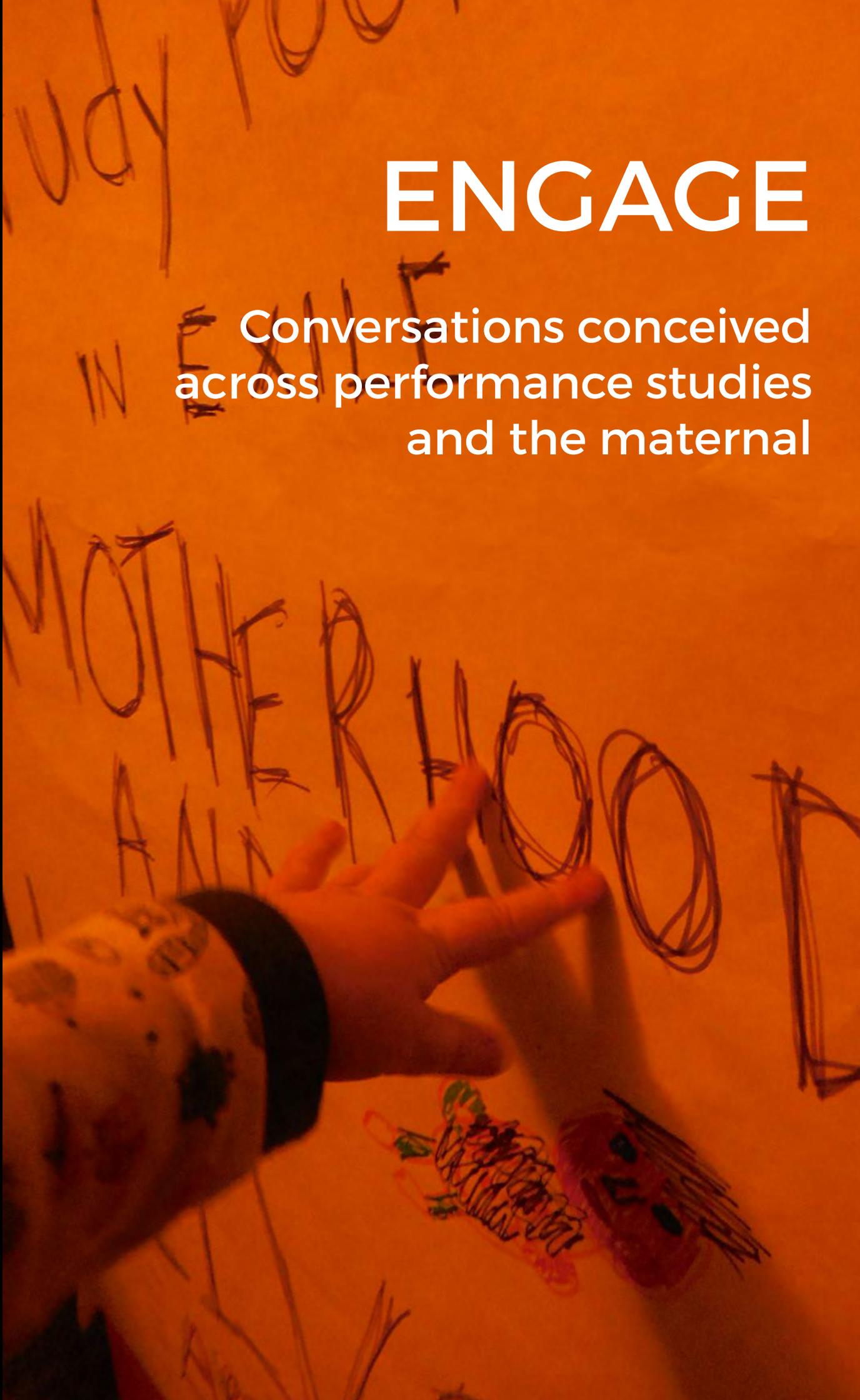


Performance and the Maternal

ENGAGE

Conversations conceived
across performance studies
and the maternal



Introduction

Performance and the Maternal is an [Arts and Humanities Research Council](#) project delivered by the [University of South Wales](#) and [Edge Hill University](#). In October and November 2020 we convened a series of online maternal fora that allowed us to consider, through different artistic and academic perspectives, how maternal performance helps us to understand the lived condition of motherhood. Each fora responded to a themed provocation (question) and here we document all five foras and share our initial responses to them.

Please note: All forums are documented in the language that they were delivered in and all external weblinks open in a new window.

Research Team



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GEORGINA BIGGS
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Georgina is reading for a PhD at Royal Holloway University investigating the menstruating body in post-Grotowskian performer training. She is a disabled artist making work through her company SheWolf, employing maternal ethics to bring landscape alive through performance.

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Tuesday 6th October 2020

Maternal Performance (Artist Forum)



[click here to watch the filmed documentation](#)

Performance and the maternal are allied as durational, embodied, relational practices. What might be unique about a maternal performance aesthetic?

Chair: Lena Šimić

Speakers: [Dyana Gravina](#) and [Lynn Lu](#), [Jodie Hawkes](#), [Ruchika Wason Singh](#), Kristina Gavran and Tina Hofman ([Notnow Collective](#))

Audience: 90 members

Joining from: Canada, Denmark, Germany, India, Ireland, Switzerland, UK and USA.

Working in the fields of: arts and culture, education, research, health care, and as students

This is my immediate response to Maternal Performance (Artist Forum). I name it '**On Time, Embodiment and Relations, yet again**'.

Dyana Gravina and **Lynn Lu** addressed maternal time, which was the here/now of the forum when their little children went to bed; **Jodie Hawkes** talked about maternal commons and her practice as research project *Playing Kate*; **Ruchika Wason Singh** spoke about the *Archive for Mapping Mother Artists in Asia* project and network; **Kristina Gavran** and **Tina Hofman** talked about the work Notnow Collective and *BYOB (Bring Your Own Baby)* to the theatre initiative.

