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## Practicing Matricentric Feminist Mothering

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*The practice of feminist mothering is central to matricentric feminism because it is centred on the experiences of mothers. Mothering and feminism are equally defining dimensions in the lives of feminist mothers who recognize that although they are oppressed and disempowered both as women and as mothers by the patriarchal institution of motherhood, they, along with their children, can also be empowered through the conscious and active praxis of feminist parenting. By placing their needs and concerns as mothers at the centre of their feminist and political practice of parenting, feminist mothers engage in and offer others a praxis of matricentric feminism that incorporates maternal theory, activism, and feminist motherlines.*

*This article reflects upon some of the lessons of matricentric feminism explored and detailed within my 2011 book *Practicing Feminist Mothering*. The book is based on two decades of research involving the lived experiences and knowledge of sixteen self-identified feminist mothers and a number of their adult children. Although the experiences and findings may appear to be somewhat dated, the insights from this research, nevertheless, provide an understanding of the conscious and political action of feminist mothering towards changing society through their parenting. They also provide a powerful perspective on mothering as a central aspect of feminism that may act as a foundation for further alternative family structures.*

### Setting the Stage

When I read the call for this matricentric themed journal edition, I saw a perfect fit with my twenty-year research into feminist mothering and with the feminist parenting I have been engaged in for the past thirty years. Simply put, the praxis of feminist mothering—the process of joining one’s feminism together with one’s parenting—is explicitly matricentric and matrifocal; “it begins with the mother and takes seriously the work of mothering” (O’Reilly, “Conference Booklet”). In other words, matricentric feminism, as noted by

Canadian maternal scholar Andrea O'Reilly, is “for and about mothers” (“Ain’t I a Feminist”). In the form of feminist mothering, matricentric feminism not only honours the work of mothers and their mothering, it also contributes to the ongoing development and practice of feminism through feminist motherlines.

As a feminist and a first-time mother in the late 1980s, I was curious about how other feminists were living their feminism while parenting. At that time, feminist mothering was not particularly visible, nor was it understood as a viable strategy of parenting or a meaningful way to practice one’s feminism. There was not a body of literature or group of scholars to consult as there are today. Here, I am particularly thinking of the maternal scholarship and activist organizations Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI) and the International Association of Maternal Action and Scholarship (IAMAS). Nor were there established communities of feminist mothers to connect with, either in person or online. No matter how hard I tried to seek them out, feminist mothers were not readily available as role models or easily found to confide in. Although I was connected to and involved with a number of feminist consciousness raising groups and feminist activist groups in my community at the time, mothering and feminism were not readily linked, spoken of, or considered to be areas of discussion or activism. Many feminists during what is now known as the second wave of feminism were closeted as mothers because parenting was seen as secondary to organized feminist activism and movement (Green, *Practicing*).

To deal with my feelings of isolation, I consciously sought out self-identified mothers, like myself, to learn from and with. I wanted to know how they understood feminism, motherhood, and mothering. And more importantly, I was curious about how this confluence of experience and knowledge might inform and underpin their understandings and practices of feminist parenting. As a new mother who was also pursuing a PhD, I used this educational opportunity to explore the interconnection of feminisms and mothering. While I developed an understanding for theoretical perspectives about and an appreciation for historical literature on motherhood and practices of mothering, some of which were feminist, I was left seeking deeper experiential knowledge and meaning making beyond the sporadic informal conversations I had with others about their personal experiences of uniting their feminism with their parenting practices.

My doctoral research, which took place primarily during the mid-1990s, included interviewing sixteen female cisgender, temporarily able-bodied, neurologically typical, self-identified feminist mothers living in or around Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The majority of mothers were born in Canada, with eight in Manitoba, two in Ontario, and one in British Columbia. One mother was born in Guyana, two were born in England, and two were born in

the United States of America. Most women describe their heritage as mixed, noting their ancestry being connected to countries in the European Union (as of July 2019)—notably, England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Poland, and Sweden. Three women identify as Jewish and one as Mennonite. One woman identifies herself as Guyanese and another as Métis. One names her heritage as Scottish and Icelandic and two others as Colombian and Australian.

