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## Revolutionary Becoming

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*This autoethnographic project examines my occupation of multiple constructions of “the good mother.” Raised in an international, Hindu-based religious cult and now mothering in contemporary Canadian society as a white, married woman, I explore the interplay of these disparate identities in my everyday feminist mothering practice. The ways in which internal conceptualizations of mother-identity affect the possibility of achieving autonomous mothering is considered in the context of motherhood as a site for social change, where the question of changing what and for whom is complicated by straddling an invisible cultural divide. Poetic explorations of meaningful everyday moments are examined as the location for resistance, emphasizing individual practices as the foundation of broader social movements.*

scrambling for paper  
technology too slow

o

centre / texture  
a moment  
peripheral

safety:stillness

MotherBody knows  
breath-as-revelation

centre / pain  
the riverbanks  
internal

MotherBody knows  
down-through-out

fingertips to keys

## Revolutionary Becoming

In her groundbreaking book, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich proposed a theoretical division between motherhood and mothering. Motherhood, she suggested, is a patriarchal institution which aims to degrade female potentialities (13). Restrictive, oppressive, and based on false conceptions of mothering as naturally tied to embodying female biology, the institution of motherhood “locks women into biological reproduction, and denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering.” (Nakano-Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 9). Outcast from the institution, mothering encompasses the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children (Rich 13). This theoretical division lays the foundation for an examination of the both patriarchal institution of motherhood as well as the practice or “how” of moving into an emancipatory feminist mothering practice.

Investigating feminist mothering is an exercise in negative definition. In the words of Andrea O’Reilly, “We know empowered mothering by what it is not” (2006: 4). Patriarchal motherhood functions as a “master discourse or hegemonic narrative” (O’Reilly 2004: 13) that exercises dominance by constructing an impossibly ‘good mother’ that is white, heterosexual, selfless, devoted, nurturing and invested only in the needs of the child. Feminist theorists counter the discourse of motherhood with alternate narratives of mothering practices, often in literal opposition to the hegemonic requirements: *blackmother*, *lesbianmother*, and so on. These explorations of alternative mothering practices located outside the domain of the institution offer a glimpse into a space outside patriarchy; however, the institution still dominates the alternative by comprising its relational counterpoint. As a binary construction, the conceptual interplay of motherhood and mothering reflects a Western ideology of opposites as exclusive and disparate (Nakano-Glenn et al), limiting and confining alternative conceptions of ‘good mother’ into a rigid duality. Good mothers are not feminist mothers and feminist mothers are not good mothers. Enclosed within this constrictive narrative, the femi-

nist mother coalesces only in the presence of the institution of motherhood and mothering examples “never have the opportunity to roam” (Kaufmann 2010: 98).

I was drawn to the idea of empowered mothering but have never felt that I could see myself in the alternative examples. I have questioned whether I am simply too white, too married, too heterosexual to embody a true feminist mothering practice. As a white woman who visibly embodies the master narrative but who evolved from a location where whiteness is conceived of as a pitfall, I began to feel that the unity of identity required under both the patriarchal construction of motherhood and the feminist mothering practices offered by others did not adequately leave space for the (invisible) divide in identity that I straddled. Could I really be a white, Canadian woman who felt like something else? Did my history really articulate “a subject position grounded in dichotomy” (Kaufmann 2010: 91)? By seeking to dissolve the unity of the patriarchal motherhood—feminist mothering binary and progressing into a space between, a multi-local subject may be found. This displacement constitutes “a fluidity of identities that ... deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of its claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (Butler 120).

As O’Reilly notes, “mothering is achieved by dismantling patriarchal motherhood and actively and consciously mothering against motherhood. It is a practice” (2006: 12). Sara Ruddick tells us that maternal action can be seen as proceeding from maternal thinking (97). By centering everyday moments of maternal practice and investigating the internal thought landscape contained within a single moment, mothering as a practice moves from the realm of private action into a valuable, subversive strategy of resistance occurring within institutional boundaries (Green). Asserting change agency within the private realm of the everyday reframes “modest struggles of people trying to change their lives” (Stall and Stoecker 747) as instances of potentially grand social change and counters the assumption that change must take place in formal spaces. In this way, a small act undertaken in private operates as micro resistance. Collectively undertaken, these everyday micro resistances transform the social landscape, forming the foundation of broader social movements.

