

Images and Echoes in Matroreform *A Cultural Feminist Perspective*

From a feminist perspective, the essence of life experience is construed in reflective narrative understandings. In this paper, the author shares personal stories that are reflected through photographic images. Photos capture a singular moment through the eye of the lens and the camera's partial scope; however, images embody echoes of deeply held stories. As a woman in early motherhood, the author's construction of herself as a "mother" only previously lived in wonderings and glimpses of her childhood experiences. The echoes heard through images of her youth harkens to underlying tensions and experiences of a Chinese Canadian girlhood. The process of "capturing" through the lens allowed this Chinese feminist researcher, writer, and mother to reflect on her youth and transform the dissonance of early experiences into harmony. This process represents the author's drawing of deep etchings on a previously invisible "motherline." A series of seven photographs and echoing stories outline issues in mothering, racial tensions, bi-cultural identity, and belonging, while proposing a new concept of "matro-reform." Emerging from Adriene Rich's "matro-phobia," the author argues for a more empowering concept of matro-reform, which is defined as an act, desire, and process of claiming motherhood power; it is a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one's motherline.

Every moment of the day, we partake in an incessant parade of events that constitute our lives. Psychologist George Kelly (1969) reminds us that if we fail to make something of these events, we gain little in the way of experience from having been present when they happened. Kelly asserted that it is not the happening that makes us "experienced," but rather the successive construing and reflecting on the happenings that enrich our lives.

In this paper, by listening to echoes reverberating from photographic

images, I was able to recognize how slowing down and deliberately reflecting on experiences transform the fragmented happenings of my girlhood and motherhood into poignant mementoes. Indeed, constructing and composing life stories are fundamental to comprehending ourselves. Stories or “narratives” derive the fabric and essence of who I am as a feminist, mother, academic, Chinese woman, and psychologist. I have experienced a bone deep understanding that I live through stories (Mair, 1988) and that in telling and sharing them, I can reaffirm them, modify them, and envision new plots and stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 1991).

Photos capture a singular moment through the eye of the lens and the camera’s partial scope; however, images embody echoes of deeply held stories. As a woman in early motherhood, the construction of myself as a “mother” only previously lived in wonderings and glimpses of childhood experiences. The echoes heard through snapshots of my youth harkens to underlying tensions and experiences of a Chinese Canadian girlhood. The process of “capturing” through the lens allowed me to reflect on my youth and transform the dissonance into harmony. This process represents my drawing of deep etchings on a previously invisible “motherline.” Through outlining issues in mothering, racial tensions, bi-cultural identity, and belonging, I deploy my process of *matro-reform*. This process is not only reforming and reaffirming; it is a feminist act of voicing up and out of invisibility and silence.

Korean American writer, Joonuk Huh eloquently captured that “[f]or the daughter-writers of our century, narratives are a means of rescuing themselves and their mothers through the act of storytelling” (2000: 268). Huh captured the poignancy of narratives as a way of emerging from invisibility for Asian mothers and daughters. Indeed, through unearthing old photographs, taking new ones, and hearing and writing echoing stories, I rescued myself and simultaneously contribute to the visibility of an Asian mother/daughter Canadian experience.

Images and echoes

Hearing echoes amongst dissonance

The camera battery power reads “low.” I am determined to take these last few—“Click,” “Click,” “Click”... convinced that the final few are where echoes can be heard the loudest. Trees ... flowers ... paths ... people.... Unfettered from the pressure of “getting it this time,” I freely click away.

The USB port connects my camera to the computer, like joining mind to spirit; I translate the images, waiting for meaningful echoes to call to me. Instead, they come up blurred and crazy-colored. Jumbled. Not a pretty patched quilt of colors... but rather technology and color gone wrong.

Undo “delete,” perhaps there is an echo here if I listen....

Bold hues of purples, blues, greens, greys, and reds are fighting energy with each other. They are a blur of emotions overriding the moment, muting the events.



Echoes of Peers

In a Montreal, Canadian girlhood, sounds of ridicule emanate from schoolmates. “Chink, Chink, Chink” is chanted in indignant rhythm. Images behind the blitz of emotions show little girls and boys spitting on the sidewalk at my feet as they chase and kick me.

I can’t recall my feelings in those moments, nor my reactions. I must have felt powerless, confused, and helpless... like a child falling down after being tripped. But as to the exact feelings, and how much the scrape hurt, I am uncertain. I’d like to imagine that I wasn’t affected by their insults: that I ignored them and skipped the rest of the way home, indifferent to their name-calling and cruelty; that I went homebound looking forward to a sweet, Chinese sticky bun as my after school snack. Yet, this was probably not the case. Through even blurred memories, zaps of intense emotions, and amidst uncertainty of immediate feelings, one message sinks in loud and clear: I am different. But not only am I different, I am inferior to these white-skinned, fair-haired children.

