

Laurie Kruk

## More than One, Less than Two *Canadian Poets Becoming Mothers*

Sons branch out, but  
one woman leads to another.  
—Margaret Atwood, “Five Poems for Grandmothers”  
*Two-Headed Poems* (1978)

I was diapering my 21-month-old daughter, when she lunged forward, arms tightening around my neck, saying “Hug Mommy.” She has been attacking us with hugs for the last month, a delightful new assault. I asked my husband, the “senior parent” of an eleven-year-old boy, “Will she always be this affectionate?” He shrugged, handing me her rubber pants, “Oh no—in a few years, you’ll be at each other’s throats. I mean ... mothers and daughters—you know.” “But—” I protested weakly, thinking of my own ambivalent reaction to my mother’s weekly phone calls, the surge of affection and irritation that rises at her hesitant greeting. “Hello ... it’s Mom. Hope aren’t too busy to talk...?” “Haven’t you read *My Mother, My Self*?” he asked, lifting our laughing child into her crib.

Well, yes, I had read Nancy Friday’s (1977) pop classic, of course. And related to its intense, self-absorbed daughter-centric declaration of independence from the demanding, often dysfunctional, mother. But that was when I was only a daughter—since July 1998, I’ve been a mother of a daughter, and with the added identification involved in nurturing a female comes an added fear of eventual criticism, sizing-up and expulsion from her heart of hearts. This was a fear I carried even during my pregnancy when I “wished for” a boy ... only to push my deepest anxiety out of my body, breathing and beautiful—my daughter.

What happens when Canadian poets become mothers? This is vast

territory for anyone to cover, for me as a new mother, reader of Canadian literature and poet myself... I can only begin to sketch out some observations on a heartfelt transformation—personal, political and psychological. Almost randomly, I chose three other Canadian poets who write of becoming mothers to daughters—and who suggest the paradox expressed in my title, as being “more than one,” but also at crucial moments, “less than two.” Claire Harris has created a challenging collage of poetry and prose focusing on a woman’s dreams, memories and meditations during pregnancy, entitled *Drawing Down a Daughter* (1992), nominated for a Governor-General’s Award. The speaker is Trinidadian-Canadian, and juxtaposes her late-pregnancy experience in wintry Calgary with her own mixed memories of the “motherland,” mingling awareness of racial and class difference with the fears and fantasies of a woman addressing her future first-born daughter. In two poems from *The Litmus Body* (1992), “cry,” and “watching her swim,” Nadine McNinnis addresses the complex feelings generated by alternating impulses—embracing separateness, then psychically overlapping again—that the mother/daughter relationship carries with it. I posit that such tension is more defined in this relationship than within a mother/son dyad, although my hypothesis is not (yet) experience-tested by this author. Omnipresent Atwood, mistress of the satirical dissection, has also pondered the cultural dressing of women in a five-part meditation from *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) called “A Red Shirt” that offers a rare portrait of this very public poet as mother. I will use these three female poets as preliminary samples in a literary survey of this most self-reflexive of ties, and conclude with an instance of my own creative convergence of voices as mother, poet, critic.

Carolyn Heilbrun has drawn on the anthropologically-inspired term “liminality” to address the multiple identities experienced by contemporary women writers who “began to portray the new possibilities that, as a result of feminism, they found themselves confronting.... For the most part, they found themselves betwixt and between, neither altogether here nor there, not one kind of person or another.... They found themselves in a state of liminality...” (1999: 8). This recognition of psychological and cultural multiplicity of identifications is certainly relevant to mothers who are poets. It is also an apt description of Claire Harris and her polyphonous exploration of the threshold state of the pregnant woman, her protagonist Patricia, who looks back at the “motherland” of Trinidad, and her girlhood there, while projecting her daughter’s future in Canada, her adopted country. The expectant mother is caught between an irresistible maternal vision of newness, and the hard-won knowledge of life as a black woman in a still racist society: As Patricia broods, “inside her the child thrashing / daughter she needs/ dreads / for who would bring a child/ skin shimmering black God’s / night breath curled crisp / about her face courage / of enslaved ancestors in her eyes / who would choose to cradle / such tropic grace on the Bow’s frozen banks” (1992: 17-18). Passages of such lyric intensity recognized as high literacy by Canadian readers sit beside transcriptions of voices of female ancestors, including a story of a girl’s sexual

