



**Interview with  
Jennifer Verson**

15 May 2017, Otter's  
Café, Liverpool

Interview conducted by  
Lena Šimić

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**Jennifer Verson** is a visiting research fellow at the Centre for Trust, Peace, and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University.

Jennifer's interdisciplinary research draws together her work as a performance practitioner, with contextual theology and mixed methods social research. Jennifer's work focuses on building knowledge and understanding of the potential of multi modal performance for social repair, particularly in the long aftermaths of genocide, slavery, and colonialism. She recently completed her PhD at CTPSR where she was one of the first recipients of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Studentship. She serves as the Artistic Director of Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (MaMa). Recent Heritage Lottery Funded work involved migrant and refugee women creating new musical compositions through creative participatory interpretation of the International Slavery Museum archives. Jennifer is a Research Assistant on the Performance and the Maternal project as well as a member of the project Advisory Circle.

**Lena:** Could you please explain the name of your network Migrant Artists Mutual Aid, MaMa for short?

**Jennifer:** I'm a migrant artist. And MaMa is my relationship with other migrant artists. The people that started MaMa wouldn't identify as migrant artists, yet I realized, when I thought of the acronym that we could use this identity, and that identity would then be easily accessible. The acronym is important to MaMa members and over the course of nine years our group has developed an identity as a community of artists and cultural producers. So, while at the beginning, I was the one who identified as an artist, the group has grown and blossomed – it's more fitting now, artistic production together has always been core to our strategy for change.

**Lena:** Through the naming, there are three strands, the idea of a migrant artist, the idea of mutuality, and mutual aid, and then, of course MaMa as in motherhood and maternal. Those three strands are interesting in how you say that in the beginning maybe some of the people in the group weren't necessarily considering themselves artists but now that has come about, this connection to the art. I'm interested in this idea of the maternal and motherhood. So, in what ways do you understand the terms maternal and motherhood?

**Jennifer:** If you understand maternal as an act of caring, I do think that various traumas shrink our ability for maternal expression. In MaMa right now, this maternal caring actually is happening between people – this is a showing of love. That is not necessarily reciprocal, the maternal is not necessarily reciprocal. I'm just thinking of one of the members who is very caring and looks out for people, gives people cups of tea and brings presents, this idea of gifts – non-reciprocal gifting. So, I understand maternal as that sort of caring, that is not necessarily mutual.

**Lena:** Okay, that's interesting, maternal is not about “I help you and then you help me”, so it's not calculative?

**Jennifer:** The maternal operates through a networked web within our group. So, that caring, sometimes being cut off by trauma, the traumas of migration or asylum, happens not necessarily between mother and child, but between me and somebody else's child – and some other mother towards another mother – it's shared and intersectional.

There's the embodied life experience of motherhood – that I've produced a child. I remember when you first introduced the work of Bracha Ettinger to me, and the concept of the matrixial as an alternative metaphor of gestation in the uterus, as a way to consider how we are interconnected. I was captivated. It made me think of a poem I've written about my daughter and this feeling of never being alone again because this child has come out of my body and that child will always be of me and how this affects my ability to create and produce. So, I understand motherhood personally – as my process of raising this being that I gave birth to.

**Lena:** That is interesting what you said about motherhood, how it affects you never being alone and your ability to create and produce, can you say something more about that?

**Jennifer:** So, there are gaps of solitude of only looking out for myself. I'm very aware consistently that there is always another bit of me – that is outside of my body. There's my worry about my child, my thoughts about my child, I'm never alone and – even if I am alone – my state of concern is very embodied.

**Lena:** What does that do to your art?

**Jennifer:** I just don't write poetry in the same way that I wrote poetry before-becoming a mother.

**Lena:** Why?

**Jennifer:** There's a possibility that my brain doesn't work in the same way.

**Lena:** Possibly?

**Jennifer:** Possibly. I don't know if I want to say that.

**Lena:** Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) uses two terms, mothering and motherhood. Motherhood is connected to the institution, to the patriarchy and so on, whilst the mothering is the lived, what we actually do. Therefore, motherhood becomes a bad word, motherhood has been co-opted by patriarchal society and by nation state, the reproduction of the citizenship and nationality structures, and so on.