In too short a discussion (due to time mismanagement), following the presentations, Dyana wanted to talk about the failure of technology and how it didn't hold – how we never saw her maternal time with her son, putting him to bed, the actual maternal time that cannot escape the here/now. And yet it was missed, it was invisible yet again. We saw Lynn, with her daughter, tender, close, putting her to bed. Close up of their heads. Pyjamas. Warmth. In the case of that first presentation between Dyana and Lynn and their two children what prevailed was a pre-recorded sound – the thoughts that have been previously considered and now conveyed. The here/now of two mothers and two children somehow slipped away.

Unexpected things happened during this online encounter. Whose sensibility is holding this online space? The digital surprises us. It throws us into the abyss with a multiplicity of images all mirroring one another, tunnelling away. Who was truly there? In the now of the forum?

Jodie reminds us that we need to think about 'maternal commons' (Tyler, 2013:107), what holds us all is the fact we all perform mothering, and not in a theatrical sense, but in the everyday, which is much more scary and real, and invades us from all corners of society. We, the privileged mother/artists get to reflect and re-enact, re-perform motherhood whilst grasping onto the idea of authenticity, the reality of mothering. Jodie talked of this construct, this idea, this frame, that moves from Kate Middleton to her replicators to

everyday mothers on the playground, holding, holding, holding onto some kind of Mother. And where are maternal commons? What do we have in common? A performance of it is a start. Jodie mentioned her embarrassment about her own mother when Jodie was a child... for being common. She talked of speaking in a posh voice. Being proper. Who is a proper mother here? In this grouping nobody wants to occupy such a space. In this grouping we are all striving to be different. Spivak reminds us,

People are similar not by virtue of being similar, but by virtue of producing a differential, or by virtue of thinking of themselves as other than a self-identical example of the species. (Harasym & Spivak, 1990: 136)

Ruchika's work is all about others, about facilitation, about enabling a space, a network. It is work driven by her own self-identification with motherhood, its shaping on identity and how this in turn directs her choices in art practice. Ruchika acknowledges maternal identity and subjectivity as an unarticulated subcategory of womanhood and feminist discourse in Asia to highlight, therefore, its absence as subject matter from feminist discourse and artistic practice.

Kristina says that issues regarding the invisibility of maternal relations are as prevalent in academic contexts as they are in art. Are we to hide our fleshed maternal encounters? Hide our children? Or do we bring them into our work spaces? And if so, how? Tina mentions that we are privileged in being able to bring our children to our theatres. What if we worked in factories? Money is mentioned - the astronomical childcare costs.

Tina and Kristina, self-identified as two foreigners in the UK, two Croatians, talked about the concept of *Bring Your Own Baby* into theatre space. They don't brag about it. They admit it's inadequate, but it is economical. You can't afford the childcare, not really, being an artist or PhD researcher or working precariously in academia. The maternal is about economics. Tina's presentation was powerful, a movie, moving on the road, a mother managing her love expressions via Skype. A nomadic existence. Kristina tells us that as a part of Notnow Collective they addressed speaking in their mother tongue with their children, and with one another.

I remember speaking in Croatian with my first two children, but not so much with the last two. Sometimes I wonder if that is because I am so vehemently anti-nationalist and can't separate Croatian from this badge of nationality. How to love one's mother tongue beyond its national identity? I remember that all the songs I invented for all my children were in Croatian... they just came to me. The first one happened in the bath as I was nine months pregnant. I caressed my belly and started to sing:

kupamo se, kupamo
ja i moja beba...

A rap appeared as my first son was only few months old:

ko je moja bebica,
krasna mala bebica,
ko je moja mala lijepa,
prekrasna je bebica,
Neal, moja bebica,
najdraža je bebica,
Neal moja mala lijepa
najdraža je bebica.

Nowadays I hear my second son Gabriel talk to our dog, Tess, in Croatian. He says: moja mala beba. He learnt that from me, love expressed in mother tongue.

Following the forum, Emily, Georgina and I had a debrief. Half an hour or so. The platform was empty. Everyone else left. Georgina said: But we didn't really take care of the audience... I knew that this was true. The atmosphere couldn't be checked. The temperature? Was everyone feeling as cold as I? Maternal performance is about relations, about ethics, and yet, this contained online space didn't allow us the warmth. No presence, no bodies. I was a facilitator who kept wondering if she was capable of holding the space, if the online space was capable of being held. I knew I couldn't do it but I continued with the performance of it, of facilitation, of some kind of care, of understanding the thread lines and closing comments, the perceived flow of conversations and ideas.

We framed maternal performance through time, body and relations. Yet, bodies were disembodied, reduced to an online presence, relations were therefore harder, more abrupt. Were they more careful? One had to make sure their microphone was on/off when speaking/listening. Are we learning how to listen and when to speak? Yet, there was a lack of flow, spontaneity, lack of human gestures, nods of heads, body language, an acceptance or rejection – a sense of bodily temperature in the room.

I feel inadequate hosting, I feel inadequate being. My younger two are at their Dad's. Sorted. My older two have been forbidden access into the kitchen for the duration of forum. A niggling thought at the back of my mind: if i'm being honest with myself, do I not think i'm past this... this particular phase of making art provoked by my mothering experience? Is it not time to 'move on'? Do we ever 'move on' from being mothers? It does get better... Right?

What was it we began with? A statement: Performance and the maternal are allied as durational, embodied, relational practices. A question: What might be unique about a maternal performance aesthetic?

Following the forum, I made some notes on maternal performance aesthetics under the headings:

Time – maternal performance includes interruptions and unpredictability, it is about letting go of control, embracing real time which cannot be escaped, but still can remain undervalued and invisible, slow and stretched out time which belongs to others living, breathing beside us as well as in us, time which becomes intergenerational, future-orientated, as well in the here/now.

Embodiment – maternal performance works from the rupture of the body, through birth and breast-feeding, its sensuality and bodily proximity, in leakages, and ruptures; it uses speech, babbles, inventions with and beyond mother tongue.

Relations – maternal performance is about ethics and our relation to others, it is about economics, it is situated in class, race, gender, culture... and it strives in solidarity, networks, contexts, a desire towards 'maternal commons'.

