable distrust, matched by grim unquenchable persistence.<sup>6</sup>

Then after a while, love, but love unlike any other, that comes and then dies, that comes and dies. Like nothing I have ever experienced before, the vacuum of love, and all of us knowing the exact dimensions of that vacuum, waiting for the indelicate transformation of all our terrible pasts that will allow filling.

"I love you because you want to be my Mom. Thank you."

For all the times I have been mothered by you F-----, and by you M--, I say: we all adopt parents. Any way. That there are children in the world, brought in variously, distributed variously. These are parented for a while. They do not belong to any of us. As

adults we have a collective responsibility for children. (Little piggies though they are, we were once those selfsame piggies.) We all bring up children not our own.

As with Rukeyser's sequence "Nine Poems for the Unborn Child." In it, she speaks of making many choices, for the child. The choice of its life. Then the choice of its life on the bed of her potential death. She chooses its "social condition," knowing that its fatherlessness could be either the laceration of perpetual hurt or a form of knowing. She chooses to allow the child the difficulties of his existence that none can protect another from confronting. The fullness of difficulty. To "use" one's life, she says.

I dreamed of telling friends about the adoption, while finding food in some shadowy underground place where one also

votes.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed., H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1952, originally published in 1949), p. 606.

<sup>3</sup>Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976).

<sup>4</sup>Muriel Rukeyser, *The Gates* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1963), p. 197.

<sup>6</sup>The best book I know about all this is Ann Carney's *No More Here and There: Adopting the Older Child* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1976).