**Jennifer:** As a second, or third generation feminist, my concept of motherhood is so divorced from the socially produced.

**Lena:** This takes us to the third question, how does your work figure, configure and use motherhood and generally traditional ideas that come along with motherhood? There was a particular phrase that you use...?

**Jennifer:** Co-opting the cult of motherhood.

**Lena:** Yes, how do you think you co-opt and re-figure this cult of motherhood?

**Jennifer:** As a migrant, my relationship to the concept of the cult of motherhood is slightly different, I never really internalized this idea. I have a distance from it. From the beginning I was very and specifically aware of my relationship with my daughter in terms of civil disobedience. When we experienced the brutality of the British immigration system, we did this from a privileged position because she is British and she's also very white. When we could not afford the Home Office fees, I experienced this as a moment where our privilege would shine a light on the way that money is used in the system to limit the rights of citizens and migrants. My daughter is very white, whereas as a migrant I am criminalized in a lot of different ways. Our relationship with each other – in our whiteness, the performing of our

collective whiteness – sheds a specific light on the criminalization of migrants, and has a capacity to deconstruct the inherent dehumanization of migrants that we've accepted –

**Lena:** Can you explain this a bit? So, you therefore feel you have certain kind of agency or capacity to do what?

**Jennifer:** To subvert and question things that we've accepted and that are clearly violations of human rights. So, if we look at the minimum income requirements for migrant families to live in the UK, which is roughly £18,000 to £20,000 a year, this is clearly discriminating against poor mothers. The dehumanization of mothers in poverty is so complete that we think it's okay, but because the cult of motherhood still sees them as precious, by juxtaposing the beauty of the cult of motherhood, the aesthetics of the cult of motherhood with the dehumanized other and presenting them either simultaneously in the body or side-by-side, we're able to open up space to question the fact that we have dehumanized the other, the poor mother, the migrant mother –

**Lena:** So, the poor mother and the migrant mother can enter into the society and its aesthetics because of the cult of motherhood?

**Jennifer:** The cult of motherhood then becomes radical – in a specific way – because, it's universalizing motherhood. Right now, motherhood is not universalised. There are very specific people that are not allowed in, women seeking asylum with children aren't included inside the cult of motherhood. And the cult of motherhood has certain privileges –

**Lena:** I'm just thinking how is that opposite of how we are encouraged to embrace difference, the idea about being inclusive and creating a society which is capable and open to embrace all kinds of lives and differences. All kinds of existences ideally. But in a way here you are presenting a more a strategic thing to do – because in culture, of course, this thing which we perceive to be the cult of motherhood does exist.

**Jennifer:** Dehumanization is a specific and identified step in genocide- and what we as a society are actually doing to migrant moms, to migrants, is actually dehumanization. So the cult of motherhood is an entry point for a cultural intervention around this current trajectory which I find really worrying. I personally see that the discourse around migration is moving towards genocide. And that one of the first very specific steps is dehumanizing the other – and so, I do feel that the easiest point of intervention is through the cult of motherhood.

I think there's a difference between the aesthetic performance of it and the civic implementation of it. The civic implementation of the cult of motherhood entails specific things that we have to do. I bloody ironed this morning. Ironing is the public performance of motherhood. Then, the laws and obligations around it, when you go to school, the paying of your school fees, the forms that you fill out yourself at parent's evening and, and at a higher level, things like interactions with social services which are the people that enforce the cult of motherhood. So, there's an enforcement of it that happens from the state. So really, we don't operate with the state enforcement of the cult of motherhood – we operate with the aesthetics of it. I would say that some of those aesthetic moments can be traced back to blood and soil, the ideology of Nazi-ism in some ways – because the cult of motherhood goes there: we (mothers) are precious because we reproduce the state.