All mothers had some postsecondary education, were between the ages of twenty-nine and fifty years, and were raising biological children who ranged in age from newborn to twenty-something. Of their collective of thirty-three children, eighteen were female, and fifteen were male. One mother was parenting an adopted child along with two biological children, and another was raising three non-biological children from a previous relationship, a biological child and an adopted child. Half of the 16 mothers were caring for children alone, and the other 8 were raising kids in partnerships. One woman identified as bisexual, two identified as lesbian, and the remaining thirteen described themselves as heterosexual.

This doctoral research was one of the first scholarly undertakings to position the needs and concerns of feminist mothers at its core. With the overt purpose of understanding and developing a theory and practice of feminist mothering, it was explicitly by, for, and about feminist mothers. Discoveries from that early matricentric research project can be found in *Feminist Mothering in Theory and Practice, 1985-1995: A Study in Transformative Politics*.

For this current article, I draw upon my 2011 book, *Practicing Feminist Mothering*, to provide specific examples of matricentric feminism. This two-decade longitudinal research (1995-2007) articulates the praxis of feminist mothering. It begins with my early PhD research exploring the interconnection between feminism and mothering in the lives of sixteen self-identified feminist mothers, and concludes with the influence of the parenting of four of those mothers in the lives of five of their adult daughters. Whereas the last of the interviews with the daughters took place a dozen years ago, *Practicing Feminist Mothering* provides specific examples of how matricentric feminism has been created, experienced, and lived by this select group of feminist mothers and daughters. Moreover, their voices provide insight into how matricentric feminism assists the intergenerational development of both feminism and feminist mothering that nourishes feminist theory, activism, and feminist mothering practices. They also offer examples of parenting that others can draw upon to parent in matricentric ways that fit with and are true to themselves.

Now, as then, I attempt to understand and explain the maternal experiences of these feminist mothers and daughters in a way that honours their particular perspectives without being elitist or exclusionary (Green, *Practicing* 53). My intent is to offer a formidable perspective on mothering, a central element of

feminism that is often neglected. Motherhood, notes O'Reilly, "is the unfinished business of feminism" ("Baby Out with the Bathwater"). Positioning the needs and concerns of mothers as the starting point for a theory, practice, and politic on and for women's empowerment is central to the lives of feminist mothers, to the lives of their children, and, potentially, to the lives of future generations.

I begin this article by briefly introducing the concept of matricentric feminism and how feminist mothering is central to its foundation and practice. I draw from the experience and knowledge of self-identified feminist mothers from my previous research to articulate five shared common characteristics that define their feminism. I then address the ways in which their feminism informs their understanding and critique of motherhood as a patriarchal and oppressive institution. I explore how this particular worldview informs the ways in which they choose to trouble motherhood and to create affirming feminist mothering practices for themselves and for their children. Through the conscious and active praxis of bringing feminism and mothering together—the active engagement of matricentric feminism—these mothers place their needs and concerns at the centre of their political practice of parenting. In essence, they disrupt the child centric model of mothering prevalent in intensive mothering (Hays) that developed during the 1980s with the millennial generation and continues to be practiced today. I conclude by demonstrating that by engaging in the praxis of feminist mothering, these mothers create a practice of matricentric feminism that dislodges sacrificial motherhood for themselves, their children, and others; it offers a foundational model of matricentric feminism based on agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity that benefits parenting, families, and feminism at large (O'Reilly, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood").

### **Defining Matricentric Feminism**

In "Ain't I a Feminist?: Matricentric Feminism, Feminist Mamas, and Why Mothers Need a Feminist Movement/Theory of Their Own", O'Reilly contends that mothers, more so than women in general, "remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism" because mothers face distinct social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological problems related specifically to the identity of mother, the work of mothering, and the patriarchal institution of motherhood (4). Mothers, she argues, "need a feminism of their own"; one that positions the concerns and realities of mothers at the "starting point for a theory and politic of empowerment" (O'Reilly, "Conference Booklet").

Simply stated, under patriarchy mothers are oppressed as mothers because they are mothers. A matricentric mode of feminism organized from the mothers' particular identity and their work as mothers has the potential to

finally deal with motherhood. Consequently, mothers, children, and feminism benefit from a matricentric mode of feminism based upon the particular identity, knowledge, work, and politics of mothers.