I am reminded of the first-ever research gathering Emily and I organised at the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home in 2016. Are we going in circles? Is a mother's work ever done? Will it ever be done? Thank you to producers, to those who can hold, Dyana and Ruchika, thank you to artists who have the courage to provoke us into affect, Lynn and Tina, thank you to the fighters, Jodie and Kristina, who dare, who make us uncomfortable through their statements. And of course, all of these roles intermix, it's just that last night, I felt them in this particular way.

Response authored by Lena Šimić

[Tyler, I. \(2013\) *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London and New York: Zed Book Ltd.](#)

[Harasym, S. & Spivak, G. \(1990\) *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. New York: Routledge.](#)

Tuesday 13th October 2020

Storytelling and Mothers



[click here to watch the filmed documentation](#)

What maternal narratives might we want or need to tell and hear in these times? How might we represent the diversity of maternal experiences?

Chair: Emily Underwood-Lee

Speakers: [Laura Godfrey Isaacs](#), [Christine Watkins](#), [Roiyah Saltus](#), [Alison Perry](#), [Jude](#) and [Zoe Brigley](#), [Tracy Breathnach-Evans](#)

Audience: 90 members

Joining from: Australia, Bermuda, Canada, Finland, Greece, India, Ireland, Lithuania, Spain, Sweden, UK and USA

Working in the fields of: education, arts and culture, research, health care, and policy.

We wanted to connect to explore maternal stories. We wondered what the dominant maternal narratives might be, and how we could embrace a range of stories and characterisations of the maternal. We wanted to hear the mother's story, as protagonist rather than antagonist and in all its variety. We acknowledged that we could never represent all maternal stories, that there are as many maternal narratives as there are mothers, that the maternal is infinite, reinventing itself at every turn and with every new instance of mothering. We were learning about the technology and how to connect digitally. We missed sharing physical space together, but we enjoyed connecting globally in ways that would not be possible otherwise. We struggled with the sound and had a last-minute change in the running order so that the stories we shared could be heard; both in terms of turning up the audio and of enabling deep listening. We ran out of time and nothing was heard as deeply as we wished for. Like a child hungry for an extra bedtime story, we wanted more; more space, more time, more energy, more mothers, more stories.

We spoke about mothering as a verb; mothering as an action; mothering outside biology; mothering as something that we can all do; embarrassment; ambivalence; uncharted territory; the mothering aspects of the midwife or the community or the carriers; the non-maternal biological mothers; the daughter as mother; carving out time and space for ourselves and for creativity; being taught from the womb; moving away from the 'perfect' mother.

Laura Godfrey Isaacs

Laura talked about the *Maternal Journal* project. She explored how creative journaling can support women and people who birth as they go through the process of becoming a mother or parent. She showed examples which demonstrated how journaling can address the unsaid aspects of mothering, reveal what might be hidden, and help us find community and solidarity with others.

"Going through the process of becoming a mother or parent is a time of great change but also an opportunity for growth."

"Journaling is part of a feminist and radical tradition."

Christine Watkins

Christine reflected on the siôl fagu (the traditional Welsh nursing shawl) as a way of exploring her own personal narrative of becoming a grandmother and, at the same time, caring for her own mother at the end of life. Christine described how the siôl fagu is an ancient form of baby sling that could be worn by anyone in “the circle of kith and kin” in order to keep the baby close while engaging in daily activities. She placed the siôl fagu within the personal and mythic landscape, examining how the weave of stories and the weave of the shawl can foster connections through the generations to expand ideas of who we carry, notions of mother tongue, and moments of intimacy.

“...your one hand remains in close connection to perform intimate magic, the other external and active in the world.”

“...the child carried within is the holder of memories and imprints in ways both understood and not understood that connects the past with the future.”

“...mamiaith, [mother tongue] the scintillating, multi-coloured common and particular tongue made for the conceiving and uttering of story.”

Roiyah Saltus

Roiyah shared a digital story created with her mother Solange Saltus. She then shared her own story, co-produced with her son Malachi, about the complexity, inspiration, and joy of being mothered by a woman who “continues to claim she does not have a maternal bone in her body”. The stories reflect on the inheritance we receive and pass on through the maternal line. Roiyah and Solange’s stories explore a childhood in a marginalised community in Bermuda and the intricacies of working together with one’s mother in a research environment. Mother and daughter’s stories are placed alongside each other, making the legacy explicit and inviting us to reflect on the specificity of our own maternal stories.

“It’s not what you think I ought to want, it’s what I think I ought to want.”

“With her I remembered myself, I remembered how she had weathered the storms.”

“my muse, my mentor, my mother, in all its ambivalence.”

Alison Perry

Alison reflected on her research into people’s journeys to becoming mothers, which is conducted from her position as a midwife. She asked us to consider the risks implicit in placing responsibility on the shoulders of expectant and new mothers for the future mental and physical health of child, mother, and (by extension) society. She asked us to consider how maternal health practitioners can alleviate this burden by listening to people’s stories and providing support and resources that meet the needs of birthing people.

“What is still missing [from health research] is the woman herself.”

“Continuity of care is care that allows a woman’s story to unfold with space to speak, people to listen. Story is another way of saying ‘woman-centred’.”

“It matters that there is space for story in maternal health and that we are all our own authors in that space.”

Zoe Brigley and Jude Brigley

Jude and Zoe presented their poetry film created in a collaboration between a mother and daughter (who is also a mother). They explored themes of multiple miscarriages, fostering connections between extended family and community as a means of mothering, the politics of the maternal, and the difference between ‘mother’ and ‘mothering’. Jude and Zoe examined how stories breed stories, when one story is offered it allows for an “outpouring” of previously silenced stories.

“Motherhood can be filled with grief and challenge as well as joy and that needs to be talked about.”

“...we need stories and narratives that show us that mistakes are universal.”

“We are not just mothers.”

Tracy Breathnach-Evans

Tracy spoke about birth stories and the complex, multiplicitous, under-represented and non-linear forms that they might take. Birth stories open discussions on reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, identity, and representation.

“Learning how to tell my experience from my body was a revolution.”

“I speak these words. I write my story. I create my own meaning. I challenge my own identity. I listen to other women reaching towards, finding and speaking their own words. My heart opens and receives this.”