So, by saying that “reproducer of the state” is *all* women and that baby is hybrid, biracial baby, you actually can get a radicalized idea of citizenship that starts with aesthetics. So, we start with the aesthetic production of radicalized notion of motherhood and take that aesthetic production to impact on the state's enforcement of the cult of motherhood.

**Lena:** What's your aesthetic production? How would you describe it? In terms of the work of Migrant Artists Mutual Aid?

**Jennifer:** So, there's three things.

There's very specifically the singing of maternal songs in foreign languages. A lot of our repertoire are songs from memory of childhood. There is this line of human memory that ties back to native languages and maternal languages, especially from South Asia. English has a really interesting role because English is easy and spoken but the language of a mother is Urdu or Punjabi or Hindi. So, there's a false bilingualism. You can refer back to Adrienne Rich in that you're constantly speaking in a different language which is not your maternal language. So, we're singing in the maternal languages of people but we're singing that together. We are creating a sound where that maternal language is reinvented as a universal. Especially, in the post-colonial British Empire, Punjabi has a place in our consciousness, it is our language. We're reimagining a post-colonial language, in a way that's extremely complex. By someone who is British/white/coloniser, hitting a harmonic note in the maternal language of a women seeking asylum. We create this new aesthetic of maternity that has the possibility of being-hybrid, radical and global.

**Lena:** You said there was three parts?

**Jennifer:** When we worked with Manuel Vason, we did a photo performance called *The Art of Correspondence* (2016).<sup>1</sup> He asked us to think about where in our bodies we correspond with another person. There's one picture of me and one of the members in MaMa where we're touching each other's wombs. I'm not sure how that picture is read, but at the moment of interaction Aisha was struggling with trauma which made it difficult. Her bonding with her baby was completely influenced by her fear and trauma: she was always worrying that the baby was going to get hurt. And I see that. I see that in my own behaviour. It was something that has been part of our relationship to each other, and this is produced aesthetically through these pictures.

**Lena:** In a way, it's not just the representation but it's actually reality as well, isn't it? The photograph itself does the work that you too need

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see [the art of survival gallery – Migrant Artists Mutual Aid](#).

to do in real life. It's not like just, "Oh, let's look beautiful and put our hands on our wombs," there's an actual need for that. Why did you take it? You and Aisha.



*In Correspondence: Aisha and Jennifer, Photo by Manuel Vason, 2016.*

**Jennifer:** The very specific instance is that Manuel was like, "This is what I want you to do." And this request was so completely inaccessible in the language to the members of MaMa. Yet I had this *correspondence* with this person who's very specifically my friend. She speaks like a New Yorker. She's not a New Yorker, she's from Pakistan. But this way of speaking is shared by many members from busy and loud world capitals. So, I've said to her, in terms of explaining Manuel's instruction "This is our correspondence," because, we relate to each

other in terms of being mothers and raising our children in fear.

**Lena:** Do you remember what you meant by the third one? You said the singing, you said images of bodies touching.

**Jennifer:** The political work that we do is very specific. These two strands create bonds, a certain level of intimacy that allows us to do civic interventions. Because if you're surviving gendered violence, one of the things is natural protection. Like any woman who's been raped, some just don't talk about it to their children. And how you might talk about it to your children is very complex. So, the intimacy of these two elements which are performed then actually moves into and informs

our civic interventions, where there's a level of trust and the ability to intervene in state violence against women.

**Lena:** I'm thinking about the ways in which the agency is generated, and how it has to do with the maternal sense of your community. You were talking through the maternal aesthetics, which are also the ways of being, from what I can understand. When you are singing together, you're not just doing it for the sake of representation, you are actually enacting something together, as a community. And because of these maternal aesthetic actions, what's created is a sense of intimacy which allows you to have this maternal agency, which happens in the civic.