If motherhood outside of patriarchy can be emancipatory and if changes to mothering practice make possible social change on a broader scale (O’Reilly 2004: 20), then understanding how my constructions of good mothering are constituted offers insight into how my personal, specific location as a mother can support autonomous maternal agency. To investigate the impact of a fluid, multi-local position on my exercise of agency, “I would need to first revisit the events in my life that have impacted on the way I practiced” (Muncey 113). The

search for contributors to my personal conceptions of mothering and for clues to how I determine success and failure in my own maternal action (Ruddick 97), is inherently a search for motivation.

### (My)story

I was born in 1979. My father was a biochemist who spent his days working on cancer cures and his free time meditating and playing music. My mother was a world traveler and a nurse who stayed home with me until I entered school.

In the words of my mother, I was raised in a system of raja yoga, a spiritual path dubbed “the natural way.” My mother converted to this practice six years before I was born and has followed this path through the death of her original guru, the growth of the movement under his successor and the international phenomenon that it has become today.

In the words of others, I was raised in a cult, loosely based on Hindu philosophies, borrowing liberally from various traditions. Focused around a single leader who serves as the divine incarnate, practitioners or “abhyasis” devote themselves to the goal of spiritual evolution by abiding by the three M’s: Master, Mission and Method (Rajagopalachari, “Salient Features”; Durai). Master is embodied by the living guru. Abhyasis seek his love above all else. Mission is the spread of this path throughout the world, actively proselytizing to recruit new members. Method requires the devotion of three hours per day to meditative practice; group meetings or *satsangh* twice per week; attendance, planning, and funding of regional gatherings; and annual visits to various ashrams around the world. It also involves donations; the purchase of books, audiotapes, and videos; membership fees; and competitive bidding on limited edition commemorative items that celebrate life events of the guru. Though there is no charge to participate as an *abhyasi*, estimated annual revenues for the Mission sit at \$23 million (CAD) in addition to real estate assets (The Sahaj Marg Project). The guru is the CEO of the Mission as well as the spiritual leader.

In my own words, I grew up a little differently. I moved between life in Canada as a child who loved Michael Jackson, Broadway musicals and mock medieval dresses, and life in the Mission, attending gatherings all over the world, living communally, practicing surrender and devotion in preparation for my ultimate goal: starting the meditation myself at the permitted age of eighteen (sixteen if you were lucky enough to get special permission) and getting married to the man of my Master’s choosing.

Returning to school after a trip abroad, having missed weeks or months of school, I had stories to tell of foreign places and languages, strange foods and leisure. Wearing saris in the halls and skipping terms to allow for travel,

I was keenly aware that my life was not-the-same-as. The rules that applied to my friends and classmates did not seem to apply to me. Being special and having unique experiences was an enormous gift. However, it also made me conspicuous, the result of which was taunting, threats and, on some occasions, physical bullying.

My unique position extended into my experience of the Mission. As a long-standing member of the community, my mother was afforded special privileges. We always had a bed inside while most others slept on the floor of massive outdoor communal tents. Our guru had nicknames for us and we were regularly chosen to be part of small, elite groups that went on outings with Him or traveled with Him to invite-only gatherings. Upon arriving at the ashram, I was virtually guaranteed to receive a personal blessing in the form of a hit on the head with a cane. Our status in the organization was high and my mother, Maha Kali, and me, Little Kali, were known favorites.

I was privileged to travel often at a young age and to be close to the inner circle within the Mission. However, that privilege was not universal. As a white woman in a predominantly East Indian organization, I was often segregated yet encouraged to mimic being an Indian girl. Activities that local girls were permitted to participate in were not open to me. In addition, my family was not wealthy and so we were of little use to the more wealthy families that began to administer the organization as a business. I was aware that in the Mission my whiteness and background were a hinderance rather than an asset and so I practiced my surrender and submission with increased fervour.

I achieved the first part of the ultimate goal at the age of 15 when I received special permission to start my personal meditation practice while at an international gathering. I was the first Westerner permitted to start so young. I returned home to Canada from that transformative gathering and attempted to add the third M, Method, into my life as a high school student. It came as a surprise to me that integrating the devout life of an abhyasi into my life as a Canadian teenager was incredibly difficult. I struggled to find space for my emotional life as a young woman within the disciplined daily practice and unattachment required of an abhyasi.

