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## Empowering Mothers and Daughters through Matroreform and Feminist Motherlines

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*Feminist motherlines, spoken in the mother tongue of relational discourse by mothers with their female relatives and children, help feminist mothers gain authority of their embodied knowledges of mothering. Along with matroreform—the self-determined mindful process of (re)claiming and (re)forming one’s parenting power—feminist mothers develop alternative rules and different practices to those prescribed for them by others. Drawing upon research into feminist mothering over the past two decades, this paper explores the ongoing rich contributions feminist motherlines and matroreform provide families and feminist theorizing. By participating in matroreform and feminist motherlines, mothers and children often develop a life-cycle perspective and a worldview of interconnectivity with each other, with others, and with the world that offer them opportunities and ways to create feminist mothering perspectives and practices countering those prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Discovering and nurturing matroreform and one’s motherline is often an idiosyncratic and a chaotic process that takes a lifetime, yet through it, mothers and their children can often reconcile intergenerational rifts. Findings shed light on the potential that matroreform and feminist motherlines have in presenting children with opportunities to engage with their own mothering practices and motherlines should they become parents.*

The quality of the mother’s life ... is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.— Adrienne Rich (246-47)

One of the gifts and a positive outcome of motherlines—according to Sharon

Abbey, Anglo Canadian maternal scholar and professor emeritus of adult education at Brock University—is its ability to assist in resolving the intergenerational rifts that may be felt and experienced among grandmothers, mothers, children, and grandchildren (845). A motherline, first coined by American Jewish poet, author, feminist and Jungian psychologist Naomi Lowinsky, connects mothers to their female ancestors and helps them to understand how their life stories are linked with previous generations of women in their families and cultures. Motherlines are spoken in the mother tongue of relational discourse, as noted by Ursula Le Guin, which help mothers gain authority in various ways through exposure to an embodied knowledge of mothering that journeys back through encounters with ancestor women who have had experience with mothering. Discovering and nurturing one's motherline is not simple; it's an idiosyncratic and a chaotic process that takes a lifetime (Abbey).

This paper explores the ongoing richness and potential contributions that feminist motherlines, along with matroreform, can offer families and feminist theorizing. By drawing upon research into feminist mothering over the past twenty-plus years, I continue to develop my longstanding exploration and discussion of how matroreform and feminist motherlines afford mothers the opportunity to record, explore, and pass on their life-cycle perspectives of feminist mothering to their children and to others. I also consider the potential matroreform and feminist motherlines have in giving children opportunities to engage with their own mothering practices and motherlines should they become parents. By participating in feminist motherlines, mothers and children can develop a life-cycle perspective and a worldview of interconnectivity with each other, with others, and with the world that offer them opportunities and ways to create inspiring mothering perspectives and practices countering those prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

### **Feminist Mothering and Matroreform**

Feminist mothering involves matroreform—an empowering practice first theorized and articulated by Canadian scholar and psychologist Gina Wong-Wylie in 2006. Essential to feminist mothering, matroreform is a conscious exercise whereby mothers partake in the mindful process of (re)claiming their parenting power by establishing alternative rules and different practices to those previously prescribed and described by others for them (Wong-Wylie, "Introduction"; "Images" 135). It also requires "a cognitive, affective, behavioral and spiritual reformation of mothering from within, including [the] removal and elimination of obstacles to self-determination and self-agency" ("Images" 135).

Matroreform can include the active practice and empowering process of creating a meaningful motherline for mothers when they engage in reflective

understandings and narratives based on life experiences both before and during mothering. Matroreform and feminist motherlines may selectively honour the practices of previous generations of mothers by replicating attitudes and behaviours seen as valuable and worthy of reproduction. They can also interrogate, resist, revise, or remove behaviours hurtful to mothers, children, and others. Furthermore, matroreform and feminist motherlines can replace damaging actions with more nurturing parenting practices (Green, *Practicing*).

Drawing upon research with a small group of self-identified feminist mothers living in or around Winnipeg, Manitoba, during the mid-1990s and the first decade of the 2000s,<sup>1</sup> I summarize their shared understandings of feminism and mothering, which, in turn, inform their approaches to matroreform. Understanding the specificities of matroreform provides the context and backdrop for discussing the role and significance of empowering mothers and children through feminist motherlines.