### **Five Shared Characteristics of Feminism**

Each person certainly comes to their feminist consciousness and to their mothering through their own particular journey. Nevertheless, the feminist mothers I interviewed between 1995 and 2005 about their experiences of becoming feminists and becoming parents all believe, as clearly articulated by African American feminist bell hooks, that “feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression” (26). Furthermore, as a group, these mothers share five common characteristics when defining what feminism means to them—characteristics that are fundamental to their parenting values and practices.

First and foremost, these mothers recognize their feminism as an embodied identity. Like self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde, they understand their own personal and varied identities to be interwoven and inspirable. For them, feminist and mother are two self-defining core identities that are intertwined and inform each other. Feminist and mother cannot be separated or torn apart. Being a feminist mother is crucial to their sense of self, and informs the ways in which they see the world, choose to live their lives, and how they engage with and parent their children.

Second, their feminism entails a world view that acknowledges and critiques patriarchal society, which is based on a binary view of the world. These feminist mothers are especially critical of and work against the patriarchal sex-gender system that privileges cisgender males over cisgender females as well as folks with other gender identities. They also recognize that patriarchy intersects with other systemic forms of oppression that operate within power hierarchies that classify and oppress people according to socially constructed identities based on, among others, ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, literacy, race, religion, sex and sexuality.

Their third shared understanding of feminism is that the personal experiences of people are directly linked with the social, economic, and political contexts in which they live. Personal experiences are related to and are influenced by the hierarchical power dynamics of patriarchal and other systems of oppression. These gendered personal realities are political in nature because the political environment has tangible and particular ramifications for individuals (Hanisch).

A fourth shared belief of these mothers is that meaningful and permeant change in the individual lives of women and others who are oppressed will only be reached when patriarchy and other related and intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression are eradicated. They consider feminism to

be, as articulated by hooks, the necessary “struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (26). Their feminisms value individual autonomy and choice, which are both essential to human self-determination and freedom as well as to bringing about progressive social change. These mothers consider a person’s autonomy and choice to be important not only for an individual’s development and life, but also for their own beliefs and how they are practiced in their relationships with their children.

And, finally, these feminist mothers believe in and are committed to feminist praxis—the conscious act of putting one’s theoretical and experiential knowledge of feminism into daily practice, particularly during their motherwork and in their relationships with their children (Green, *Practicing* 56, 150). Like hooks, they believe “the foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression” (33). As feminist mothers, they know that the institution of motherhood, so central to the life and longevity of patriarchy, must be eradicated because it reifies and reinforces patriarchal ideologies and practices, which, in turn, oppress women as mothers. They, too, recognize that “without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long-range impact” (hooks 33). This strategy of troubling patriarchy and bringing about feminist social change by integrating feminist theory with their parenting practices as mothers, so central to matricentric feminist praxis, exemplifies the confidence they have in the potential of intergenerational feminist mothering. It may also have the potential to reform mothering for other folks who may not meet the patriarchal definition of mother, such as transgender parents and plutonic co-parents.

### **Feminist Understandings of Motherhood**

Accepting that they live in a patriarchal world, which influences all social institutions and interpersonal interactions, informs the ways in which these feminist mothers understand motherhood. Each recognizes the difference between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, first identified by the American poet, activist, theorist, and feminist mother Adrienne Rich. In her now classic 1986 book, *Of Woman Born*, Rich notes there are “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13).

These feminist mothers also know that motherhood, which encompasses the ideal of intensive mothering, can be an oppressive institution that systemically places social pressure on women to conform to culturally defined and monitored constructions of the ideal, perfect, and good mother (Green, *Practicing* 76-77). They recognize these regulatory elements of motherhood to be harmful to women and children and speak of the low self-esteem, self-blame, and self-hatred associated with internalized oppression (Green, *Practicing*; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 139). Yet through their critique of motherhood, they create some distance from it and make space to redefine motherhood for themselves and for their families (Green, *Practicing* 151).