I have a little question here. Does agency have to do with the maternal sense of your community? I think you have kind of really answered that already, but I would like to be a bit more specific.

**Jennifer:** Yes, so specifically it is about fighting for people's right to remain in the UK and very specifically how women seeking sanctuary from gender-based violence are often refused asylum. It is often on the grounds of negative credibility. So, they'll just say, "I don't believe you," therefore, I'm going to refuse you. So, the maternal and the friendships create a context, they establish credibility.

**Lena:** Because you believe them and therefore they believe they can. If you were on your own in an asylum process and you are confronted with the state who says "I don't believe you," if you don't have a community that you can fall back on, you would just fold. So, MaMa are creating a network of support.

**Jennifer:** Sarah Fisher (The Executive Director of Open Eye Gallery Liverpool) said this really interesting thing that when you produce art, especially conceptual art, there's this concept of validation. People validate your practice. So, it's almost like validation, as opposed to a community of support. I have actively situated this validation, the practice of MaMa, in the art world. When you produce a piece of art and there's no context, it's possible that it won't be seen as valuable.

So, by providing a context in the same way, that human is seen as valuable. The human who's been devalued. You have seen this in the picture of the Alan Kurdi the three-year-old boy who drowned.<sup>2</sup> So, there's some moment of that little boy being seen as human. But equally we're seeing pictures of migrant mothers and children in Greece.<sup>3</sup> And some people read them as human, but also, they're being read as swarms. So, this process is about humanizing through art.

**Lena:** The humanizing through the art.

**Jennifer:** If we think about this in terms of the matrixial, we can understand that there is a bond that is not ephemeral. The commitment then becomes transnational. So, if there was, and this has come up, if there was a point that somebody in the MaMa choir were removed against their will, then that commitment and bond becomes transnational.

**Lena:** That bond stays. But do you have a proof that art can help? You were talking about how through the creation of these images and through singing you are creating a humanizing picture of each woman, right? So, in a way –

**Jennifer:** That's what I am doing my PhD on. I wanted to develop my language and capacity to map how this art –

**Lena:** But does it work?

**Jennifer:** There's a couple of ways it works, if you want to talk about cognition and empathic responses that happen in the brain.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see [Death of Alan Kurdi - Wikipedia](#).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the dehumanisation of refugees see Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison & Xzarina Nicholson (2013) 'The visual dehumanisation of refugees', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48:4, 398-416, [The visual dehumanisation of refugees: Australian Journal of Political Science: Vol 48, No 4 \(tandfonline.com\)](#).

See also [Refugee baby born on beach in Lesbos moments after Syrian mother arrives in rubber boat | The Independent | The Independent](#).

**Lena:** Yes, I think it would definitely work in terms of the audience, absolutely. But I mean in terms of their asylum process –

**Jennifer:** Yes, yes. Absolutely.<sup>4</sup> There's a case that we're winning, a long case that we just had a positive decision for, which is amazing.

**Lena:** And because you presented the evidence and the art was part of this evidence...

**Jennifer:** The art created the finances to be able to fight. So, there was a point of a refusal of legal aid because there was not a high enough chance of success. The solicitor said, "We're not gonna let you go to court unless you come up with £750." And then the money generated through this specific project was able to pay that and another fee of £150. The case got to court, and the decision has been positive.



*MaMa performance at the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, 2016.*

**Lena:** So, art creates the money. But can art be a part of the narrative too, to give character reference to the persons, maybe?