betrayal and supernatural revenge (as La Diabliesse, the female demon), partly narrated in the voice and dialect of a Caribbean female storyteller. Sunanda Pal observes of this sequence, “While the story about a pregnant girl being heartlessly deserted by her lover, hints at the poet-protagonist’s anxiety about her [absent] husband’s return, at another level it is a device that mixes formal literature with folkloric tradition” (1996: 137). Thus the “voices” of the text vary from high literacy of contemporary poetry, to Afro-Caribbean idiom: joking asides to the “Girl” in utero, recipes for “bakes” which turn into storytelling, typically female storytelling: “Child this is the gospel on bakes” (Harris, 1992: 44). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., aptly describes this African-Caribbean text created in English as “two-toned.... Its visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular” (qtd. in Morrell, 1996: 9-10). Formally and linguistically, *Drawing Down a Daughter* is the most liminal work of the three. This cultural/linguistic “betwixt and between-ness” is re-presented in the present moment through the father/husband’s suggestion that they move back to Trinidad, after the birth, against Patricia’s preference to stay in her new country, Canada.

Yet even now her mind is drawn back to the heritage she wishes to preserve for her daughter, in her ongoing conversation with the fetus. For example, this tidbit of remembered matrilineage:

that was your great aunt by marriage Aunt Clem she put  
my navel string in a bottle, carried it to the family barracks  
at Lopinot to bury i wonder what the doctor would say if i  
asked him for yours  
what would your father say so thorough  
a Canadian  
*he doesn't really know anything about us...*  
we're going to have to teach him, you and i  
(Harris, 1992: 80 [emphasis in original text])

We notice how husband and doctor are joined in their power to “say” something against the feminine birth ritual, while daughter and mother are linked as the “us” he doesn’t know “anything about”—certainly women, and perhaps, Trinidadians. Thus, the continual alternation in her mind of the Bow river of Calgary in Winter, with the tropical Lopinot River of Trinidad.... and the biography of Patricia Whittaker-Williams, the successful writer/teacher, with that of her girlhood acquaintance, Jocelyn Romero. Jocelyn changes names and becomes Enid Thomas, the illegal immigrant and single mother whose tragic story Patricia uncovers, a shadow to her own. Patricia’s own chosen pregnancy is also juxtaposed with the unplanned motherhood of Jocelyn/Enid, who is denied Patricia’s class-based advantages of wealth and education. Class, as Harris insists in a 1997 interview, remains a silent source of racial separation in the Afro-Caribbean world: “I don’t think it matters

where you were born—I think it matters to whom you were born. Certainly in Third World countries it is the difference between life and death” (qtd. in Sander and Mukherjee, 1997: 26).

However, the birth of the daughter offers the possibility of political transformation, for “it is through mother-daughter bonding that Afro-Caribbean women develop a collaborative feminist consciousness of struggle against multiple oppressions” (Kuwabong, 1999: 105). This meditation, this work of “drawing down a daughter” ends in the onset of Patricia’s labour, and in an ecstatic moment, she envisions the beauty of her daughter’s face, hair and hands, which nevertheless assert independence, “though we are [still] roped to each other” for they “grasp the air casually taking your own self back / as if all my striving to order existence with your birth / were less even than this view” [of the Bow river] (Harris, 1992: 112). The female power and pride of giving birth is immediately shadowed by the painful knowledge of sexism and racism, the utopian impossibility of her mother’s “striving to order existence.” The ambivalence of this moment of giving birth to a Trinidadian-Canadian daughter is negatively resolved by the shocking simile which ends the book: in the pain of labour contractions, Patricia says “for a moment i am / as the stunned slave under the whip.” And the reflective Canadian poet is suddenly joined not just with all “eight billion women before me” (Harris, 1992: 80) who give birth, but more chillingly, the “enslaved ancestors” of her motherland. According to Harris, her poetry is part of a larger project by poets of African descent to confront “a society that in all of its manifestations still wants to convince us that we’re less than others. So the stance can only be oppositional, critical, unyielding” (Sander and Mukherjee, 1997: 36)

Anglo-Canadian Nadine McInnis too sweeps away sentimental cliches in her depiction of the mother/daughter bond in two poems that deal with the parenting of a female: “cry” and “watching her swim.” “cry,” (1992: 26) with its blunt, lower-case title, probes the infant’s egocentric tyranny over first, the animal toys which she squeezes until they “cry” and then, the mother, whose rocking and nursing arouses surprisingly hurtful “play,” despite gender stereotypes about docile little girls. The mother speaker says simply, “I must teach you to be gentle, and not / to tear at my lower lip with your nails / when I try to rock you to sleep in my arms, / not to twist the free nipple when you suck” (ll 16-18 ). Breastfeeding, rocking, these iconic acts of mothering are here shadowed by aggressive impulses which suggest maternal insufficiency and the infant’s demanding presence. The “crying” of the “empty” toys the infant squashes releases air that reminds the mother of the ‘stale’ smell of parking garages, sinisterly imaged as the scene of a sexual assault: “where someone has been loitering / waiting for a woman to happen by/ alone” (ll 13-15). So, as with Claire Harris, the hope and innocence symbolized by infancy—though partly a projection, as we see—is punctured by the mothers’ knowledge of the potential inheritance of their female babies. This legacy of vulnerability joins mother and daughter as “one,” politically as well as personally.