A snapshot captures life lived in moments and bytes. It does not however, preserve the underlying emotions. I search my memory bank but cannot recall my feelings about the ridicule, or remember a salient moment when I felt a certain way about myself or about these white children. Like a pot of water on

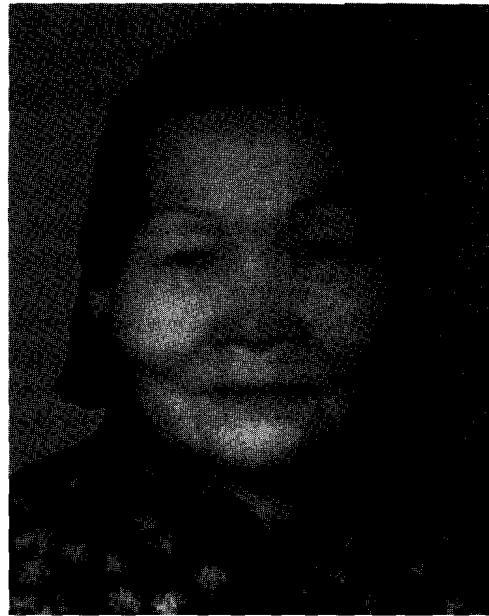
Gina Wong-Wylie

a low-flamed stove, the heat slowly penetrates into the viscera of my soul. Their bitter words... their fingers pulling at the sides of their faces to imitate my Chinese eyes ... flavours the pot and simmers it ... stewing passively over the years ... in ways that I can recognize in retrospect.

I recall praying and wishing deep within myself that I could be different from “inferior” Chinese people. The greatest compliment anyone could have paid me during my early teen years was that I did not look or act Chinese. I strove hard for this ... and it was not difficult since I was immersed in Canadian culture and spoke English without an accent. I spoke no Chinese at all and when asked if I knew how, I denied that I had any comprehension whatsoever. I spent immeasurable amounts of time trying to alter my appearance. All because I believed the natural “me” was worthless. I struggled not wanting to be that Chinese girl with scraped knees. Trying to be who I am not ... trying to be what I have not yet become.

*Echoing Wonder ... what of my daughters?
Will they too hear echoes of cultural dissonance?*

Grandmothers: Dissonance relived



Echoes of Gnin

I was always darker skinned and further tanned myself to achieve an exotic look to hide/cover/ the obvious “Chinese” pale-yellowness. Gnin would pull me toward her and sit me in her lap. In Toi San she scolds me about how dark-skinned I am and how I do not speak Chinese anymore ... disapproval and

disappointment in her lilting voice. Barely understanding her words, I easily pick up disapproval and judgment in her tone. I have become unaccepted in two cultures.



Echoes of an Invisible Motherline

I look at this old photo of my Po Po taken when she first immigrated to Canada. Many immigrants from Hong Kong hold sacred their passport photo as a symbol of new life, freedom, and chance for prosperity. In my family, these passport photos are blown up 8 x 10 and framed to commemorate the individual at their funeral. The photo is then hung on the wall in the house of the eldest son as a shrine to remember and honor.

As a child, the shrine of my great ancestors lived in the basement of my home. A red light bulb shone night and day between the faded black and white photos. Red, the Chinese color symbolizing happiness and prosperity, only enhanced my fear of the shrine. In the middle of the night I would scurry past with my eyes clamped shut to prevent their images from searing into memory and allowing death to pop up whenever she wanted to frighten me. For many years, I did all I could to avoid looking at the photos.

Now, as I look deeply into this photo, I am not afraid anymore. It doesn't represent "death" ... now, it echoes "missed opportunity." In the far recesses of my mind I hear Po Po. I am taken back to the many times I hear her voice: hearing but not comprehending. One thing is certain, she speaks and speaks and speaks incessantly and loudly talking to and "at" my mother. My sisters and I count how many spaces between the loud trills of Chinese words we only

partially understand and laugh at not being able to get to 3 seconds. How can she breathe through all that talking and what did she have so much to talk about? Other times, my mother spends countless hours on the phone merely saying “Ah ... O ... Ah ... Ah.”

On the first snowfall in early winter of 1997, I visit Po in the palliative care unit at the hospital. If only I could have understood those animated stories she told in half-Cantonese/half-Toi San and that she would fill my ears with—stories of her youth, her life, her triumphs, and struggles. What was it like raising two children single-handedly in Hong Kong and how did she maintain her steadfast, unwavering commitment to my grandfather who died when my mother was a girl? Most honoring Chinese wives do not marry after their husbands die. Did my Po Po not re-marry out of family honor or did she not remarry out of love? She died with those stories I will never pass on to my children nor know of my ancestral roots.