### Understandings of Feminism and Mothering

Even though each feminist mother engages in her own approach to and practice of feminist parenting, the mothers I interviewed share common understandings of their place within the world as women, feminists, and mothers. They also share a personal commitment to confront and resist unreasonable and often hurtful social expectations placed upon them as women and as mothers. For these women, feminism is an embodied identity. It is central to their sense of self and to the way in which they understand, view, and engage with the world around them. They recognize that humans live in largely patriarchal societies based upon unjust social systems that systematically create, support, and privilege men who commonly control a disproportionate share of power (Green, *Practicing*).

Feminists generally view patriarchy as an ideology central to and supported by, among others, familial, legal, political, economic and social organization, which generally disempower and disenfranchise girls and women (Green, “Patriarchal Ideology” 969). Patriarchy is understood to be a system of social structures and practices that take place within, but not limited to, relations in paid work, in the state, in the family, in sexuality, in cultural institutions, and in modes of production (Walby). Feminists understand patriarchy to be exceedingly damaging, as it limits almost everyone in varying degrees, which may be according to, but not restricted to, the identity and intersection of a person’s sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, ability, age, religion, and spiritual beliefs.

The feminist mothers I interviewed understand motherhood to be a patriarchal institution—an idea originally posited by American feminist, mother,

novelist, poet, and theorist Adrienne Rich in her monumental 1976 book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. These mothers know, as did Rich four decades ago, that as a patriarchal institution, motherhood restricts women and children. They know, firsthand, how the culmination of social structures and patriarchal meanings of motherhood create restrictive and punishing environments under which they are expected to live and parent.

In their daily lives, these mothers contend with the resulting conditions and circumstances largely proscribed and shaped by the institution of motherhood (Green, “Cultural Bearing” 260; “Patriarchal Ideology” 969). For instance, they must confront the social pressure and demands to perform a particular kind of “good mother” (Wong-Wylie, “Images and Echoes”) that practices “intensive mothering” (Hays) or “sacrificial motherhood” (O’Reilly, *Mother Outlaws*). They understand how these expectations placed upon them as mothers—to unconditionally give their time, money, emotional support and love to their children, and to be ultimately responsible for their children’s welfare—are unrealistic and impossible to fulfill.

Being aware of and critical of the institution of motherhood, these feminist mothers also know that the type of intensive socialization of children expected within this form of mainstream motherhood contributes to sustaining the social production and practice of patriarchy. And, they know that this type of childrearing and parenting practice is also a self-fulfilling prophesy that feeds and sustains both the patriarchal institution of motherhood and patriarchy (Green, “Patriarchal Ideology”; *Practicing*).

As feminist mothers, they understand that what occurs in the larger world has an effect on each person and, conversely, what people do as individuals has an influence on the larger world. In other words, they believe that the personal and the political are categorically interlaced. They recognize that all humans have varying degrees of agency and influence in the world. Furthermore, they appreciate that each person is variously influenced by social systems and people that live within them.<sup>2</sup> Their positions as feminists and as mothers inform their understanding of not only the influence they have on, and the responsibility they have for, their children, but also the interconnection of the personal and the political and how they integrate them in their motherwork (Green, *Practicing*). They are aware of the social expectations placed upon them to mother in ways that ensure the replication of patriarchy, and also understand and enact upon their individual agency to parent differently if they so choose. And they do.

Feminists, including these mothers, believe that autonomy and choice are central to human self-determination and to freeing people from the social constructions of gender, sexuality, ability, class, race, and their resulting oppressive limitations. Ensuring that everyone, and especially girls and women, can make conscious life choices—regarding, among others, their gender, sexuality,

relationships, education, work, religion, reproduction, and family—is central to how these feminist mothers develop and support the autonomy of their children as individuals (Green, *Practicing*). Having and enacting upon their agency within the context of parenting assists mothers in reforming patriarchal mothering practices to suit their needs and the needs of their children. Being autonomous entails knowing that putting one’s personal and political understandings, beliefs, theories, and knowledge into practice both individually and collectively involves enacting one’s potential and capacity to be self-determined, self-directed, and engaged as social-change agents in their families and in the world (Green, *Practicing*).