Intensive mothering, first theorized by Sharon Hays in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, expects and demands that mothers (not fathers or other caring adults) will unconditionally give themselves and their resources to their children, which include but are not limited to their time, physical and emotional energy, money, emotional support, and love. Parenting is the primary focus of the mother, who must respond to her child's needs before her own. Any guidance she seeks must come from mostly male experts in child development and childrearing.

In understanding the distinction between the institution and ideology of motherhood and the experience of mothering, these feminist mothers recognize the following: 1) the institution affects mothers differently depending on their social location (i.e., age, class, disability, ethnicity/race, gender, sex, sexual orientation); 2) mothering can be an empowering site for mothers, children, and community members; 3) feminist mothering can challenge the ideology of motherhood; and 4) feminist mothers can make space in their mothering in which they can actively engage in alternative practices of raising children through close and egalitarian parent-child relationships.

Each of the feminist mothers I interviewed considers their mothering to be a conscious political act. Like hooks, they believe that "feminist movement must necessarily think of feminist education as significant in the lives of everyone" (23). For these mothers, feminist education is intrinsic to their decision making and mothering practices, particularly when they engage with and educate their children about themselves, the world around them, and their place within it. Feminist education is fundamental to their matricentric parenting practices, which is central to the political act of troubling patriarchal ideals of motherhood and creating alternative models of parenting that empower themselves as mothers and, as a result, also their children.

## Creating and Affirming Feminist Mothering Practices

The feminist mothers I interviewed between 1996 and 1997 knew they were in a complicated position due to their critique of the dominant ideology of the institution of motherhood. Yet, they found ways to navigate both the societal and internalized expectations of motherhood and to honour their own understandings of feminism and parenting. For instance, Niere,<sup>1</sup> a forty-one-year-old white Jewish mother of three cisgender kids—a teenage daughter and a ten-year old and six-year-old son—came out as lesbian after divorcing her heterosexual cisgender male spouse. She elucidates her understanding and critique of motherhood as an institution:

I think it boils down to this whole ideology surrounding the family: that the family has two people, opposite sexes and the children. And they're enclosed, a supposed fully-functioning family unit. And our society is still predicated on that. So, if a woman finds herself in a position where she's not within that structure, the society only pays lip service to supports and that kind of thing. But I think, given that this patriarchal model is still very much in existence, there are still a lot of women who are falling into this trap. And it just creates a lot of conflict and a hell of a lot of guilt. I think it's very damaging. It's definitely damaging to mothers because it erodes our self-esteem and our self-confidence in our ability to be good mothers. (Green, *Practicing* 73)

Keeping herself centred as a mother in her feminist analysis of the institution of motherhood, Niere is both critical of its damaging expectations and is able to break free of the patriarchal model of family that she finds so restricting. As such, she is empowered to mother confidently alone and come out as lesbian at a time when lesbian mothers were often isolated and ostracized.

Willow, a thirty-seven-year-old single, white Jewish lesbian mother of a ten-year-old daughter also understands and rejects the patriarchal ideal of motherhood. She clearly redefines mothering for herself and invents alternative ways to parent her cisgender daughter. Reflecting on her feminist mothering she tells me the following:

I mean basically, in order to do this, I broke all the rules and went about this in the most conscious manner that I knew at the time. I'd probably go about it differently now, but back ten years ago, I broke all the rules by making a choice to be a mother. Nobody told me I had to do this because I was married or that I had to get married in order to do this. I made choices for myself. I did not let myself be subjugated, as it were, by men. I'm not married, and I never have been. And no man ever called the shots in my home, nor did a man ever support me in any way. (Green, *Practicing* 95)



By honouring her own understandings of feminism and parenting, Willow chose to become pregnant at a time during the late 1980s when there was little support from lesbian and feminist communities in Winnipeg for lesbian women to do so. By retaining a matricentric feminist outlook and practice, she could redefine motherhood for herself, for her child, and for others within the larger lesbian and feminist communities.