*Echoing Wonder ... what of my daughters and granddaughters?
Will colour, culture, language, and generational differences
impede them from knowing the stories I have lived by?
Can my Motherline become visible?*

Alice Walker's 1983 essay *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* introduced the term “motherline,” which Sara Ruddick further describes in *Maternal Thinking* (1989). Motherline is a feminist, maternal genealogy of knowledge and wisdom handed down from mother to daughter through generations. Motherline becomes invisible (sometimes warped, crooked, thinned, or severed) when cultural dissonance impedes the growth.

Additionally, motherline can be warped and severed by the grand narratives of a particular culture. For instance, the Head Tax imposed on Chinese Immigrants by the Canadian government in 1885, which rose from \$50 to \$500 per Chinese person, followed by the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1905 was legislated racism. Such stigma in peoples' history precludes visibility of motherline as mothers and grandmothers silence themselves and each other from recounting shameful stories of exclusion. Shame from poverty, from stigmatization, and internalized fear hindered my grandmothers and mother from drawing the motherline.

In my girlhood: Crumpled worth

My tiny frame shakes hysterically,
I am beyond fear.
At the age of 3, I know terror
as it rips through my small frame.
Screaming and shrieking at the top of my lungs...
Heaving and sobbing so greatly that the air

fails the expression of my helplessness.
Huge silences fill the gap between bellowed fear.
The basement cellar is my
Forever imprinted dungeon of abandonment.
The floor is cold and hard ...
darkness makes my dismal aloneness all the more palpable.
There are spiders here – no time for fear.
I must get out before the ghosted blackness snuffs out my existence.
Heart pounding with a life of its own,
I hold my breath, close my eyes,
and wail for reprieve as I live out my necessary punishment.
Punishment for what?
Perhaps I spilled my drink;
didn't finish dinner;
touched something not mine;
lied.

The crime is not what sears my anguish.
The punishment creases my dignity...
folds it tidily and
tears it to shreds.

*Echoing Wonder ... what of my daughters?
Will I mother with intention to their self-worth and dignity?*



Echoes of Worthlessness

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich described matrophobia as a phenomenon of fear of turning into one's mother and the ambivalence in reproducing a mother's oppression and subjugation: "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (1976: 193-195).

Though Rich (1976) appropriately defined a poignant fear, her use of "phobia" inaccurately defines what I believe is a keenly felt experience. Rather, fear of mother oppression and duplicating our mother's well intentioned but imperfect practices is not irrational, nor illogical, as the term "phobia" suggests. Instead, I believe it is a common experience, particularly of feminist mothers, to not want to reproduce, or be trapped in the oppressive bonds of conventional motherhood. The term "matro-reform" depicts what Rich explored and further describes an empowering process. I define matroreform as an act, desire, and process of claiming motherhood power; it is a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one's motherline. Matroreform is a cognitive, affective, behavioural, and spiritual reformation of mothering from within including removal and elimination of obstacles to self-determination and self agency. Just as Huh, at a young age, makes up her mind not to resemble her mother, I too, experience reluctance to emulate my mother and must reform mothering from scratch.

Within my process of matroreform, I have recognized that my parents loved and love me deeply; nevertheless, many of their methods of teaching served to fortify my desire for matroreform. The authoritarian and punitive style of parenting and the cultural chasm between an immigrant mother and a rebellious, first generation, Canadian-born girl were significant barriers to a close mother-daughter relationship. It was not until adulthood, when I became pregnant with my first child, that the active process of matroreform was initiated.