“Let’s banish the ghosts. Let’s reclaim our bodies and their deep experiential wisdom. Let’s lose the critical self-judgement. Let’s find resource and safety in our bodies. Let’s heal ourselves. Let’s come into our presence.”

The time ran away from us. We did not have enough space for conversation. I did not get to ask the questions that I wanted of the speakers. I wonder if the other people listening felt this frustration too. We never heard Roiyah or Solange’s live voice, only their voices mediated through their digital stories. We managed a live encounter with the other speakers but we never really got to having anything that could be called a conversation; where we listen and respond to one another. The audience were silent and invisible. We know how many people booked but have no idea who was actually there with us. We initially planned a conference, all together in one room, in one time, breathing air together, sharing food, caring for one another in order to allow us to share ideas

and to push our collective thinking further. This never happened but we did make a connection. We brought people together and we all took care – of our words, of this digital space, of each other. Georgina, Lena and I (the Performance and the Maternal research team) texted one another in the background, making sure we were okay, that we knew what we were doing.

Response authored by Emily Underwood-Lee

Tuesday 20th October 2020

Climate, Gender and Performing Maternal Futures



click here to watch the filmed documentation

How might a maternal inclination help us to re-imagine the future, and what maternal futures might we want to create?

Chair: Georgina Biggs

Speakers: [Natalie Loveless](#) and [Sheena Wilson](#), [Chantal Bilodeau](#), [Hannah Davey \(Liberate Tate\)](#), [prOphecy sun](#), [Rosemary Lee](#), [Ben Spatz](#)

Audience: 102 members

Joining from: Australia, Canada, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, UK and USA

Working in the fields of: arts and culture, education, research, healthcare, mothering, fertility coaching and as students

A significant purpose of our research is concerned with expanding our understanding of the maternal, which historically has been limited within the tropes of biological essentialism and seen through romanticised ideologies of what comes to constitute a 'mother'. Our research identifies that the maternal is not only about biological reproduction but is around attitudes of care, choice and responsibility to each other, ourselves and our planet – a more-than-human world. That we can make maternal connections in a variety of ways, not only through bearing children, and that our capacity to bear children or not does not necessarily mean we have to be in a maternal relation.

Nature and bodies that birth, that is bodies who were assigned female at birth, share a similar genealogy in that they have both historically been read and romanticised through bodies, through subjectivities, that were assigned male at birth. When read within a patriarchal paradigm these readings have led to skewed fetishisms. Can diverse subjective encounters, such as feminist, queer and posthuman readings of the maternal disturb anthropomorphic readings of nature and in doing so come to positively influence our environmental future? If so, might we better understand the maternal act of being in-relation, reciprocity and interconnectedness as fundamental to the interruption and dismantling of capitalist modes of production which continue to lead to mass environmental devastation? Might the enmeshment of the reproductive body and technology help us better understand the body's situatedness in those production-oriented modalities? And might this cyborgism, furthermore, also help us to reconsider what comes to constitute a body, a gendered body, and thus collapse the binary of nature and culture so that we might reconsider not only what constitutes a body, but where our bodies begin and end? Here I reflect on some of these emergent considerations in the context of this maternal forum and each speakers' response to the provocation.

Natalie Loveless and Sheena Wilson

“...collaboration in its emergent dynamism pulls out us out of the isolating neoliberal subjectivity...”

Based at the University of Alberta in Edmonton (Canada) established authors and academics Natalie Loveless and Sheena Wilson reflected on working collaboratively together at the intersections of gender and climate change. Their presentation drew from their shared academic, artistic, and personal lives to think through the complexities of collaborative feminist labour as a chosen mode of resilience. Not documented without its ‘messiness’, theirs is a collaboration which collapses personal and professional lives in an effort to claim the maternal as an ethic and politic. Through lived experience they showed us why the claim “the personal is political” (Harnisch, 2000, p.113) is still as relevant today as when expressed in 1969. Yet it is a narrative that Natalie and Sheena brought into contemporary measure to help us understand what it looks like to ‘stay with the trouble’; a concept that forms the title of Donna Haraway’s (1944) most recent book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

Natalie and Sheena located ‘trouble’ in the conflux of past, present, and future, and as such situated themselves and their work geographically and genealogically in relation to Treaty 6 territory; a settler colonial state steeped in indigenous erasure and the heartland of Canada’s oil industry. This situated embodied relationship grounds the starting point of climate action in the land and the peoples’ relationship to it, in an acknowledgement of the (stolen) lands where they both work and live, a shift beyond tokenism to instead draw from these violent inheritances (and their concomitant privilege) as the generative pivot around which more resilient possibilities might be imagined. It is the ‘trouble’ that they are learning to ‘stay with’ for as Haraway puts it,

Neither the critters nor the people could have existed or could endure each other in ongoing, curious practices. Attached to ongoing past, they bring each other forward in thick presents and still possible futures: they stay with the trouble... (Haraway, 2016, p.133)

In the midst of climate crisis and the threat of ongoing pandemics, the ‘staying with’ that they proposed came in the form of collaborative feminist labour. Within the academy this was a vision that asked us to consider in more detail the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ of curating feminist space (events). It was centralising the ‘who’ in such a way that demanded the presence of intersectional voice; perspectives which truly reflect the land’s complexity of lived histories. It was nurturing the ‘how’ to better attend to such difference, reorganising the temporal and material rearrangements to facilitate sharing and to bring people closer to one another. Issues such as attending to accessibility and comfort in space, offering (funds for) childcare, scheduling downtime as intimately generative space, and presenting a variety of food and drinks. They also showed the potential of maternal art in these transformations of organisational space, conference space hosted within Lise Haller Baggesen’s womb-like installation *Motherism*, (Hallerbaggesen, no date), encouraging and leading towards surprising moments of intimate connection/discussion.

In these small adjustments to the ‘how’, they reminded us that by asserting the power of form we can politically renegotiate the givens - both within the university but more broadly across organisational statures. Whilst they opened their vision for collaborative feminist labour within the academy, they also worked backwards to locate their original meeting point - a confluence in artistic practices with an interest in climate activism. They also took us to the present day to say that this long and enduring collaboration (not without its moments of rupture and divide) is one that continually seeks to re-find one another.