Thirty-four-year-old Deb, a white heterosexual woman, living common-law with the white heterosexual cisgender father of their seven-and-a-half-year-old son has a more subversive approach to mothering than that of Niere and Willow. Nevertheless, Deb is just as conscious and inventive in her matricentric parenting activity, noting:

Someone can look at me on the surface and go, “Okay, there’s a woman who’s chosen to be a mother, good patriarchy likes that. Good, good.” They don’t have a clue! I have the ability to transform what I perceive the role to be, to take it on, to claim it, and to just create it. I’m a mother in my own image in the absence of a role model, or someone telling me how to do it. (Green, *Practicing* 98)

Deb resists the damaging elements of the institution of motherhood by continually noting, analyzing, and challenging the power dynamics inherent in stereotypical gender roles and their associated prescribed domestic roles. She does so by inventing and engaging in relationships with her partner and their child that are centred on her own feminism, experience, and knowledge.

Niere, Willow, Deb, and the other feminist mothers I spoke with, each parent from their own specific matricentric place and, as a result, each create their own image of mother. Whether blatantly or surreptitiously, each challenges the hegemonic ideals of the good mother. By creating their own practices of mothering that fit closely with their feminist beliefs, they also trouble and oppose the dynamics of power and control in their mother-child relationships.

Bev, a forty-four-year-old white bisexual lone mother of two teenage daughters, notes how she consciously shares the power she has as an adult and mother with her daughters: “I’ve had to treat my children in an equal fashion from the beginning so that they have always known that they have the right to express themselves, that they have the right to say, ‘No’ and that we could engage in a dialogue about the issue as opposed to me wielding my power over them. And that’s still very important to me” (Green, *Practicing* 124). In 2007, I had the good fortune of interviewing Bev’s two adult cisgender, neurologically typical, temporarily able-bodied adult daughters who were living and working in different parts of Toronto. They spoke about the respectful and egalitarian relationships they each have with their mom and how they treasure their ability to have open and frank conversations about a plethora of topics and life

issues with her. They believe their mother's feminism is the source of their conscious and deliberate nonhierarchical relationships with her, and they credit it for their ongoing connection with Bev over the years (Green, "Empowering").

Bev's eldest daughter Sonia, who is thirty-one and identifies as heterosexual, reflects on the centrality of her mother's philosophy and practice of encouraging her daughters to engage in an egalitarian relationship with her: "I have always been able to say how I feel to my mother and subsequently to others. I can say to my mother, 'I don't accept that.' Or tell people that I'm not happy with something" (Green, *Practicing* 127). Sonia notes that her mother encourages her daughters to develop an autonomous sense of self and to be whoever and whatever they want to be. Sonia notes feeling supported and encouraged by Bev in her unconventional, unexpected, and sometimes risky decisions about education and work, especially when she first studied fashion design and then engineering.

Kyla, Bev's twenty-eight-year-old bisexual daughter, concurs with her sister; "I think in a lot of ways, what I have respected her for as a parent I also had to kind of struggle with as a child. She definitely wanted to install a sense of individual autonomy, and she also definitely wanted to show that we were able to act for ourselves in our own lives. And I think that was probably a central kind of value that she wanted to put into our childrearing" (Green, *Practicing* 130). Bev, like other feminist mothers in the study, facilitates family decision making as well as frequent and diverse interactions with her daughters to encourage them to express their individual opinions and autonomy (Odenweller et. al.). She also gives her kids the freedom to solve their own problems, and expects them to, in an effort to encourage them to be independent and efficacious. Both Sonia and Kyla clearly meditate upon this approach of Bev's relationship with them.

Like their mom, Sonia and Kyla believe feminist mothering is a political act. Kyla, for example, recognizes how her mom has taken on more battles than she has had to. She understands Bev's generation was forced to live within a society that was less comfortable with young, single, and queer mothers. As a child, she witnessed the pressure placed upon her mother and how she responded to it. Kyla believes that she's grown up in an era far more accepting of feminism, fluid gender expression, sexual orientation, and diverse family types. She also thinks that there is now more tolerance, and a greater chance of possible positive role models for her as a queer woman. She is grateful for the ground-breaking work done by previous feminist mothers like her mother.

Both daughters speak about the support they received from Bev for their plans to have children. They name her feminist mothering as a positive model of parenting that they would draw upon should they become mothers themselves. Kyla speaks of her mom's lived example as a queer single mother and of the support she has offered Kyla who is planning to have a child and

co-parent with another woman. Sonia is grateful for the encouragement she has experienced from Bev for her personal plans to conceive and raise a child on her own terms, with or without a partner.