Simply put, feminist mothers engage in praxis when they consciously integrate their feminist understandings and theorizing in their everyday lives. In this case, by linking their feminism with their mothering, they create parenting practices that disrupt the institution of motherhood and offer alternative models and practices of mothering to their families and to others. In doing so, they use matroreform and create feminist motherlines that empower themselves and their children. As such, they contribute to feminist theorizing around parenting and feminism by offering alternative ways to raise children and be mothers (Green, “Developing a Feminist Motherline”; “Feminist Motherline”; “Matroreform”).

### **Matroreform: Breaking the Rules of Motherhood**

Reforming and contesting the institution of motherhood is not easy. As my longitudinal research has found, it requires various strategies and actions in multiple locations over long periods of time. For instance, some feminist mothers create alternative models of mothering by choosing to parent alone. Some expand their families to include other biologically and/or nonbiologically related adults to co-parent and/or support and assist their parenting. Others consciously inhabit the socially sanctioned position of “mother” recognized within the institution of motherhood to covertly trouble and contest the ideals of the good mother from within (Green, *Practicing*).

Keenly aware of the influence they have in the lives of their children, as well as the contribution their children make to the world, feminist mothers are critically attentive to the interactions they have with their children. They are acutely attuned to the values they demonstrate, model, and teach. They are also mindful of, and sensitive to, the possible damage they can inflict upon their children through their actions, especially by misusing the power they have as adults within their mother-child relationship. As such, they choose to interact with their children in ways built on the feminist principle of not replicating patriarchal values and structures based around hierarchies and domination.

Within their mother-child relationships, feminist mothers actively resist the dynamics of power and control prescribed by the institution of motherhood. For instance, they may speak directly with their children about the expected and socially supported power dynamic of adults over children within society. They may also acknowledge and disrupt their own power as mothers within their own family relationships. As feminists, they respect their children's human rights<sup>3</sup> and respect their children's right to autonomy. They consciously work to develop non-hierarchical relationships with their children, and attempt to be open and honest about their own feminist understandings about their relationships with their children.

When speaking directly with their children about the ways in which gendered relations and power operate in the world, they participate in ongoing age-appropriate conversations. This may begin during the child's early years by having discussions with their children about characters and storylines they see together as they read children's books, watch movies, view television shows, or go online. As their children mature, mothers may progress to more complex and in-depth conversations about community-related activities, as well as news items, current affairs, and global concerns. They may, for instance, discuss issues around violence against girls and women. They may also talk about the current epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous girls and women in Canada. Or they may speak about the high incidences of transphobia, homophobia, and queerphobia. They may address the general exploitation of women in the paid labour force, or they may talk about the exploitation of women who work as migrant or domestic workers.

Aware of the patriarchal gaze of others and its need to significantly control and punish mothers who do not conform to patriarchal notions and standards of motherhood, feminist mothers are strategic in the ways in which they challenge and question their socially prescribed roles and duties as parents. Although mothering in one's own image can be liberating, it is often isolating and lonely for both mothers and their children. This is especially the case when mothers refuse to participate in socializing their children into the expected gender binary—when they do not enforce in their children the socially prescribed gender-specific expressive behaviours. Furthermore, mothering in one's own image, when that image does not reflect the expectations of motherhood held by society, also means mothers must be aware of and be able to negotiate the burden of contending with the real consequences of having social services scrutinize them as mothers and potentially relinquish their children to authorities.

Living one's feminist principles while mothering means trusting that approach is better than the one offered by mainstream motherhood. Matroreform requires a faith in one's feminist worldview and unconventional

parenting methodology. It also means taking risks and being cognizant of the very real and harmful potential social sanctions for oneself and for one's children. Being consciously aware of injustices—caused by patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia, queerphobia, transphobia, ageism, class bias, capitalism, colonialism, ableism, as well as the violence often accompanying these interlocking and intersecting social systems—is central to the matroreform of these mothers (Green, *Practicing*). These mothers defy and contest the institution of motherhood by defining and creating mothering for themselves and their children.