Today the two live as neighbours, Sheena intentionally moving to be near to Natalie to, as she puts it, “co-parent, co-live, co-dream and sometimes we co-vent, co-drink, and co-cry”. It seems that this moving backwards and forwards in time is not coincidental. For me it exposes that the collapse between the professional and the personal is a key informant to, and necessary for, the articulation and enactment of collaborative feminist labour. For me, Natalie and Sheena’s ongoing collaboration reflects an emerging resilience and a sense of community arising from the intentional (and inescapable) intertwining of personal and professional lives. Theirs is a lived experience and situatedness that demands, on

a daily basis, a continual renegotiating the givens, of what it means 'to stay with the trouble'. As such, I read their proposition as the urgent need to revise how we work together, to find better (collective) ways of resourcing a world grown more accustomed to the exploitative and individualised plight of neoliberalism. It is an encouragement to "think of care as an organising principle on each and every scale of life" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p.22). Faced with an uncertain future, received in the context of a global pandemic and in the midst of climate crisis, it seems that I am now, more than ever, acutely attentive to the revisions they pose.

Chantal Bilodeau

"If caring is associated with maternal instincts how can we harness those maternal instincts in service of the earth?"

Chantal talked about their work with Climate Change Theatre Action, a project which brings communities together to foster conversation around climate whilst also providing a way to express this care and, crucially, to act on it. Each year the project makes a global call out to writers' wanting to write about issues of climate. Through a thematic prompt, writers are encouraged to imagine beyond apocalyptic scenarios or dystopian worlds which, as Chantal points out, can often be the starting point for many new writers tackling issues of climate. The prompt as such becomes the critical tool to awaken new imaginaries, ones that better reflect Sheena and Natalie's depiction of what it means to stay with Haraway's 'trouble'. That is, narratives that reflect a lived situatedness in a world with complex past, present, and future injustices.

Made globally available to anyone wanting to stage or use the writing in any (big or small) way, participation in the project means not only committing to artistic presentation but to taking action. Beyond and through artistic presentation this action is the intention to leave something positive, to build better connections between disparate groups, and improve engagement with life on this planet (in its most diverse forms). Woven throughout the conceptual design of the project, much like the temporal and material reorganisations Natalie and Sheena made within the

academy, here we see again an ethic of care (which leans towards better tending to what it means to be in relation) employed to intentionally subvert and intervene standard practices of presentation. These different ways of doing continually calling into revision the givens of 'how' things get done, inviting us to "recognise our mutual interdependencies and the intrinsic value of all living things" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p.21). The call for a specific climate action to be embedded into each project is what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa might call a naturecultural vision, thinking which disobjectifies nonhuman worlds by exposing their liveliness and agency in a way that promotes an mode of attention which resists falling into human perspectives (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p.141). Chantal's work moves beyond a neoliberal subjectivity (which seeks (self) appraisal and glorification in the final product alone) and encourages actions of care that puts us in better relation to both human and more than human worlds. It reminds me that performance is a powerful platform through which we can actively nurture these attentive modes.

Hannah Davey - Liberate Tate

"The collective isn't all women but is entirely maternal, loving and women led. It's the familial side of our group that makes it work and we know that we can only do these things together".

Hannah's presentation was delivered on behalf of Liberate Tate, a collective of artists that began to make unsanctioned performance interventions in Tate spaces. Their purpose was to demand that the gallery drop financial backing from oil companies such as BP. Hannah spoke about their final intervention at Tate called *Birthmark*, a piece which explored lasting damage, scarring, and healing through the art of tattoo-giving. Sneaking in car batteries and inverters to power machines, and flasks of hot water to wash/sterilise equipment and hands, the intervention involved tattooing the numerical value of carbon emissions (determined by year of birth) onto peoples' bodies. These were small intimate acts that transcended bodily boundaries through the release of carbon circulated from machines, to building, to air, to climate and back to bodies. This piece invites my curiosity towards the porosity of

bodies and their enmeshment with matters of environment. First performed as an intervention in the BP *British Art in the 1840s* gallery, the location of the performance drew attention to the extraordinary rise in carbon emissions that followed the beginning of industrial revolution in the 1840s. Later (2016) it was performed, again without invitation, in the National Portrait Gallery on the threshold of the BP Portrait award. As their final work, it bridged Tate's relinquishing of unethical financial sponsorship and was, thereafter, performed with invitation worldwide by the collective themselves and by separate groups of artists.

Tracing the evolution of the project as a grass roots upswell that led to a worldwide action I identify this work as activism, but a maternal activism in which a maternal drive is expressed throughout - practice, product and affect. Reflecting again on Natalie and Sheena's attention to the 'who' and 'how', and through a complete collapse between personal and professional spheres, in *Birthmark* we witness that the experience of new mothers continually shapes and informs the collective's engagement. Children remain a presence in the work and performance space, yet their care is not located as down to the individual (as it might be in a world context that values neoliberal subjectivity) but is shared across the community who are treated as a collective resource for the mother artists. Resilience grows through what Sheena and Natalie might identify to be collaborative feminist labour.

Today, in the context of COVID 19, touch and physical contact have become a danger. But in this work physical intimacy appears to be a core ethic. In *Birthmark* (a metaphor for the literal mark to skin that we are born with) skin is the primary medium that facilitates a two-way dialogue with environment. Machines mark skin, skin (human presence) marks the venue, and the venue (as machine) marks the planet. Dismantling boundaries between bodies and technologies, *Birthmark* puts Haraway's provocation of "Why should our bodies end at skin?" (Haraway 1990, p.220) into practice, and unwittingly uses it in a maternal activism that successfully exposes environmental concern. Yet, whilst boundaries are dissolved, moments of intimate exchange are still marked by touch. Now under COVID compliant enforcements, in a world

starved of touch, I wonder how we might achieve such intimacy in the same way. Through online platforms we are entering intimate spaces, namely the home environment, but skin on skin contact (that certain types of performance allow) feels lost. I wonder how can (maternally-informed) intimacy, which premises itself through the medium of such contact, now be rethought? In the work I see intimacy as a conceptual ethic which helps to build closer, more familial relations that connect people more deeply with one another and the planet. So how might it be redefined as an ethic or concept of performance in these online worlds? Perhaps there is more in Haraway's provocation to expound.

prOphecy sun

"I see bodies as spaces of enmeshment, folded in a trans-corporeal dance which is complex, full of politics, surroundings and substance, that often merge and become blurred, in which a variety of timeframes and realities blend together."