*Asleep or waking? I don't know which, whether it be deepness or dreams. Such change and simultaneously stagnation. I don't need this system; in fact, I don't even want it. What I do want is to experience the quickness of bliss that arises from this earth. If God is here can I not find him, with faith, in everything? Master says I am experiencing the "normal appetites" of a teenager that are normal but abnormal. He prays for me. Should I continue on in this passivity? (Wignall 1997)*

The decision to leave the Mission completely solidified around a scholarship to study theatre on the other side of the country, something I had been explicitly told not to do in a personal audience with Master. After graduating high school in Canada, I accepted the scholarship. Though I arrived on campus in my Indian clothes, I believed that the Mission part of my life was officially over. My past became good dinner party conversation, a bizarre and funny story certain to elicit attention and disbelief.

It was not until my first son was born that I was once again exposed to the Mission on a regular basis. After years living far apart, my mother relocated to be closer to us and with her came regular conversation about her practice and travels. In addition, her parenting advice often takes the form of “well, in India they...,” bringing into my mothering space a familiar, mediated cultural perspective.

As I grew into my role of mother, I began to investigate the ways in which I had learned mothering. From whom has this knowledge of mothering come from? How do these multiple influences interact, impact, and form my both maternal practice and my everyday resistance? This breadcrumb trail led to the slow process of putting aside unified conceptions of identity and diving into the uncharted space between to uncover the mother knowledge that I embody.

Ten  
I dream myself  
a baby  
a crib  
a rainbow shining beside me.  
He slides down,  
Raises me up and crowns me  
Master.

*A woman cannot be a master.  
Babuji said that a Master of caliber gets  
orders from above, and  
their work includes that of destruction.  
A woman is not capable of  
such destruction. (Rajagopalachari 2001)*

Highway speed  
windows open and  
fatigue so deep it disappears behind  
normal

my exit  
 passes  
 the road a promise of something better if

I could I  
 just keep driving

Upstairs in the women's dorm  
 each morning we  
 laugh scream and cover  
 each other  
 in shiny polka dots  
 my thighs sticking to the bench  
 beside clear nail polish bottles lined up for battle  
 ready to suffocate the creatures burrowing in our skin.

### Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a methodology that marries subversion of the dominant discourse with personal life events and practices as valid data sources (Muncey 31). This goal is mirrored in feminist maternal theory. In the words of Adrienne Rich, “the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will truly be ours.” (3). Reveling in the specificity of an individual experience, autoethnographic practice can locate a single subject as the ground upon which identity can be shown to be socially constructed and can become a process of instigation, where theorized alternatives evolve away from binary toward polyvalence.

Poetic analysis provides a practical tool with which to disrupt dominant discourses structurally. “If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story” (Irigaray 69). It is a performative method that treats subjective emotional experience as if it matters. In so doing, poetry comprises and supports resistance by affirming the emotional as valid. Traditionally, emotion has been relegated to the private sphere and has not been welcome into the political realm of the public. Introducing emotion into the public is one way of troubling the hierarchy of the public/private divide (Young), of crossing over into the traditional realm of politics with a personal, private tool. This transgression brings forward a “subject in process as revolution” (Speedy 288). Poetic narratives also disrupt what Bettina Aptheker describes as the masculine conception of progress as linear. Narrative exploration asserts circularity where the subject undertakes a “journey as on to a place of understanding but back and forth, over the same

ground” (Muncey 63). In this way, poetic narrative embodies a knowing story of resistance, a story of becoming.

As Tessa Muncey states, “narratives *are* people’s identities” (43). Exposing my narrative disrupts singular identity and “give words to this mode of being a subject” (Mol 30). To begin this process, I identified moments in my daily life as a mother where I experience conflict. I began by writing a short poem about the moment itself: what am I physically doing, what am I thinking, how do I feel. I then noted other voices that accompany me in this moment. Placing these beside and around my short poem, an internal terrain began to be revealed. This “process of placing meanings, words and texts under erasure and excavating traces of other discourses therein not only deconstructs binary opposites but also the multiple other meanings that exist within the chora, or open space between these opposites” (Speedy 284).