Another feminist mother, May, who moved from Guyana to Canada in her twenties, clearly understands the power she has as a forty-year-old and recently separated heterosexual mother of two biracial cisgender teenage daughters. Like Bev, and the other feminist mothers I interviewed, May respects her own capacity to resist the social pressure placed upon her to engage in interpersonal adult-child dynamics that encourage adult domination of power and control. She also understands her ability to establish alternative rules and parenting practices based upon her own experiences, knowledge, and feminism to those prescribed by institutional motherhood:

To be a mother to me is a big thing. As I say, you have the next generation in your hand. And we can do a lot to shape that, regardless of whatever is out there; you can still make a big impact being a mother. I really believe in mothering. It's a feminist thing. It's a very special power that women have that we should not lose sight of. We're raising children that will take our place, and they're 'gonna shape that world.... We can help them think critically on different issues by presenting them with all these ideas. I'm trying to give them a new sense of what it is to be women. I'm trying to give them some understanding of where oppression is and to encourage them to always seek justice and to resist the current structure. (Green, *Practicing* 86)

The result of engaging in open and honest relationships that are not based on a hierarchy of adult power over children also foregrounds how feminist mothering can be a site of resistance and a place of empowerment for mother and child alike.

In 2007, ten years after my initial interview with May, her eldest daughter, Gemma, is on the cusp of her twenty-sixth birthday, is recently divorced, and self-identifies as biracial, cisgender, heterosexual, and feminist. She credits her mother's feminist parenting for her own sense of autonomy, independence, and the confidence that she has developed and needs to work within the Canadian music industry as a musician composing music, writing and singing lyrics, and producing popular music. Reflecting upon the influence of May's feminist parenting on her own identity and life, Gemma tells me the following: "I've always identified myself as a feminist. I've always felt feminism is a positive thing. It just means that you believe that women should be equal in all aspects of everything in terms of getting paid the same in terms of just being treated fairly" (Green, *Practicing* 118).

Gemma explicitly thanks her mom for instilling a foundational value of being able to understand how the world is patriarchal and ways to challenge

its ideology and practice. She is grateful for learning how to respectfully speak her own truth when she feels safe enough to do so. She speaks with admiration for May, who persistently supports her in her career in popular music:

I think that coming from the background I came from made it a lot easier for me to believe in myself as a musician—that I could do it and not think less of myself because I am a woman and not be intimidated by all the males that are there a lot of times telling you “I don’t think so.” I think my mother encouraging us to be independent is a big part of that and knowing who we are.... I think it’s about embracing yourself as a woman. And about overcoming those barriers set up for us as women that are just a part of society and those stereotypes. And finding the confidence to deal with it and fight it in any way that you can. (Green, *Practicing* 118)

When envisioning the possibility of parenting her own child, Gemma declares the following:

I would want to prepare her for what’s out there. And I’d want to instill a strong sense of self, which I think was at the root of everything my mom did when she was raising us. She wanted us to feel confident and not to be intimidated as a woman by anything that might come at us. It all starts with confidence and I would definitely talk about that with my daughter, if I ever have one. (Green, *Practicing* 121)

In the early summer of 2007, I spent time with Shar, almost sixty-two years and her eldest daughter, Darcy, age thirty-nine years. Both are Euro-Canadian, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, and lone mothers. Shar has two biological adult children in their 30s, Darcy and a son, and two adopted children, a daughter a few years younger than Darcy and an infant whom Shar recently adopted. Darcy is the mother to a twelve-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son. Feminism for Shar is “not merely a theory but rather an embodied political worldview that informs her entire life,” and “like mothering, needs to be a lifetime commitment” (Green, *Practicing* 139). Darcy explains her feminism as “an underlying philosophy that can rear its head at times, and not at others, that’s based on the rights for women, and respects the work that other women have done to allow her and others to be where they are today” (Green, *Practicing* 143). The two mothers share a close relationship; they often finish each other’s sentences or only say two or three words because they know what the other is thinking or talking about. They constantly discuss their beliefs about the ways in which they raise their children and the thinking they put into their motherwork, particularly around values, communication, and the types of toys, clothes, activities, books, and movies they should encourage and allow.