Also joining us from Canada, but this time from Nelson in British Columbia, performance artist prOphecy sun situates a site-responsive practice in a region of complex colonial settler and indigenous relations. Interested in the collisions and overlaps between life and art, prOphecy's work delves into these histories through embodied engagement with the landscape. Working in the Columbia basin and beyond, we witnessed in their work a co-composition with objects, matter, extraction, and surveillance through the medium of film. These are artistic works, which provoke audiences towards future imaginaries through the juxtaposition of abstract and yet situated visuals. prOphecy's work evoked a futurity in which a spectrum of ecological possibilities arrive through a multiplicity of meanings.

prOphey articulated a feminist approach to research and shared three excerpts of their filmed landscape work which took up the notion of feminist collaboration, care, and maternal ecologies. In the first we witnessed a maternal duet with a weather balloon, a struggle against the wind moving along the bank of the river against a mountainous backdrop. The object, ordinarily used to carry scientific instruments into the sky for the purpose of

atmospheric measurements, conjured the imagery of the balloon as a white breast. Filmed following prOphecy's miscarriage and death of a grandmother, this was a dance where again we see the collapsing of the life/art divide, a maternal performance which through lived experience brings something new to the complexity of maternal experience. Duetting with a surveillance balloon as a breast labours the point that the maternal body is increasingly technologized, and this gets explored further in the second piece in which bodies existed solely in digital space. In the second work visuals of a body generated through artificial intelligence continually faded in and out and were overlaid with close-up images which suggested its interaction with bacteria. The porosity of the body is expounded to issue a speculative imaginary (along Puig de le Bellacasa lines) of a time in which algo-rhythms come to mark bodily (non) boundaries. Haraway's cyborgism also spoke into the visuals of both films presenting prOphecy as "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (Haraway, 1990, p.163). The final piece brought me back to the subject of care that wove throughout all previous presentations but here it was presented in the form of feminist land stewardship. In the film we witnessed prOphecy attempting to find a place on the ground for a fallen tree branch; a search for space to co-become. Throughout all three pieces nature, culture, body, and technology intertwine. There is an intentional merging of human and more than human worlds that speaks into the complexity of maternal lived experience - here and now, and in the future.

Rosemary Lee

"In sensing our bodies and our presence in relation to environment I'm hoping that I can enliven the sense that we are nature - that skin dissolves into air dissolves into our skin"

Rosemary Lee presented to us as a choreographer who makes work for outdoor sites. Her work spoke deeply into the theme of body and earth enmeshment, not only interrogating where bodies begin and end, but encouraging people to become more sensitised at an embodied level to enable them to experience the environment anew. This ethos was captured, not through solo

performance as in prOphecy's work, but quite uniquely through large casts of performers that widely spanned experience and age.

For the purposes of her presentation she shared with us two pieces of work that featured all female casts - *Square Dances* and *Passages of Par*. In the first women of many ages moved en masse as a flock of birds unexpectedly through public urban space and, in the second, a group of women crossed the sand out to the shoreline and back at the turn of tide (filmed in two hours every day across three days). Through these performances, and her wider work, Rosemary sought to cultivate a sensory awareness to the world in such a way that it drew a new attentiveness in not only the performer but also in the viewer. In *Passages for Par* a group of connected women moved in unison across the beach, one step in front of the other, on and on; a repetitive rhythm created by the motion of the bodies themselves immersed in the raw sounds of the landscape. Sound (timed with the visuals) enters between silent passages where only bodies moving across the land are witnessed. In this way I experienced time, place and space as stretched, a kind of liminality framed within the very real time of a turning tide which did draw me toward a new attentiveness. Similarly, the rhythmic and repetitive nature of the choreography, the women slowly moving onwards as one organism whilst negotiating the demands of elemental forces, speaks deeply into the endurance of women's work and labour.

Both performances evoked a sense of wildness which Rosemary etymologically translated as related to the act of 'being itself'. Rosemary presented the cultivation of wildness, the act of just letting things be, in relation to a maternal inclination to say that there is an element of nurturing involved in just letting things be, where the aim is to add value rather than be extractive. Given the extractive depletion of natural resources worldwide we can see how this maternal inclination might help us re-imagine a better environmental future - the commitment to wildness (body and earth) meaning to just let things be themselves.

Both of Rosemary's works depicted an ethic of communal care but in *Passages for Par* it is acutely witnessed through the large cast whose collective actions defined the central organism.

Be it through the collective mind of the human flock of birds, or the interconnected assemblage of women on a beach care is articulated as a communal caring with, caring alongside, and caring for. Heightened through the performers' felt sense of each other, this vision of communal care is one achieved through a continual negotiation of being in relation as well as the search for a shared togetherness. Explored in process and presented in performance the vital life of the organism as such is presented like the caring community, centralised and valued over and above the hyper-individualised, competitive, neoliberal subject (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p.45).

Ben Spatz

“When you open your body, when you put your body into risk, into softness, in order to care for someone else, perhaps we could think of that as a possible future of a non-binary maternal.”

Ben presented a *Non-Binary Essay Poem* in which they spoke into the provocation whilst playing silent unedited film footage (part of a new audio-visual laboratory being developed). The footage depicted Ben and a colleague undertaking embodied research in the studio in the presence of Ben's mother - a visual artist joining the laboratory space. The film plays in the background as Ben presents to viewers identifying as a nonbinary parent and begins to talk through the complex relationship of gender and sexuality in maternal terms. First Ben drew attention to the problem of binary gendered terms in relation to the maternal. An unfitting title of Dad was rejected; as was the paternal distancing that it evoked. A maternal Dad was then considered but was still not felt as befitting. Finally, Dad bod was offered as inconclusive potential, but at least a term which, for Ben, leans towards a less gendered expression of the maternal. It reflected a description which acknowledges that bodies of any gender are somehow transformed through the act of parenting. That bodies, beyond gender, are always changed somehow through the arrival of new life. Ben understood this change as defined by closeness, a proximity which we as audiences may interpret as both the intimate act of being in relation, as much as relating to actual physical distance.

