

Matroreform

Feminist Mothers and Their Daughters Creating Feminist Motherlines

This paper, based on long-term research with a number of feminist families, addresses the relationships between specific feminist mothers and their daughters. It explores how some daughters of feminist mothers often embrace, and at times, attempt to emulate their mothers, unlike many daughters who experience matrophobia—the fear of becoming their mothers (Rich, 1986). Through matroreform—the empowering process of claiming and acting on power from within (Wong-Wylie, 2006)—daughters have benefited from their feminist mother’s courageous and deliberate challenges to the institution of motherhood. Furthermore, they appreciate how their mother’s have negotiated the social and cultural obstacles to the self-determination and agency for themselves and for their children. This paper continues the narrative of feminist motherlines; the feminist maternal genealogy that records and ensures the difficult, yet rewarding work of feminist mothering remains a communal and political endeavour.

I hope that feminist mothering is one of the things that’s going to help us move, over the long term, in raising children who are wanting to see this world be a better place and that they have a part to play in making it so. And whether that’s in anti-oppression work, or whether it’s in raising their own kids from a feminist perspective, I don’t care. But something that says, “I can make a difference in this world.”²¹

In her recent essay, “Images and Echoes in Matroreform: A Cultural Feminist Perspective,” psychologist Gina Wong-Wylie (2006) discusses the theory of matrophobia—the fear of becoming one’s mother—first proposed by feminist theorist Adrienne Rich (1986). Wong-Wylie argues that the use of “phobia” in this case does not accurately describe “the real and common experience of feminist mothers to not want to reproduce or be trapped in the oppressive

bonds of conventional motherhood” (142). Rather, Wong-Wylie contends the concept of “matroreform,” which she defines as “an act, desire and process of claiming motherhood power,” is a more appropriate term because it specifically refers to “a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one’s motherline” (135).

According to Jungian analyst Naomi Lowinsky (2000), one’s motherline can be imagined as a line, a cord, or a thread that connects every woman—each born of a woman—back to her foremothers through her roots of family and culture (231). Wong-Wylie cogently presents a compelling illustration of how she engages in the active process of matroreform in her parenting to create a meaningful motherline for herself and her daughter by engaging in reflective understandings and narratives of her life experiences, despite a previously invisible motherline of her Chinese foremothers due to the cultural dissonance she experienced as a young Chinese Canadian girl living in Montreal. By attending to her own maternal narrative as the mother of a daughter, and linking that narrative to her reflections and understanding/s of her personal relationship as a daughter with her own mother, Wong-Wylie works to forge a strong bond with her daughter. In embodying matroreform and creating a new feminist motherline, she challenges patriarchal norms of motherhood and empowers herself and her daughter by living her life with authority, agency and autonomy (O’Brien and Swadener, 2006: xviii).

I am excited by Wong-Wylie’s language that articulates this feminist motherwork. Over the past dozen years or so, I have been engaged in a longitudinal and intergenerational study of feminist mothering, focusing on a group of self-identified feminist mothers living in Winnipeg, Canada and, more recently, on a number of their adult daughters.² Through this research I have observed how matroreform is a process that “is not only reforming and reaffirming (but also) a feminist act of voicing up and out of invisibility and silence” (Wong-Wylie, 2006: 136).

In this article I explore how a small group of feminist mothers and their daughters attempt to “unravel the patriarchal script of motherhood to write their own stories of motherhood and daughterhood” (O’Reilly, 2000: 145). Due to ethical considerations of interviewing minors and the limited number of available adult children, I draw upon one-on-one interviews with five daughters of four feminist mothers. Of particular interest is how these particular women are creating their own mother/daughter script to establish matroreform rather than foster matrophobia. I begin by examining feminist theorizing of motherhood, provide an overview of the ways in which feminist mothers have chosen to challenge conventional expectations of motherhood, and conclude with examples of how their feminist daughters continue to create feminist motherlines.