The real victimization conjured up by the toys' innocent abuse is echoed, more intensely, by the baby's equally casual "abuse" of the mother. This unconscious behaviour, however, is read as meaningful by the mother, who feels that the baby has internalized a polarized "good"/"bad" mother and is expressing anger at the withholding mother, "as though there is something denied you, / something more desired locked inside" (ll 20-21). This analysis speaks powerfully to the daughter as both part of the mother and separate from, angry at, the mother. Yet the mother herself, a nursing mother, emblem of mother/child symbiosis, draws the division here, insisting "There is no lost part of you in me. / You took everything with you when you left, / dragging that great weight of independence / on a rope behind you" (ll 22-25). Again, as with Harris ("we are roped to each other"), "rope" is used for the umbilical cord, physical marker of dependence. A rope is a sturdy tool, used to tie things down or up, and it implies a durable bond,—yet also, perhaps, an associated burden, something to cut loose. The mother here asserts *her* independence even as she declares her daughter's. In fact, the poem ends on a note of anger, which politicizes the "cry" the mother makes, perhaps replaying or echoing her birth cries:

I must teach you that  
a woman's cry does not rise from an empty space  
you can leave behind. A woman  
is not just empty space you can tear open  
and fill. (ll 24-29)

The implication is that as a woman is not a toy for a child to torment, or an object of a rapist's rage, so a mother is not a selfless vacuum, not just an extension of her child's needs—even a daughter's. The separateness of each member of the relationship is here reaffirmed.

However, a glimpse of a pivotal moment in parenting suggests that this question of fluid or shared identities is always ready to be re-opened. In "watching her swim," (McInnis, 1992: 27) the mother looks on in fear and anxiety as her little girl, "baby cheeks puffing" (l 3), gains independence in the water. The element of water, typically identified with women, becomes a symbol of the fluid boundaries between mother and daughter. This fluidity typifies the "relational ontology [that] underpins much of the feminist work on care," according to sociologist Andrea Doucet's summary (1998: 54). The landscape of sky and "a vaporous lake heavy as mercury" (l. 2) is described as "in flux" to the watching mother, who imagines underwater boulders and drowned bodies, representing the unconscious fears for her daughter's safety lurking beneath the surface of her "smile turned outward, / with fingernails cutting my palms, learning / as she is, the skill of letting go" (McInnis, 1992: ll 6-8). The tension between fear for the daughter, and confidence in her, is visualized in the "faintly blue" child's struggle "against the cold slap on the skin / of wave after

wave.... Easily, she could slip beneath the surface / alchemy of storm and light, and leave me here" (ll 21-25). As the mother acknowledges the barely perceptible gap between swimming and drowning, she is also acknowledging the closeness of her fears, her unavoidable return to thoughts of the child's first surfacing from near-"drowning" in the mother's birth canal. The poet-mother blends these two scenes, of both immersion and separation, being born and learning to swim, within the final stanza. There she prepares herself for the rescuing dive into the cold water, which would numb her arms and darken her vision, causing her to black out "in a faint as I did after her birth, groping / blind, through the old blood she came from" (ll. 28-30). Although the daughter is swimming in a (Canadian, I presume) lake, the archetypal *la mer/the mother* link is recalled, by McInnis, through the images of fluidity and surface tension which link mother and daughter in one pre-birth body and the "old blood" they both share.

