

BOOK/VIDEO REVIEW

Maternal Theory: Essential Readings. Andrea O'Reilly, ed. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007; 846 pages; ISBN 978-1-55014-482-6; \$49.95 (paper).

Whatever Floats Your Boat: Perspectives on Motherhood. Dir. Heather McCrae. 2007. DVD. Pink Gazelle Productions Inc.; \$24.95 or \$74.95 (with educational resource kit)

In her introduction to *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, Andrea O'Reilly, founder of the Association for Research on Mothering, celebrates the ample scholarship on motherhood and mothering. This was not always the case. O'Reilly points out that when Adrienne Rich wrote her influential *Of Woman Born* in 1976 there was not only a dearth of academic literature on the topic of mothering, but it was quite taboo to critically speak about motherhood as a patriarchal institution and revolutionary to imagine feminist mothering in academic circles (O'Reilly 1). By the time O'Reilly drew articles together for this collection, there was a canon of maternal scholarship to draw on. And yet, *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* is the first anthology to bring together writings on motherhood for the purpose of establishing "central concepts, ideas, and models of maternal theory" (2).

Maternal Theory: Essential Readings is an astounding reader; selections capture the last thirty years of maternal theorizing. The canonical authors are sampled here (Rich, Chodorow, Ruddick, Kristeva, hooks, Hill Collins, to name but a few). The collection also includes voices from emerging maternal theorists such as Gore, Juffer, Gutiérrez and Noonan. Chapters represent a wide range of social identities and academic disciplines; O'Reilly is keen to ensure diversity (2). This is important because a valid critique of motherhood scholarship is its centralization of the white, middle-class, heterosexual, 30 yrs+, able-bodied, Judeo-Christian, North American-born mother. While this volume could go a bit further in including voices from women who do not fit the profile described above, especially women outside the Global North, at 846 pages it is quite a tome! The regrettable omissions signal the need for a second volume which could include, for example, work on pregnancy, non-biological mothering, maternal activism, new reproductive technologies, and mothering in the Global South.

In her introduction, O'Reilly promises three themes: "motherhood as experience/role, motherhood as institution/ideology and motherhood as identity/subjectivity" (2). Perhaps it would have been beneficial to organize the chapters around these themes rather than present them chronologically. However, anyone unsure of how to group these readings together would benefit from O'Reilly's suggestions in the introduction where she outlines how the book can be used as a central course text in women's studies, gender studies, sociology, history or psychology classes. She also notes how selections from the reader may be used to fulfill course units on certain topics or in conjunction with other course texts

in a variety of academic classrooms. This text ranges in academic accessibility but is very useful for undergraduate or graduate level courses.

Maternal Theory: Essential Readings compliments *Whatever Floats Your Boat: Perspectives on Motherhood*. In fact, the reader provides the basis for critique of the documentary. In *Whatever Floats Your Boat*, filmmaker Maryanne Pope invites eleven women for a weekend houseboat trip to talk about motherhood. Pope assembles a variety of people that includes intentionally childfree women, single mothers, stay-at-home mothers, full-time working mothers, women struggling with infertility and women who have adopted children. Some are (re)married, some are divorced and some are widowed. The participants are predominantly in their thirties, although one woman is in her twenties while another has just turned fifty. Their children range in age from toddlers to teenagers. Like O'Reilly's *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, the strength of the documentary lies in its gathering of women with an assortment of mothering backgrounds. But while the participants vary in experiences, they are not a particularly diverse group otherwise and, unfortunately, replicate the dominance of straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied, 30-somethings within discourses on motherhood.

Filmmaker Pope seems aware of the group's lack of heterogeneity. For instance, the DVD is supplemented by a 20 minute facilitated discussion with eight additional women. This should be used in conjunction with the documentary because it brings racially, ethnically, and class diverse women into dialogue with the film. These additional women introduce issues such as expectations of mothering based on ethnicity, the unparalleled scrutiny of potential adoptive parents, the silence of infertility, judgments between women who have trouble conceiving, and the option of abortion for those who do not want to mother. There is a supplementary educational resource kit that includes interviews with other women thereby adding the voices of lesbian mothers and stepmoms. The kit is a fabulous resource as it includes further readings, discussion questions and potential assignments for students.

During the 53 minute documentary, three themes emerge: the choice to mother, freedom/independence as a mother, and the social expectations of mothers. If I could choose one word to summarize the entire film, it would be "ambivalence"; these women illustrate what Adrienne Rich so importantly theorized as maternal ambivalence. There is an awareness of the limitations on women who mother as well as the joys of motherhood. The dialogue is refreshingly honest, sometimes cringe-worthy and heartbreaking. One particular section that stands out for this reviewer, and the women in the facilitated discussion, is an exchange between 38 year old child-free Shannon and 50 year old Colleen G. who survived cancer that left her unable to bear biological children. These women get into a heated debate about whether one can be fulfilled without children. The pain of infertility is evident with Colleen G. who wishes she was able to have biological children, and this is countered by Shannon's assertion that children should not determine a woman's value in society. It is an agonizing discussion that leaves participants unsettled into the next day and is sure to resonate with viewers. Other moments that made me squirm involved discussions of single motherhood, biological clocks and adoption. While these moments were unsettling to me, I appreciate the women's candor and value the experiences through which they arrived at their ideas. Ultimately, Maryanne Pope,

documentary filmmaker, and Andrea O'Reilly, editor, should be commended for enabling the space to work out issues about motherhood and mothering in a culture that tends to marginalize or silence honest dialogue about these experiences.

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