Ben invited me to decode these gendered terms, then went further to observe how the figure of the mother is also used in violent ways when conflated with whiteness. For example, when deployed by Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) to incite transphobia. For TERFs the cis-gendered, heteronormative and reproductive body claims exclusive ownership of the title woman/mother. It is a movement that persists with an anti-trans narrative that is dangerously fuelled by the tropes of liberal feminism, an inherently white feminism that emerged during the 1970s in America. But Ben also drew our attention to these violently raced appropriations of the mother figure in instances where they appear on the global stage. For example, where the figure of a (white) mother is used as rhetoric to gain another seat in the US court, as Ben points out a stage which has always been the domain of white supremacy and privilege. Ben draws my attention to the raced and gendered power dynamics imbued in presentation of the maternal. That, this transnational vision of global domesticity (the global mother) which is occupied by the white mother, is arrived at (and dependent on) the erasure and failure of the non-white maternal body; the non-white native mother (Shome, 2011, p.399) whose ceded territories and colonised lands the image often proliferates. Instead, Ben drew us towards indigenous knowledges, inviting us to move beyond the binarisms of colonial settler sexualities. It was an invitation which sought to separate the maternal from the cis-gendered biologically reproductive body and instead reorient it towards the act of caretaking - a form of the maternal.

Ben's migration towards (and beyond?) a Dad bod terminology, highlights how bodies are inescapably adjunct and superlative in the execution of (maternal) care and, as such, can frame a new and ungendered vision of the maternal. For Ben this was a future where the act of caring becomes thoroughly enmeshed with the body but through an ungendered embodiment defined as being “with body, bodily care, care that risk one's own body, care that opens and sensitises one's own body, care through proximity rather than distance, care through touch, closeness, opening, vulnerability and softness”. This is then perhaps more the radical practice that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942) searched in the seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, a practice that attends

to this double session of representations rather than reintroduces the individual subject through totalising concepts of power and desire (Spivak, 1999, p.31). For me, Ben's presentation concluded our evening of speakers with a vision of a (non-binary) maternal future that spoke into and across all the previous presentations. It was an acknowledgement that perhaps 'maternal care' is a specific type of care, one that can be recognised beyond the mere 'action' of care that the verb implies, to instead be recognised as a type of care that inescapably and affectively remains in dialogue with the body, a body, any body and its situatedness in the world.

Response authored by Georgina Biggs

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Tuesday 27th October 2020

Migration and (Maternal) Citizenship in Performance



[click here to watch the filmed documentation](#)

How can the maternal migrate, cross borders and enable us to think globally with responsibility and care towards one another? Is it possible to envision a maternal citizenship?

Chair: Lena Šimić

Speakers: [Jennifer Verson](#), [Umut Erel](#), [Jina Valentine](#), [Elena Marchevska](#) and [Sara C Motta](#)

Audience: 83 members

Joining from: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ireland, Italy, Spain, UK and USA

Working in the fields of: arts and culture, education, research, healthcare professions, youth work, journalism, and as students

The 'Migration and (Maternal) Citizenship in Performance' forum was the fourth in the series of our maternal fora, whose central questions has been: How does maternal performance help us to understand the lived condition of motherhood? Previous fora have addressed maternal performance aesthetics, storytelling as a way of bringing forth diverse mothering experiences, as well as discussed maternal futures and genders in the light and context of climate crisis. Of course, lots of these themes have overlapped with our own inquiry around 'Migration and (Maternal) Citizenship in Performance'.

With this particular forum we were keen to open up maternal matters across borders thinking about various migrations we undertake locally and globally, as well as notions of citizenship and care that might be possible. Mothering, as an activity, is a site of never-ending political and personal production; it is situated in a specific place, and it is undertaken by specific bodies, marked by experience and context. In my arts practice and research I have often identified and been identified as 'other', as 'foreign' – though my accent, through my cultural background, through my particular difference here in Liverpool, UK.

As mother/artists and scholars we are a part of public discourse. We act as citizens who might not belong to a particular nation state, as activists often, trying to change prevalent perceptions of 'mother' and 'motherhood'. We engage with notions of care beyond the limitations of the nuclear family and biological children. We welcome others into our networks, we create solidarity spaces. Who do mothers belong to? They tend to be co-opted by nation states, tamed into a certain image. But could we possibly envision maternal citizenship, a call for civic duty, beyond borders. What does it mean to mother? What does it mean to be a citizen? These were some of the thoughts, questions and ideas running through the 'Migration and (Maternal) Citizenship in Performance' forum.

Jennifer Verson, artist and scholar at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at the Coventry University, started her talk by responding in poetic format to the words of *The Last Poets* that she listened to at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. Her poem invoked her own history, present, and context. That context primarily consists of her own migrant friends and colleagues, who

are part of the Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (MAMA) network in Liverpool. Working through, what Verson frames as an 'ontology of interconnections' that consist of centring friendships, shared lives and political solidarity, MAMA have used performance (in particular music making and chorus singing) to affectively craft a 'new aesthetics of citizenship' and 'create a post-nationalist political agency'. The MAMA members work from The Walker Art Gallery paintings and Liverpool International Slavery Museum archives in order to explore their own current stories of migration and shared lives. The group support one another through weekly meetings, and thus build long relationships and friendships that support each other's journeys through the oftentimes unjust and tiresome asylum processes. At the same time MAMA members, through public art presentation and music making, encourage a new imagery and forms of citizenship. They are a group of diverse women, celebrating their different bodies, voices and backgrounds, who have come together, singing, creating harmony on stage, and at the same time creating a de-essentialised maternity; one that refuses to be aligned with nationality and thus used by the nation states towards the idealized motherhood. Verson has showcased a new diverse and open maternal citizenship.