Mothers and daughters are inevitably linked, for Margaret Atwood (1978), by the cultural "clothing" they are given by a society that has marked women as bearing power, literally, that evokes fear and demonization. In part i, the poet-mother and her sister are sewing a red shirt for the daughter/niece—a domestic act, uniting women in unrecognized creativity, akin to the inferior "crafts" of knitting, needlework and weaving, linking women across time. The shirt's colour *red* is culturally coded, she reflects, for according to popular, and male opinion, "Young girls should not wear red.... A girl should be a veil, a white shadow, bloodless.... Dancing in red shoes will kill you." (i, 7-18). The reference to "red shoes" highlights the fairy tale intertext, elaborated by Sharon Wilson (1993) in her study of Atwood's career-long use of these shaping texts. A more mythical communal voice answers in part ii, "But red is our colour by birth- right," (ii, 1-2) as women's legacy of birthing becomes the seed for the idea of a feminine culture, signified by the communal sewing done by the "old leathery mothers ... like worn gloves" (ll 13-16), a reminder of their handiwork, passing on "a long thread of red blood, not yet broken" (l 20) in the cultural as well as biological continuity linking mothers and daughters. The mother archetype now "put on" by the contemporary woman leads back, in mythical descent, to the story of "the Old Woman," (part iii) who "weaves" bodies and souls, is burned as a witch, and "like your mother ... is covered in fur" (iii, 12). This startling evocation of the submerged "wildness" of mothers, sexual or otherwise, as seen in the "fur" prepares us for the Old Woman's metamorphosis into the inverse of the saintly Mary, "the *black* Madonna who accepts an offering of *red* candles when there is no other/ help or comfort" (iii, 17-18, my emphasis). The humble act of sewing, of handiwork with needle and thread, is revisioned, with Goddess Athena and the Three Fates, for example, as powerful antecedents ... not just binding women, but all humans to a submerged feminine world of life and death, through the metaphor of spinning/sewing/creating "lifelines." As Wilson (1993) points out, the "triple goddess" archetype (mother/maiden/crone) is also behind the scenes, reminding us of the recurrent

female cycle of transformation, of role and power.

Part iv returns us to a more everyday world, where “It is January, it’s raining” (iv, l 1) and the contemporary mother would like “your shirt to be just a shirt, / no charms or fables (ll 4-5).” Yet politically, as well as psychologically, these fables may linger and be used to justify persecution of those who reflect our unprocessed mysteries such as the prostitute or the Jew. Like the good fairy at Sleeping Beauty’s christening party, then, the (sceptical/superstitious) mother tries to counteract harmful myth with a “tiny stitch, my private magic.” But the final “magic” occurs when the daughter puts on the shirt, “red / with purple flowers and pearl/ buttons.” Though she is robed in “our colour,” and decorated in regal purple, this “means nothing to her” (v, l 5). The child is free still of cultural coding, free to escape from mother and aunt by running across the floor, waving delighted “red arms” which appear to the mother as triumphant “banners.” The child is yet the artist of her own identity, the ending implies—at least, for a little while—though the material for that identity is still passed down through the hands, and bodies, of women, joining the generations.

Like these female poets, I too have tried to track the shifting boundaries between mother and daughter, my anxious over-identification alternating with moves, initiated by both, towards autonomy and recognition of otherness. In the following poem, “Elena Cries,” reminiscent of McInnis’s (1992) “cry,” the infant’s nocturnal crying appears as both a wound to the mother’s competence/baby’s contentment and an a literal cry of independence and (free) will, cutting the tie.

### Elena Cries

for 40 piano-wire-tight minutes  
this first bravely scheduled night:  
face a boiled plum, she sirens her solitude,  
cries uncoiled between breaths, when she sinks  
in woe’s depths and we throb, swallow longing. Awaiting  
the spiking febrile return of another  
wave’s crash  
against arterial walls. Tiny pure voice riding  
arpeggios of mucoused rage,  
cruel crescendoes of weeping,  
leonine roars of wondering, *where: where has  
the world gone? where are the strong hands  
that held, patted? breasts’ warm oceans of milk  
I floated in, sea by sea?*

we hang staring eyes  
on neon numbers

12:25            12:33            :47  
handrails of sanity  
as we stiffen on the edge  
of twenty minutes' cradle-rocking  
till eyes glue shut with tears, hands lift  
in surrender  
and twenty minutes more of dry racked sniffles  
reproach the quiet  
of soul's stilled lament

this is the birth of pain, I reflect as we sag, sink  
into darkness, preparing to drown, to follow  
your still rocking vessel,  
wrecked off the shore of desolation:

little girl, rolled off the edge  
of the world  
into a universe  
empty of rescuing arms and soft breasts,  
black as your mother's heart  
as she rocks and watches the clock,  
counting out the minutes, the misery,  
turning to stone, slowly,  
from the head down. Whispering to the night,  
*you are not the only new born  
to loss.*