The patriarchal script of motherhood

In her monumental book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, feminist theorist Adrienne Rich (1986) purports that mother-

hood has two meanings in which “one is 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” (original italics, 13). This distinction is often difficult to recognize, as both elements are normalized by social and cultural demands placed on women in the name of motherhood. For instance:

Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal “instinct” rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self. Motherhood is “sacred” so long as its offspring are “legitimate”—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother. (Rich, 1986: 42)

The institution of motherhood is often elusive because there is “no symbolic architecture, no visible embodiment of authority, power or of potential or actual violence” (Rich, 1986: 274-5). Yet, as Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels assert in their book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (2004), current Western motherhood entails “a set of ideals, norms and practices most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem—on the surface—to celebrate motherhood, but which—in reality—spread standards of perfection that are beyond our reach” (5). This “new Momism” dictates and acts upon a highly romanticized myth of the perfect mother who needs to be a faultless therapist, pediatrician, mind reader, caretaker, consumer, safety expert and homemaker.

An ideology of intensive mothering is central to today’s new Momism. Sociologist Sharon Hays (1996) argues in her influential book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, that, “The ideology of intensive mothering is a gendered model that advises mothers to expend tremendous amounts of time, energy and money in raising their children” (x). Mothers are also expected to place the child’s needs and desires during each stage of their development before anyone else’s, including their own, and, with the help of experts, be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood. The myths and discourse of motherhood are popularly transmitted and circulate easily because of their fluid currency within a society that celebrates and rewards these motherhood traditions, images and narratives (Hall, 1998: 61). This discourse offers a readily available and socially accepted role for mothers and, hence, becomes naturalized and embodied in the everyday lives and worlds of people, including mothers.³

While the institution of motherhood may be insidious to most people, it is tangible to all of the feminist mothers I interviewed. They understand, as Rich (1986) asserts, that their relationship to their powers of reproduction

and their children is a source of energy and a strategy that can potentially destroy the institution of motherhood and liberate them as mothers (280). Through claiming the knowledge of their own experiences, feminist mothers understand the dual meaning of motherhood proposed by Rich and consciously enact strategies of resistance in their parenting to create feminist motherlines for their children.⁴

Matroreform: Enacting strategies of resistance and claiming motherhood power

Due to the limited space of this article, I only provide an overview of the ways in which feminist mothers resist and unravel patriarchal models of motherhood. This summary draws from findings of the larger long-term project, and concludes with a more detailed example from one mother involved in the more recent mother-daughter study.⁵

Driven by their feminist consciousness, by their intense love for their children and by their need to be true to themselves, their families and their parenting, feminist mothers choose to parent in ways that challenge the status quo. All are critical of conventional nuclear family arrangements due, in part, to the hierarchy that places men over women, and adults over children. Some mothers openly reject the pressures and expectations placed on them to reproduce motherhood ideals by parenting in ways that explicitly contest conventional standards of motherhood. This may be in the form of conceiving, birthing and/or raising children as single heterosexual women, or as single or partnered lesbian or bisexual mothers. For others it means refusing to stay in and, thus, leaving unsupportive heterosexual relationships and nuclear families. Partnered heterosexual women challenge stereotypical gender roles by insisting on equally shared domestic and family responsibilities.

In all cases feminist mothers use their energy, focus and dedication to contest conventional expectations and models of motherhood. They also use their socially sanctioned position as mothers to teach their children to be critically conscious of and to challenge various forms of oppression that support patriarchy. Each mother takes a distinctive approach to defy and work loose the patriarchal script of motherhood. I elaborate on one such strategy by drawing on the experiences of Beverly.

Beverly is a 57-year-old, Ukrainian, single mother of two adult daughters. She has always been critical of and contested traditional family structures, most notably as a young bisexual when she conceived and birthed her two children with different fathers. Neither of these two relationships endured the test of time, and Beverly has largely raised her daughters as a single parent with limited support from their fathers.

At the time of our most recent interview in 2005, Beverly had been partnered with another woman for five years and redefined her sexuality from bisexual to lesbian “primarily to give recognition to all those lesbians before me who had to struggle to come out as lesbian and what that means.” Always

concerned about social justice, she currently works as a provincial project officer for a national organization developing programs addressing the victimization of women, girls and queers. When I spoke with Beverly's daughters, Sonia aged 31 and Kyla 28, in the fall of 2007, they had just returned to their respective homes from a rare family vacation with their mother overseas.