Image and echoes of matroreform

July 16, 1999

Dear Baby,

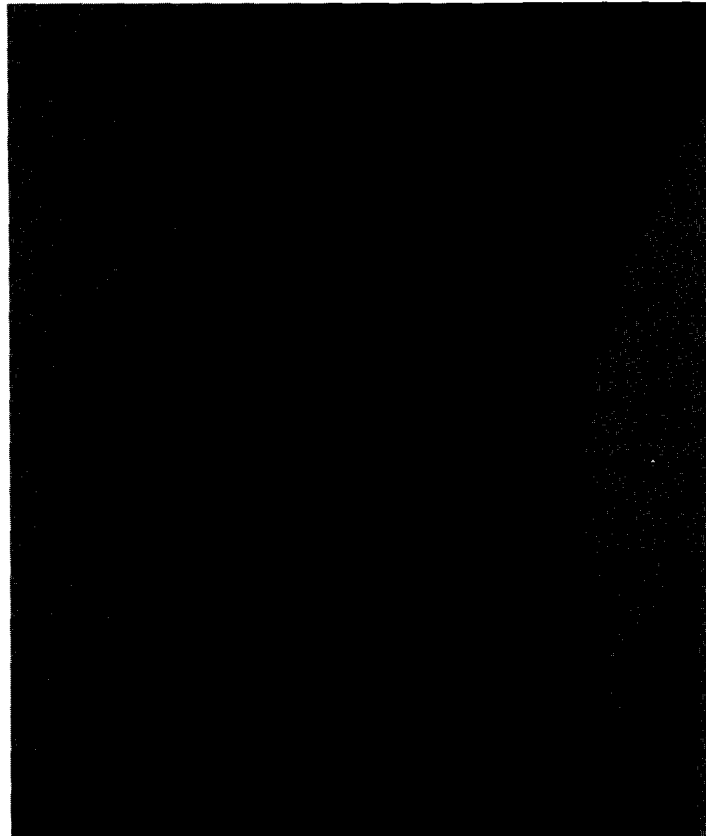
According to the ultrasound technician you are a girl. This might sound awful but it frightens me a little that you could be a girl. I've missed having a close relationship with my mother and I'm afraid that I may not know how to foster a strong and caring mother-daughter relationship with you. Silly ... because I know deep down, who I am is very unlike my mother. Some part of me believes that if you were a boy—I would have a better chance of having a different relationship with you.

August 30, 1999

Dear Baby,

I just turned over in bed—slowly and painfully so that I can write to you. My, are you (am I) big at 37 weeks!! Doug thinks you will be 8 or 9 pounds. We'll see. My candidacy is in one week. I can't wait to get past this hurdle so that I can focus all my energy on you.

I took part in a woman's Ph.D. dissertation research on the culture of mothering. I talked about not feeling like a mother yet. I described the non-supportive relationship I have with my mother and the trepidation it has fostered in my image of our relationship. I talked about how scary it is to me that you might be a girl with an expected due date right on my birthday. It's hard not to worry about repeating patterns when you could be born the day my mother gave birth to me. However, I also talked about the potential for healing—to know for myself that I can love you and be a good mother.



Echoes of Wonders

Gina Wong-Wylie

October 18, 1999

Dear Iris,

An unbelievable 6 weeks have gone by since your birth. You are lying next to me and for the first time since your arrival I have a few moments to write down some thoughts....

I could never have imagined how instantly I fell in love with you and how strongly and powerfully I feel that love. Everyday I tell you ... I can't tell you enough. All my anxieties and insecurities I had about being a mother were washed away when you crooked your head up to gaze into my eyes seconds after you were born. Your birth was incredible—brought out the best in me while challenging me to the fullest. I know you will continue to do this the rest of our lives. Thank you for coming into my life and for showing me my strength and ability to profoundly love a daughter.

I have many hopes that I can be a good mother to you. I hope that someday when you read this journal—many, many years from now—that you will be able to say that you have a good relationship with me and know how much you are loved and cared for. I hope you will be able to say that I've been unconditionally supportive of you and always let you know how important you are to me.

I feel that my life would not be as rich and meaningful if I cannot engender a feeling of worth and love in my children. I know now that I can forge my own ground for being a mother that is right for me. You're 9.6 pounds today—every ounce a joy!

October 11, 2002

Dear Iris and nine-week-old baby in my tummy,
It's past midnight on Friday and I just got into bed. Am thinking about how lucky I am to have you all in my life. Doug and I decided last night that 3 is the best age! Iris, you are so capable, independent, and articulate. You're throwing the frisbee well and hitting the ball with the bat. You love biking and want to go skiing. I love your sense of adventure and risk-taking. I feel proud that I am able to encourage you to explore your world and to stay a far enough distance, to let you learn from your own mistakes... Though never "perfect," I know that I am a nurturing and loving mother.

I look at you now and listen to the rain rattle and beat against the pavement outside. You've grown so much in a year...

And Patti Sinclair's wisdom echoes to me:

Our children offer us the sacred opportunity to overcome our deepest

fears, challenging us with our life issues, our fallibility, and our humanness. Also in the process, we have the greatest opportunity to witness a new beauty in life and experience a depth of gratitude and joy that stops and stills us. (2001: 139).



Echoes of a Visible Motherline

Going forward in motherhood



Echoes of Timelessness

Calming seas
The vast unknown...
how will this story of mine end?
All hallowed echoes heard through time,
Crashing against the waves
heard by all mothers.

I know
The answers to my echoing wonders live in the stillness of the water
and the grace of a lifetime...

The cultural chasm, this great water divide
Looks less ominous looking inward
Looking outward,
with You at my side.

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