### Feminist Motherlines for Mothers

Feminist mothering, asserts Anglo Canadian maternal scholar Andrea O'Reilly, “begins with the recognition that mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering, from a position of agency, authority, authenticity and autonomy” (*Feminist Mothering* 11). Feminist mothers draw upon and develop these values in their daily lives. This includes their mothering practices in which they model their feminist identities, politics, culture, and strategies of living for themselves, their children, and others. Their feminism is central to their sense of themselves as women, to their understandings and reconstructions of motherhood, to their commitment of introducing their children to a feminist worldview, and to developing and honouring their close and non-hierarchical relationships with their children. By living their lives in this way, they engage in matroreform and generate feminist motherlines, which demonstrate to their children the crucial lessons and skills of critical awareness, survival, independence, and autonomy (Green, “Patriarchal Ideology” 261).

Motherlines for feminists encapsulate their commitment to and practice of acknowledging and articulating the many struggles, pressures, and conflicts involved in the complex embodied experiences of feminist motherwork. Their feminist motherlines are just as dedicated to transforming the institution of motherhood (Green, *Practicing*). Not only do feminist motherlines involve self-discovery and empowerment for these mothers, they equally help daughters conceive of themselves as autonomous agents in their own right.

### Feminist Motherlines for Daughters

Within the past decade, I have had the good fortune to interview five adult daughters of four self-identified feminist mothers about their understanding of their mother's feminism and about their own perceptions and beliefs regarding feminism. And within six months of this writing, I had the pleasure of speaking

with two adult daughters of mothers they define as feminist. Between the ages of twenty and forty years, these seven daughters speak of the ways in which their mothers have demonstrated the necessity of feminism in their feminist parenting practices.

Each daughter spoke passionately of the particular need for a feminist gender-based analysis of social systems, including patriarchy, as well as interpersonal social relations in the world. They note, for instance, how they value both the lessons they were taught by their mothers and their continued conversations with their mothers about the ways in which society is constructed and functions. They appreciate learning from their mothers how to recognize that all people are located within that constructed society and appreciate how people can be positively and negatively affected by it in several ways. One daughter specifically thanks her mother for teaching her how to understand the world as patriarchal as well as to challenge its ideology and practice. She specifically notes her mother's lessons to try to respectfully speak her own truth when she feels safe enough to do so, and to demonstrate nonpatriarchal ways of engaging with people.

These daughters admire how their feminist mothers have confronted social expectations placed upon them as women and as mothers. They appreciate how their moms have struggled to live life, as much as possible, on their own terms. They see this in how they've often made personal decisions and have taken on the responsibilities of mothering in ways that confront and challenge social expectations of them as mothers and as women. Like their mothers, they agree that feminist mothering is a political act.

One daughter acknowledges that her queer mother had to take on more battles than she has had to. She understands her mother's generation was forced to live within and deal with a society that was more hostile towards young, single, and queer mothers than it is now. She believes she has grown up in an era far more accepting of feminism and the fluidity of gender and sexuality than during her mom's time. She feels she is better understood and accepted as a bisexual than those of her mother's generation. She also believes there are more role models for her as a queer woman wanting to mother a child alone. She specifically credits her mother for breaking the rules around sexuality and mothering when she was growing up, and for demonstrating the power of always being true to herself.

These daughters also speak about the respectful and egalitarian relationships they have with their mothers. They treasure their ability to have open and frank conversations about a plethora of topics and life issues. Although they understand that nonfeminist mothers may have close, frank, and honest discussions with their children, these daughters believe it is their mother's feminism that is the source of their conscious and deliberate non-hierarchical relationships



with them. They believe their mothers' engagement with feminism in their everyday lives has strongly influenced the parenting decisions they make in their mothering practices (Green, *Practicing* 111).

Their mothers candidly model ways to challenge ideals around motherhood, and make visible and validate feminist mothering practices within the institution. They note that their mothers advocate and push for their daughters' autonomous sense of self, and support them in being whoever and whatever they want to be. They give examples of being supported by their mothers in their unconventional, unexpected, and sometimes risky decisions about education and work. One daughter speaks of the encouragement she received from her mom when first studying fashion design and then engineering. Two others are grateful for their mothers' steadfast backing as they pursue feminist graduate studies. And three daughters speak with admiration and appreciation for their mothers who support them in their careers in popular music and acting in theatre and film.