Beverly confronts the patriarchal model of the insular nuclear family being the only legitimate family form through her personal identity and creation of her family. She believes this narrow and constraining family structure causes harm to mothers and children:

The more and more you move to this emphasis on the nuclear family, the more isolation mothers experience in general. Those feelings of isolation can quickly lead to an erosion of one's self-esteem. You know when you are losing it as a mother. You know when you are just not able to cope anymore, and you just want somebody, anybody, to walk in the door and change things.

And it's just so prevalent in our society; we seem to think that women have this biological, intrinsic nature that we're supposed to know how to mother. There's this huge myth that I think we've all bought into, that we can do this alone, with no help. And then there's the myth that your husband's going to help you, and he doesn't know how to. Another myth is that you're going to turn to your mother at times when you're stressed, and she's gonna tell you what to do. When you know damn well that the only thing that she's going to tell you to do is what she did to you, which you don't want to repeat.

So, this whole system is clearly out of whack. And it's certainly not promoting the best interests of the children, and it's not promoting the best interests of women.

Beverly's attitude, philosophy and approach to mothering greatly differs from that prescribed by the institution of motherhood. She believes, "if your mothering comes from a place where you're constantly challenging conventional structures and notions then that's a political act in and of itself. And hopefully you're assisting your children to be able to critically analyze those same structures so that they can, in turn, challenge them where necessary and appropriate." She tells me:

One of the things that informed my mothering was the sense that women are strong in their own right, and we are capable of being independent and can critically analyze what's going on in the world around us. I was not big on women's roles; I did not want to mold them into being like my mother, being a stay-at-home mom and that kind of thing. And so, I really pushed their education. I pushed for their sense of themselves, to be able to be whatever they wanted to be.

I see feminism as totally intertwined with anti-racism, anti-poverty, anti-homophobia and anti-ableism and all the rest of it. Until we look at all of these oppressions and working on liberation for ALL of us who are marginalized, we're not going to achieve women's substantive equality. It's just not going to happen because there're too many ways for patriarchy to oppress us, cause so many of us are multiply oppressed.

Like the other feminist mothers, Beverly models an alternative mothering model and approach to motherhood for her children. She also lives her feminism in her relationships with her daughters. As a younger mother involved in feminist activist work she took her children to various meetings and events. She also engaged with them daily in ways that honoured their autonomy and individuality, noting, "I've had to treat my children in an equal fashion from the beginning so that they have always known that they have the right to express themselves, that they have the right to say, 'No' and that we could engage in a dialogue about the issue as opposed to me wielding my power over them. And that's still very important to me."

This approach is not unique to Beverly; rather it illustrates a fundamental method of feminist mothering shared by all of the women interviewed.⁶ Feminism is central to their worldview and is the foundation of their parenting practices. Feminist mothering helps their daughters develop into women with a strong sense of themselves and an understanding that mothering does not have to replicate the patriarchal model of motherhood. The following section features reflections of five adult daughters on their understanding of their mother's feminist parenting and how it has influenced their sense of self and life choices.

Matroreform: Developing new feminist motherlines

Attention to maternal narrative links hearing of one's mother's voice as she attempts to challenge patriarchal norms (e.g., mother blame, separation vs. connection) to forging a strong female bond and establishing self-identity. (O'Brien and Swadener, 2006: xvii)

Kyla is Beverly's youngest daughter. At age 28, she self-identifies as a feminist, bisexual, Jewish Canadian woman. With a MA in urban planning, Kyla works for a provincial government writing policy to make the public sphere safer for women and marginalized folks. When I spoke with Kyla in the fall of 2007, she reflected on her mother's feminist parenting and noted the influence of Beverly's feminism on her upbringing:

She definitely wanted to instill a sense of individual autonomy. She definitely wanted to show that we were able to act for ourselves in our own lives. That was probably a central value she wanted to put into our childrearing.