Self-respect and effective respectful communication are important to both

mothers in their relationships with each other and with their children. Shar understands that her position and role of mother and grandmother is unique: “I’ve had the privilege most grandparents don’t have in having a huge hand in raising my grandchildren as well as being a pseudo parent in some ways. Not many grandmothers adopt a child that is not their grandchild” (Green, *Practicing* 145). As self-described co-parents, Shar and Darcy spend time together talking about and consciously raising Darcy’s youngest sister and Shar’s grandchildren in ways that do not replicate but rather trouble and contest patriarchal ideals of motherhood and parenting. Shar notes the following: “I end up in this situation where I’m saying to my daughter, ‘This is what I want for my grandchildren.’ And she’s saying, as the mother of those children, ‘This is what I’d rather you say.’” Because they are close, they figure out and decide together what they are going to do. Darcy practices her own matricentric feminist mothering in her relationship with her mother, and she consciously collaborates with Shar to deliberately challenge the institution of motherhood and to negotiate the social and cultural obstacles to their, as well as their children’s, self-determination and agency.

### **Key Findings**

When feminist parents are aware of and challenge the institution of motherhood, they can define and practice mothering on their own terms. Rather than being a stagnant, mechanical, and formulaic practice, feminist mothering is alive and vibrant. By placing themselves, and not their children at the centre of their lives, feminist parenting becomes a dynamic place for creativity. These matricentric feminist mothers have been inspired to contest, trouble and challenge the roles, assumptions, and expectations placed on them and on the construction of families by patriarchal motherhood (Green, *Practicing* 159). As a result, their matricentric feminist mothering practices trouble the patriarchal institution of motherhood and create affirming and nurturing mother-child relationships that positively change mothering to be a site of feminist political activism, which empowers mothers as well as children. It is also a space in which feminist values of empowerment and self-governance are modelled and fostered in the daily lives of mothers and their families.

Although I have relied on research based on a select group of feminist mothers and their daughters, together they demonstrate the power, potential, and longevity of matricentric feminism in feminist mothering. Through their lived experiences of creating and engaging with feminist mothering practices that counter those prescribed by the institution of motherhood, they demonstrate how feminist mothers and feminist mothering can successfully confront the rules and ideology of motherhood and rework the mould of this patriarchal institution. The matricentric feminist mothering developed by

these women has cultivated interconnectivity with their children that offer ways to resolve potential intergenerational rifts between mothers and daughters. The voices of both mothers and daughters highlighted here express their experiences of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy through their exposure to an embodied knowledge of feminist mothering, whether it is that of mothers or daughters.

The power and significance of matricentric feminist mothering is evident in the experiences of the daughters of feminist mothers. Each daughter I interviewed spoke passionately of the particular need for, and practice of, a feminist gender-based analysis of social systems, including patriarchal, intersectional, and interpersonal social relations that privilege some people over others due to social identifiers, such as ability, age, education, ethnicity/race, gender, sex, sexuality, and social class. They comment on how they value the lessons and their continued conversations with their moms about how society is constructed and functions. They appreciate being able to recognize that everyone is located within that constructed society, and how people can be positively and/or negatively affected by it in complex ways (Green, "Empowering" 16).

They also acknowledge and confirm the risks and struggles their moms took to ensure they raised them in the ways that were faithful to their mothers' feminisms. They especially acknowledge the importance of their mothers in encouraging and involving them in discussions about a range of ideas and decisions, and the importance of fostering close and egalitarian relationships. During these sometimes uncomfortable conversations, they note how as mother and daughter, they are candid about their feelings and ideas. They recognize that together they learn how to think and speak for themselves, and how to also engage in respectful and sincere relationships. They all speak of the positive influence their moms have on their own understandings and practices of feminism and of the respect they and their mothers have for each other, particularly when their feminisms may not replicate that of their mothers' (Green, *Practicing* 147).

Furthermore, matricentric feminism offers daughters various opportunities to develop their own feminisms and future mothering practices should they become parents. It also fosters feminist motherlines that connect mothers and daughters and helps them to understand how their life stories are linked with previous generations through a mother tongue of relational discourse (Le Guin). These close relationships based upon matricentric mothering and feminist motherlines assist mothers and children to develop authority through exposure to their embodied knowledge of feminist mothering. They are also given the opportunity to develop a lifecycle perspective and a worldview of interconnectivity, which offers them ways to create parenting perspectives and practices that contest those prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood (Green, "Empowering" 18).