All daughters speak to the influence their mothers have had on their own understandings and practices of feminism, and note the respect each has for the other, particularly when their daughters' feminism may not replicate that of their mothers'. They recognize their moms grew up in a different historical period, and that their feminisms developed within and reflect the context of particular situations connected with that era. One daughter, for instance, explains whereas her mother's commitment to fighting for women's rights is centred on women, she sees her own support for women's rights as an attempt to gain equality (Green, *Practicing* 126). Another daughter, who is a mother herself, speaks highly of her close relationship with her own mother, and how together, they have very similar perspectives on feminism and the world at large. As single women, they often talk about and share the parenting of their grand/children, which is based on similar feminist principles (Green, *Practicing*).

The daughters affirm their mothers took risks and struggled to ensure that they were raising them in the ways faithful to their feminism. They are grateful for their mothers' matroreform and for their feminist motherlines. They especially acknowledge the prominence of these influences in their own conversations and decision making about their current or future parenting practices. One daughter says she and her mom have spoken at length about her decision not to have children now or most likely in the future. Her mother was supportive, encouraging her to live her life as she wants to, not as others may want her to. Two other daughters speak of the ways in which their mothers supported their plans to have children with other women. And another daughter thanks her mother for encouraging her when she was planning to conceive and raise a child alone and on her own terms.

## Conclusion: The Power of Matroreform and Feminist Motherlines

Feminist motherlines have been created and continue to be nurtured by this particular group of feminist mothers and daughters. Their collective and insightful understandings of matroreform continue to cultivate feminist motherlines challenging patriarchal norms of motherhood and empowering them to live their lives with agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy.

We can all learn from these lessons, as they inform both individual personal feminist actions and feminist theorizing. The intergenerational power and influence of matroreform and feminist motherlines cannot be understated. Although this research is based on a small number of self-identified feminist mothers and a few of their daughters, together they conclusively demonstrate the power and longevity of feminism in matroreform and feminist motherlines.

They demonstrate, for example, the ability of matroreform and feminist motherlines to resolve intergenerational rifts that may be felt and experienced between mothers and their daughters, as theorized by Abbey. They also show how a feminist motherline, as posited by Lowinsky, connects mothers and their daughters to help them to understand how their life stories are linked with previous generations of women in their families and cultures. They also illustrate how feminist motherlines are spoken in the mother tongue of relational discourse, as noted by Le Guin, and can help mothers gain authority through exposure to an embodied knowledge of feminist mothering.

This paper has explored the ongoing contributions that feminist motherlines, along with matroreform, offer families and feminist theorizing. It continues to develop my longstanding exploration and discussion of how matroreform and feminist motherlines afford mothers the opportunity to record, explore, and pass on their life-cycle perspectives of feminist mothering to their children and to others. It also considers the potential that matroreform and feminist motherlines have in presenting children opportunities to engage with their own mothering practices and motherlines should they become parents. And finally, this paper has demonstrated how feminist motherlines give mothers and children the ability to develop a life-cycle perspective and a worldview of interconnectivity, which offer them ways to create mothering perspectives and practices countering those prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>My initial research into feminist mothering began in the mid-1990s as part of my PhD research, when I interviewed sixteen self-identified feminist mothers about their understanding of feminism, mothering, and the interconnection and influence of the two upon each other. Collectively, they were the parents

of thirty-five children—nineteen girls and sixteen boys between the ages of newborn and early twenties. Between 2005 and 2007, I contacted and interviewed ten of the original sixteen mothers. We discussed the influence of their feminist mothering upon their children as well as some of the lessons they learned about parenting and about feminism in the intervening decade. I am grateful for their generosity of time and willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with me.

<sup>2</sup>Though not specifically using the term “intersectional,” these feminist mothers and their daughters understand and apply the theory of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.

<sup>3</sup>See UNICEF Canada listed in works cited for a list of the rights of children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Declaration of Human Rights, which extends to humans at the age of majority, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 during its 183rd plenary meeting. Resolution 217 A (III), listing all of the human rights, can be found under the Office of the High Commission United Nations Human Rights in the works cited.

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