Her family is not necessarily the most progressive or feminist family and I saw a lot of personal struggles in terms of how she wanted to approach her family and be a different mother in those days, and a different daughter.

Kyla is well aware of the ways in which her mother breaks traditional family roles and models of motherhood, not only in choosing to parent differently from the ways her mother had and those prescribed by the conventional model of motherhood, but also in the feminist values Beverly embodies and enacts in her parenting. Kyla also believes alternative ways of creating family and parenting is a viable option for her. While in a four and a half year lesbian relationship that recently ended, Kyla and her partner were seriously considering starting a family together, which, of course, Beverly supported.

Beverly's eldest daughter, Sonia, is a 31-year-old heterosexual, Euro-Canadian who is an office manager for a law firm in Toronto and self-identifies as a "very strong woman." On occasion Sonia identifies as feminist, yet generally prefers not to as "the word has become so loaded over the years." Sonia reflects on the centrality of her mother's philosophy and practice of encouraging her daughters to engage in egalitarian relationships with her, noting "I have always been able to say how I feel to my mother and subsequently to others. I can say to my mother, 'I don't accept that.' Or tell people that I'm not happy with something. I've never felt that I had to choke on my own feelings or suck it up."

At the time of our 2007 interview Sonia was single, and contemplating mothering a child on her own. While she recognizes her decision to be a lone parent differs from many in her peer group, she directly relates this desire to her own mother being "a single mother for so long." Sonia told me, "I know that she struggled with it but, at the same time, I don't think she did that badly. I figure if she didn't do that badly, I could probably manage okay."

Both Sonia and Kyla are unafraid of and even welcome the prospect of conceiving and parenting children in ways that trouble and counter conventional models of motherhood set by the institution of motherhood and new Momism. Their experience as daughters of a mother who contests the patriarchal script of motherhood and creates her own practice of feminist mothering has instilled in them a belief that as autonomous women they, too, can choose to continue to develop feminist motherlines.

The other three daughters involved in the study also believe their mothers have fostered their development of autonomy, self-assurance and independence through their feminist parenting. For instance, Gemma, a 25 year-old self-employed musician who is the eldest of two daughters and self-identifies as bi-racial credits her mother's feminism for her sense of independence and confidence to work within the Canadian music industry, "I think that coming from the background I came from made it a lot easier for me to believe in myself as a musician, that I could do it. Not to think less of myself because I am a woman and not to be intimidated by all the males that are there a lot of

times telling you, 'I don't think so.' I think my mother encouraging us to be independent is a big part of that and knowing who we are."

Gemma and the other daughters of these feminist mothers imagine they may become mothers and expect feminism will have a role to play in their parenting. When envisioning the possibility of parenting a daughter Gemma says, "I would want to prepare her for what's out there. And I'd want to instill a strong sense of self, which I think was at the root of everything my mom did when she was raising us. She wanted us to feel confident and not to be intimidated as a woman by anything that might come at us. It all starts with confidence and I would definitely talk about that with my daughter, if I ever have one."

Meagan is a 22-year-old, self-identified feminist, Indigenous South American and Euro-Canadian, and the eldest daughter of "dedicated and intentional parents." Like Gemma, Meagan's ideas about feminist mothering first developed as a daughter observing her own mother, then through taking care of children herself, and by recently applying her own understandings of feminism to her personal context:

I'm always trying to find work that I will feel ethical about in terms of where the money is coming from, what the work is about, who I'm with, and how I make other people feel when I do it. Like providing childcare for friends of mine, which is the kind of work I want to do. I'm all about the human experience and it's also what I'm studying through acting. It's really crucial to me to be able to honour the human spirit and I think our society has forgotten, in our rush for power and following our patriarchal structures, some of the more visceral experiences we need as humans to stay healthy—emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

In the spring of 2007, Meagan was in an intimate relationship with another feminist woman and shared her thoughts about how feminism is integral to her life, particularly when reflecting on potentially becoming a mother:

Feminism starts, not only in the decision making process to raise children, but, also in that process of deciding if it's something that I want to do, or that I and a potential partner might want to do together, if that was the case. It would also involve setting things up for that child. So, how is this child going to come into my/our life? I think deciding on the HOW is really important. Is it an adoption choice? Is it a biological choice? Is it a surrogate mother choice? Like, all of those different possibilities, and there are many of them. If it's biological, whose sperm is it? Whose womb is it? All of those things are really intertwined with feminism. Not only because those questions are going to be asked by the children, or child, but also because it affects the relationship with the child too. And how they're going to view themselves and all those kinds of things. So I think that's

really important. I don't really believe your personal politics can be separated from how you live your life. I find it very contrary if they are separated. Raising children is a political act.

While these four daughters imagine how their possible parenting may unfold, the fifth daughter is a mother who lives her feminist mothering on a daily basis. Darcy, aged 38, is a heterosexual, separated mother to a six-year-old son and an eleven-year-old daughter. She describes herself as Euro-Canadian and very close to her feminist mother, Shar, aged 62, who recently adopted a baby. According to Darcy, they all spend “a ton of time together.” Both of Darcy’s children attend Shar’s home run childcare, Darcy’s daughter spends one night a week with her grandmother, and they all camp together in summers. Darcy and Shar’s values around raising children are “pretty much exactly the same” and they constantly discuss their beliefs about the ways in which they raise children, the thought they put into motherwork, and the types of toys, clothes, books and movies they should use. Darcy continues Shar’s feminist mothering practice of critically analyzing popular culture, especially TV, toys and clothing in an attempt to provide space for her children to develop as individual and whole people:

We stay out of what we call the “pink zone” at Toy-R-Us. You know the “Barbie, dress-up princess aisle.” On the other side of it, we stay out of the “flaming truck, boy, violent knife isle.” I don’t like those aisles because I want my daughter to be a powerful person. I don’t want her to be a princess rescued, and I don’t want my son to be a violent person. I want them to use all their parts of themselves, their brains and their bodies. I don’t want them to be limited by a toy choice or commercial they’ve seen on TV. I want it to be open for my kids. I want them to be able to do whatever it is that they want to do.

Darcy is well aware of her mother’s influence on her own parenting philosophy and motherwork, and calls herself a “mother snob” acknowledging her clear and set ideas about how she parents her children. In fact, Darcy continues her mother’s feminist motherline by consciously collaborating with Shar to deliberately challenge the institution of motherhood, and negotiate the social and cultural obstacles to their self-determination and agency as mothers, and those of their children. In doing so, they both continue, as other feminist mothers do, to challenge social motherhood norms and raise their children to be autonomous people, who have the skills to think critically about gender relations and the world they live in.

Feminist mothers and their feminist daughters creating feminist motherlines

Apparently, from the reflections of the daughters of feminist mothers, con-

tinuing the feminist motherlines of their mothers is a strong possibility should they become parents. While this study is limited to a very small sample of four feminist mothers and their five feminist daughters, the evidence demonstrates that daughters of feminist mothers learn to be autonomous and independent women, yet also honour their mother's feminist parenting, whether conceptualizing or practicing their own feminist mothering. Through the practice of matroreform, static patriarchal motherhood practices are being reformed and creative feminist motherwork is being reaffirmed. Furthermore, the act of matroreform generates space for feminist mothers and daughters to voice up and rise out of invisibility and silence, as noted by Wong-Wylie (2006: 136). Feminist motherlines are alive and well in this group of feminist mothers and daughters, and potentially their grandchildren.

¹Quote from Beverly, the 52-year-old lesbian feminist mother of two adult daughters.

²For further discussion, see Green, 1999; 2004; 2005 and 2006.

³For further discussion on this process and on the theory of habitus see Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of Theory and Practice* (1977).

⁴For a more detailed discussion of this research, see Green 2006.

⁵For a much more detailed and fuller discussion, please see Green 1999, 2001, 2004, and 2006.

⁶See Green, 1999, 2001, 2004, and 2006 for further details.

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