**Jennifer:** We started working at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, just around the time when there were a couple of members of our MaMa group who were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). At the time the Home Office was beginning to remove failed asylum seekers to the DRC, and the Slavery Museum was putting on an

<sup>4</sup> For more information see [Today's immigration laws have teeth, and their bite is toxic for people seeking asylum – Migrant Artists Mutual Aid](#).

exhibition about the DRC. We were invited to sing at the Slavery Museum, and we documented this because the connection of the narratives of slavery and colonization to the current attitudes towards people seeking asylum was explicitly narrated by our performance.<sup>5</sup> There was a choice to pursue this relationship because the narrative is so rich. In the end there was a lot of action to stop the removal of people from the DRC and it didn't happen. At any point if any member of our group was in danger of forced deportation these performance documents could become public.

Generally, the philosophy is to secure somebody's Right to Remain in the easiest way possible. Part of the scope of my role as Artistic Director of MaMa is conceiving and planning campaigns. There is always something in our archive for visual media, and something in our legal repertoire as well, but you do it the easiest way possible.

For a couple of years now we have been working really hard to secure rights for single mothers from South Asia who are survivors of domestic violence and are seeking asylum protection. It is clear that you couldn't go as a poor single mother to India, yet the Home Office will say that it is perfectly safe, but of course if there was domestic violence and poverty, it is not safe without extended family networks. But in order to fight these decisions, resources are necessary. When we started, we were fighting for refugee protection for mothers wanting to protect daughters from female genital mutilation (FGM). We started that work around motherhood with the ethos and aesthetic that every daughter is just as important as any other daughter, and the mother is a hero. But when it got to the national media, the narrative around mothers and FGM shifted explicitly.<sup>6</sup> There was a move to criminalise mothers rather than support them.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see [MAMA performance at the International Slavery Museum | National Museums Liverpool \(liverpoolmuseums.org.uk\)](https://liverpoolmuseums.org.uk) and [Refugee Week: are we still a city of sanctuary? | National Museums Liverpool \(liverpoolmuseums.org.uk\)](https://liverpoolmuseums.org.uk).

<sup>6</sup> For more information about media coverage of MaMa members see [Gambian women fleeing female genital mutilation threat - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-45888888).

There was no effort to support mothers who were suffering from having fought to protect their children.<sup>7</sup>

Now there's a lot of work around making sure that narratives are taken care of because it's very easy for narratives to slip. If you look how our narrative of women seeking asylum are heroes became a narrative that women from communities that practice FGM are not fit to be mothers, you can see how across all sections of society women mothering in poverty are being 'de-mothered'. "Actually, we're going to take your children off you because you're not a fit mother," and poverty is one of the reasons for it.

**Lena:** This is the last question "What is the role of migrant mothers right here, right now in the UK?" I'm thinking specifically this context here. How can their difference be politicized and aestheticized? And then, first of all, should we think about it as a difference? Is it useful to think about migrant mothers as different?