The situation here is one of imposed separation and independence for the infant, who is being “taught” to cry herself to sleep, so beginning a life-long process of self-reliance, where the mother is partly internalised. This “bravely scheduled night” is an in-between experience for both parents, who agonize and empathize, while rocking the cradle, over the obvious distress of their child, but insist on achieving this first degree of separation. Yet it is the mother who feels the greater sense of betrayal, having refused the nocturnal nursing that may have once lulled both asleep, immersed in a shared bodily nurturing and nourishment. The child must confront her emotional “solitude,” even in the presence of her watchful, worrying parents, who “swallow longing” to return to that instinctive responsiveness, imaged as oral desire. The child's persistent and prolonged crying is experienced as both a storm at sea, the rocking cradle the vessel and as an orchestral outpouring, a voicing of will and obstinate energy. Her imagined or projected terror at losing “the world,” largely figured by the mother's breast-feeding body, evokes guilt and remorse as the parents, especially the mother, experience a wound, a gap, in their until-now absolute bond with the child. So that the child's eventual “surrender” almost can be read as the



parents' "surrender" to a psychic loss—loss of innocence, loss of sense of competence. The episode reinforces the child's wholeness and separateness, which is a hard-won victory for the parents, but also leaves an aftertaste of loss for the mother in particular, who is forced to recognize that she may well be the cause of her daughter's (temporary) pain, in her own interest of her own autonomy and "sanity." The storm of crying which ends after forty minutes leaves the parents equally "shipwrecked," exhausted and divided—even from each other—by the ordeal. The mother is divided as she reproaches herself for her "black heart" even as her mind confirms the necessity of initiating this move towards greater self-reliance. She feels joined with weeping infant, as vulnerable as a newborn, exposed to guilt and remorse even as she focuses on the clock's digital numbers in the hope of recapturing time—for herself. And as the poet-mother observes all this, part of her is hungry for the time after when she can write down her impressions and give words to this inarticulate exchange of needs, beyond the intense interaction. She is in a liminal state, both inside and outside, equally observing and experiencing the early pangs of motherhood and the negotiation of boundaries even as she recognizes, with some pride, her daughter's powerfully vocalized will.

Maybe there is a lost part of *ourselves* in our daughters—something which we hope to get back, through our mothering. So I call my mother, glowing with pride, to share my daughter's first day of gym class. And hear an old fear in my mother's response: "Oh, no, she's started already. Leaving. Keep her close to you ... Don't let her go away—like they all do." In Martha McMahon's (1995) recent sociological study of "paths to motherhood," she found that for middle class mothers, such as myself, Harris, McInnis and Atwood, the decision to mother was often more of a rejection of *non*-mothering, of missing out on the potential attachment, than a definitive understanding, and embracing, of mothering. The fear of what would be lost, unexperienced or unlearned, may be a strong motivator for many reflective women, mothers who may also be writers ... and who are writing newly- articulated stories of mothers and daughters as frequently more than one, less than two—politically, psychologically, poetically.

## References

- Atwood, Margaret. 1978. "Five Poems for Grandmothers," "A Red Shirt." *Two-Headed Poems*. Toronto: Oxford University Press. 33-40, 102-6.
- Doucet, Andrea. 1998. "Interpreting Mother-Work: Linking Methodology, Ontology, Theory and Personal Biography." *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 18 (2 & 3) (Summer/Fall): 52-58
- Friday, Nancy. 1977. *My Mother, Myself*. New York: Delacorte.
- Harris, Claire. 1992. *Drawing Down a Daughter*. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane.

- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. 1999. *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kruk, Laurie. "Elena Cries." From a manuscript in process.
- Kuwabong, Dannabang. 1999. "The Mother as Archetype of Self: A Poetics of Matrilineage in the Poetry of Claire Harris and Lorna Goodison." *ARIEL* 30 (1) (January): 105-29.
- McInnis, Nadine. 1992. "cry," "watching her swim." *The Litmus Body*. Kingston: Quarry. 26, 27.
- McMahon, Martha. 1995. *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women's Lives*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Morrell, Carol, ed. 1994. "Introduction." *Grammar of Dissent: Poetry and Prose by Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand*. Fredericton: Goose Lane. 9-24.
- Pal, Sunanda. "Celebration of the Black Being in Claire Harris's *The Conception of Winter* and *Drawing Down a Daughter*." *Intersexions: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women's Writing*. Creative New Literatures Series 7. Ed. Coomi S. Vevaina and Barbara Godard. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996. 131-41.
- Sander, Leslie and Arun Mukherjee. 1997. "A Sense of Responsibility: An Interview with Claire Harris." *West Coast Line* 22 (1) (Spring/Summer): 26-37.
- Wilson, Sharon Rose. 1993. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. Toronto: ECW Press.