## Foundations to Be Built Upon

The lessons of these particular feminist mothers and their daughters provide a foundation for other parents to dream, create, develop, and live their own empowered parenting practices. The examples of how Willow, Niere, and Bev step away from compulsory heterosexual relationships and other patriarchal expectations of mothers to create families on their own terms offer others who do not meet societal expectations of mother and parent the possibility of also creating matricentric practices that suit them. Kyla reflects upon the influence of her mother's queer identity on her own sense of self and future possibilities to be a mother as a bisexual woman. At a time when gender and sexuality rights continue to be contested and expanded, these lived examples provide concrete illustrations of how matricentric feminist mothering has helped to create successful alternative families beyond the narrowly prescribed heterosexual nuclear family. They may also provide a foundation from which to develop parenting practices for families that challenge notions of who can be defined as mother and what types of compositions create and define family. This may include parents raising gender fluid kids, platonic parents who are increasingly creating families and raising children alone or together, and families with trans parents (Green and Friedman).

The matricentric approaches used by these feminist mothers demonstrate ways of engaging in more egalitarian relationships with children that counter those often expected and performed in helicopter parenting and intensive mothering methods where children are the primary focus. Their feminist mothering exemplifies specific approaches to disrupting child-centric motherhood and dislodging sacrificial motherhood. They model an alternative way to parent that is more in line with parenting practices that create “flexible and open family environments,” whereby each family member is treated equally and with respect (Odenweller et al. 411). As a result of this type of parenting, children are more likely to be assertive, mature, and self-reliant; they will have more resilience in adverse situations, have more interpersonal competence, and have more ability adapt to changing environments (Odenweller et al. 410-11). Their matricentric feminist mothering practices provide clear examples for others about how to engage in this alternative parenting.

In her recent book *Happy Parents Happy Kids*, Canadian mothering writer Ann Douglas speaks to the importance and value of keeping the mother central to parenting. During an interview on Mother's Day 2019 with CBC Radio One's *Weekend Morning Show* host Nadia Kidwai, Douglas talked about the significance of ensuring the wellbeing and autonomy of mothers. Although Douglas may have been drawing on the popularity of self-help discourses in her popular blog and book, she, nevertheless, centres mothers in her advice about helpful parenting strategies; she notes that parenting starts with how

mothers feel about mothering, what they think about parenting, and how they take care of their mental, emotional, and physical health. She also specifies the need to create the right parenting strategies for both parent and children (Douglas). She argues being parent centred is essential to parenting in an age of anxiety where Canadian families are living under increasing stressors. Matricentric feminist mothering strategies presented in this article may well be suited to some parents who are contending with these anxiety challenges.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although this longitudinal intergenerational study provides meaningful insights, there are limitations. First, the sample is relatively small and focused on effectively homogeneous, normative families. Expanding the number of mothers and families—as well as including a diverse array of folks regarding ability, age, class, ethnicity/race, gender, sex and sexual orientation—would enrich future research. How may matricentric parenting take shape within the context of alternative families? For instance, how may it take shape for queer family members that transgress normative roles or in the context of reproductive, communication, or disability technologies of family creation? Second, this study is somewhat dated; the focus is on parents of children born in the late 1970s to mid-1990s. Research including the grandchildren of mothers of this generation would address the intergenerational effects of matricentric parenting. Engaging younger age groups of parents who are committed to and are practicing matricentric parenting in their unique ways would also enrich and move the research forwards. And, finally, because research in this area is in its infancy, there are many avenues future researchers may explore to advance knowledge of matricentric mothering and its effects on mothers, children, parent-child relationships, and parent-parent relationships. These may include feminist mothers parenting today within social conditions of the Internet, climate change, and fundamental conservatism as well as in various movements, such as #blacklivesmatter, #me too, and the resulting backlash.

### **Endnote**

1. The names used to identify the mothers and daughters in this article are their given names or pseudonyms, depending upon the autonomous decision of each person.

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