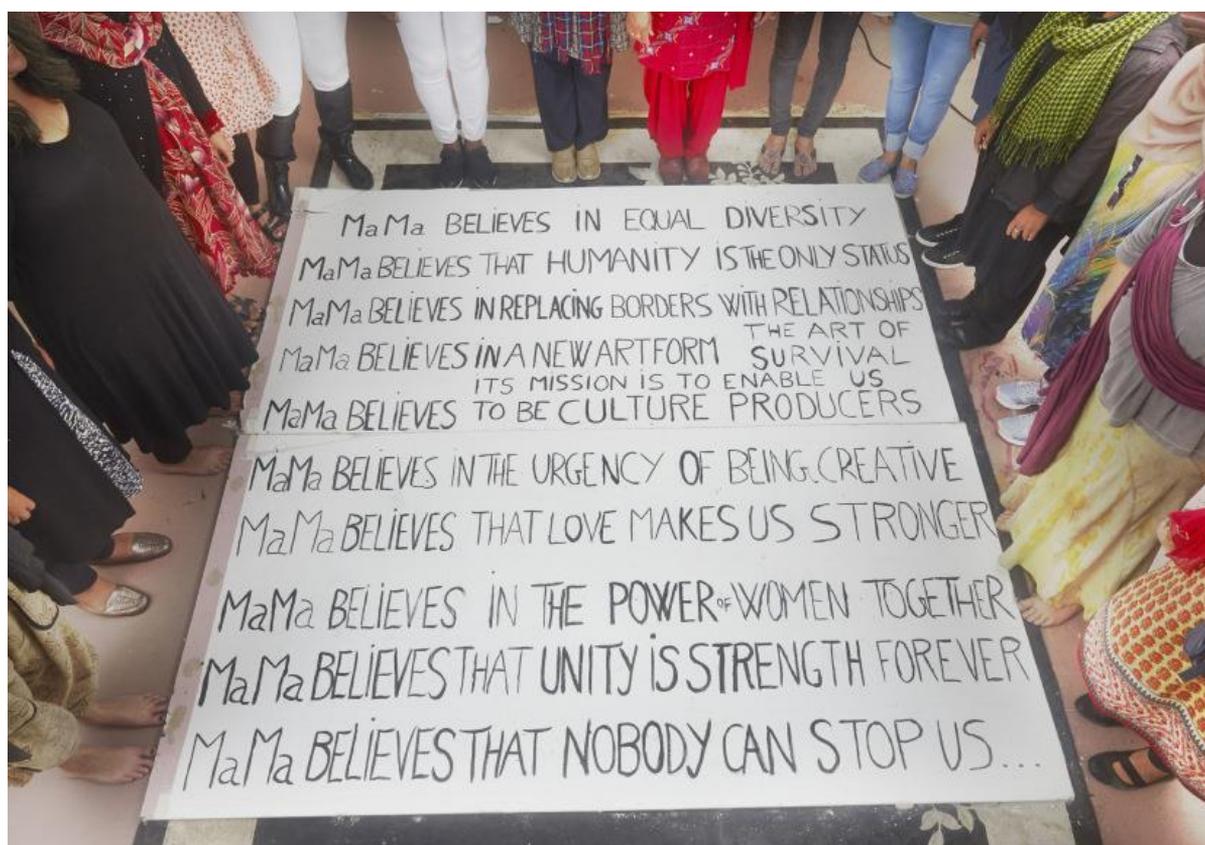
**Jennifer:** I specifically use "migrant" as an inclusive term. Most people see themselves as other. So, thinking about inclusive terms like a movement and migration. People who live in neighbourhoods, especially in Liverpool actually, talk about the leaving of their home and their maternal neighbourhood, and these tiny migrations are very impactful. I've been reading *Dropping Anchor Setting Sail* (2005) by Jacqueline Nassy Brown about the Liverpool Black community. She talks about the migrations of white women from completely White neighbourhoods to form families with African sailors. Large migrations have been historically privileged over the small migrations that women do, and so these migrations that women do aren't entering into this public narrative.

At MaMa we are also foregrounding these micro migrations and in doing this we are creating new aesthetics and imagining post-colonial

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<sup>7</sup> Berer, Marge (2015) 'The history and role of the criminal law in anti FGM-campaigns: Is the criminal law what is needed, at least in countries like Great Britain?' *Reproductive Health Matters*, 23:46, 145-157, [Full article: The history and role of the criminal law in anti-FGM campaigns: Is the criminal law what is needed, at least in countries like Great Britain? \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-015-0461-1).

identities – this identity which is really a vernacular cosmopolitanism, transnational and super local. The identity of migrant becomes accessible to everybody and it's an identity that witnesses leavings and losses. For me, and for women of Migrant Artists Mutual Aid this identity enables us to *see* each other. Everybody needs their pain and loss in their initial separation from the mother to be seen. So, by using “migrant” as an inclusive term and embracing motherhood, we enable everybody to be *seen* and that *seeing* creates solidarity.



“Members of the Migrant Artists Mutual Aid Choir are at the sharp end of the cuts to legal aid. For the holiday season we are offering our first set of limited edition prints co-created with Manuel Vason” *MaMa Manifesto*, 2016.