*A Danish abyhasi told Babuji,  
“You are what you eat.”  
Babuji looked horrified.  
Clearly he had no intention of becoming rice and daal. (Chandra)*

Noodles and cheese  
Noodles and cheese  
I will only eat  
Noodles and cheese

Noodles in the morning  
Noodles in the day  
Carrot sticks beside the noodles  
I throw them away

I have callous at the base of my pointer finger from where the knife rubs  
Raw,  
Then  
Blood,  
Then  
Hard,

The rage in me an ulcer of heat and bitter

Baby on my hip, I  
continue  
cutting carrot sticks with one hand



*The humble tasks of feeding and cleaning us;  
 We remember scenes, expeditions, punishments, special occasions.  
 For most of us a woman provided continuity and stability—  
 But also the rejections and refusals of our early lives,  
 And it is with a woman's hands, eyes, body, voice,  
 That we associate our primal sensations, our earliest social experience.* (Rich)

They giggle when they see the matchstick in my mouth  
 Tell the story of  
 The Never-Ending Bags of Onions

When I lived in a castle,  
 in a land far, far away  
 we laughed in seven languages  
 cutting onions all afternoon

*This afternoon, Chari joined us in the kitchen to make puris.  
 He asked the crowd, "Who will buy the perfect puri?"  
 Kevin got called up from the crowd to be the auctioneer.  
 First \$100, then \$1000, then \$10,000!  
 Brother claimed his prize and tore it into pieces for the kids.* (Wignall 1990)

*The atmosphere of approval in which I was bathed...  
 like an aura I carried with me, in which  
 doubts, fears, misgivings,  
 met with absolute denial.  
 This is what women have always done.* (Rich)

### Every Time I Move, I Make a Woman's Movement (DiFranco)

Patriarchy is not a state or a thing but an action applied to a subject that is woman. Permeating everything, patriarchy is difficult to grasp and "secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" (Dyer 457). Examining the subject upon which patriarchy is applied allows us to see it. This act of identification, of cataloguing the consistent and persistent challenges faced at the everyday level by a mother subject, is a radically authentic questioning that allows us to put ourselves first and resist the sublimation of the self into the child. Moving around and between constructions of good and feminist mothering, the mother subject is transformed from passive conduit into active creator.

I start with myself because I cannot start without me. Theorizing from my

located, bound moments where action is contemplated and direction decided upon informs my articulated constructions of good mother. Rendering visible the terrain I traverse as I move from theory and history into practice is a step toward unlocking how I reproduce cultural and social practices that promote my own oppression, how I play my part in continuing the subversion (Rich 21) so many, many years into our women's movement. However, this movement up against and between also liberates me at a micro-level, allowing an insignificant everyday moment to become the field of feminist praxis.

Just as a bear joyfully rubs itself against a tree and carries off in its fur small pieces of bark, there is pleasure to be gained in the rubbing up against a knowledge that grows quietly, in layers. Through my poetic analysis, resistance is transformed from a fight constrained by motherhood as institution and my historic understandings of mothering to an understanding of moving as a multitude. In each moment, I am neither "good" nor "feminist" but rather a simultaneous collection of selves shuffling toward an impermanent and changeable integration. I embody the gap between theory and practice and it is within the holistic engagement that I step outside the institution and autonomously envision my own unique maternal potential.

*Suffering is a blessing from God.*

*Cheerful acceptance is a gift which ennobles us. (Rajagopalachari 2009)*

Journalled dreams of being pressed into walls  
"get used to it"  
a Husband  
only He  
can see

*Cheerfulness is a matter-of-fact willingness to continue (Ruddick 1980)*

*Are you willing to give yourself, whether it is in  
marriage  
or whether it is in  
parenthood  
are you willing to give yourself?  
Do you have the  
heart for it? (Rajagopalachari 2010)*

If this coffee table could tell a story  
it might just giggle itself into kindling  
singing

love made loudly  
before baby

*I had  
no knowledge of my mother at all, remembering  
nothing  
more than the last heart-rending scene before  
her mortal remains were taken away for  
cremation. Nevertheless,  
she has remained with me as  
a pervasive reality* (Rajagopalachari 2005)

A half-smile for  
The swollen roundness of this child

*Paternity  
is the central social relationship.  
The emphasis is on the  
male as  
contributor of the seed  
and  
begetter of life.  
In equality, the woman's contribution:  
an egg.* (Rothman)

Every stretching bit of me beautiful  
No epidural required

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