Umut Erel, Professor of Sociology at The Open University, talked about 'Participatory Theatre to Challenge the No Recourse to Public Funds Policy'. Umut's research employs an intersectional approach and explores how gender, migration and ethnicity inform practices of citizenship. She is a sociologist who utilizes participatory theatre as a collaborative research method between theatre practitioners, activists and academics. The work has been about challenging the boundaries of what citizenship means and how to think of migrant mothers as citizens, and contest the ways they and their families are marginalised. Umut's research project is called *Participatory Arts and Social Action Research*. The project engages with migrant women, girls and families, in order to better understand the crucial issues affecting migrant families, make a difference and impact on practice and policy whilst engage in the co-production of knowledge around a policy issues (specifically No Recourse to Public Funds). The researchers expand the notion of citizenship through the research with participants themselves. They acknowledge migrant mothers' practices of constructing belonging and place-making as a starting point to critique state

and everyday cultures' exclusionary understandings of citizenship. Instead, through the medium of participatory theatre, with *Margins to Centre Stage Theatre* the migrant mothers portray their stories in public and share experiences of what it means to have No Recourse to Public Funds. These public acts of citizenship allow us to better understand the hostile environment that's been created by the UK government, social injustices and citizenship laws which are, in Umut's words, 'delimiting migrants' rights to bring up families in dignity'.

Our third presentation came from **Jina Valentine**, a Chicago-based, contemporary American visual artist whose practice is situated through her position in the world as a single, black mother. Jina's practice deals with alternative readings of text. The socio-critical element is in part inspired by her son and his perennially posed "why?". It is inspired by what in *Art Brut* is described as an *unclaque*, or among millennials as becoming woke. An *unclaque* is an event that shakes one awake, opening up new possibilities for perceiving the world. Jina's highly visual slides presentation *Autopoiesis* discussed her practice of synthesising family life and studio, single motherhood, collaboration through roundtable discussions and 'teaching to care'. Jina noted that since the birth of her son, her arts practice has become more political as she has had to confront numerous issues around racism in contemporary USA. For example, she talked about having to explain white supremacy to a seven-year-old. She discussed engaging in close readings of newspaper accounts of the killings of unarmed black people - primarily young men. It is through collective discursive analysis, and close, microscopic consideration of newspaper texts containing the heart-breaking phrase 'shot my son' that Jina created her own aesthetic and critical response to the unimaginable maternal grief that those printed words carry.

Our next speaker was **Elena Marchevska**, who is also one of the mother/artists we have interviewed for the project (Marchevska with Šimić and Underwood-Lee, 2017). Elena is an Associate Professor at South Bank University who has recently published the edited book, together with Valerie Walkerdine, *The Maternal in Creative Work*. In her talk, entitled *There Are Other Worlds (They Haven't Told You Of)* which is named after a track by Sun Ra and His Arkestra, Elena reflected on her experience of studying at

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago as one of the token migrant students at this prestigious university. The track connects her and other migrant students who in 2003 endlessly talked about 'representation' and 'identity politics' at the self-initiated gatherings – topics which were somehow out of discourse fashion during that time. Elena also addressed a new collaborative research project *Finding Home: Housing, Migration & Research Creation* which looks at 'hostile environment' and asks questions about what constitutes 'a good citizenship narrative' in the UK. Finally, a short film featuring herself and her daughters' poetically addressed questions of migration and caring, looking towards more caring constellations, and 'different worlds that wish to speak to you'. A phrase that remained with me from the film is an acknowledgment that 'caring is not a romantic affair'.

Our final speaker for the forum was **Sara C Motta** who is an Associate Professor at the University of Newcastle in Australia. Sara joined us from a hotel room, and addressed that position of being in-between homes (due to dangerous toxic dust polluting her previous home). She spoke of gentrification and the idea of home as a place of autonomy and freedom making - our inner territory. She urged us towards thinking together on how to create home-places, co-housing projects, how to differently reproduce life through radical education projects, radical food production, through being and acting m/otherwise (Liss, 2013, p.1). Sara named her presentation a fragmented representation of fractured displacement, which characterised the experience of many migrants and herself in her newly found land of Australia; a place of great pain and dislocation. Sara's talk was poetic. Her positioning began from impurity as a mestiza salvaje [salvahe] single mother of Colombian Chibcha [chib-cha], Eastern European Jewish and Celtic lineages living on the unceded lands of the Awabakal [awabikal] and Worimi peoples at an estuary point where salt and fresh waters meet in the so-called lands of 'Australia'. She explored her impurity as both a phenomenological experience of multiple a phenomenological experience of multiple (mis)namings etched into the skin, and a political/epistemological choice of becoming (m)other otherwise. Sara was adamant not to essentialise her position, but rather claim the idea of (m)otherwise to create different kinds of markings beyond those that are perceived by the state and the notions of

citizen-proper. She emphasised the racialised and feminized subjectivities and reconfigured mothering as a survival.

All presentations were pragmatic and inspired us towards the act of solidarity-making. Migrant mothers were framed as agents of political change. We held onto the idea of 'other worlds', which Elena mentioned, of '(m)otherwise' which featured in Sara's talk, of 'new aesthetics of citizenship', which Jennifer called for, of the political engagement as clear in Jina's art, and the opening up of the term citizenship in Umut's participatory research actions.

In the discussion we talked about maternal methodologies and the potential for thinking about maternal citizenship, whilst acknowledging displacements of families and kin which are currently happening across the planet. We talked about expanding the idea of the migrant beyond the usual victim status. A question appeared, what can a migrant become? We returned to discussions about the body and the flesh, questions of touch, and who we can/are allowed to touch. We spoke of an enmeshment in bodily intimacies. And most prominently we acknowledged the topic of care, which has become ever so primary in COVID times. I was left returning to my own experience of being othered, the incongruence of being identified as 'foreign', yet simultaneously feeling 'foreign' to, distant from, any nation state's projection of idealised motherhood. I am struck that if 'caring is not a romantic affair' then we might better reorient our love, our tending, our care to these points of rupture.

Response authored by Lena Šimić

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Tuesday 3rd November 2020

Health, Policy and Impact – Maternal Performance Matters



[click here to watch the filmed documentation](#)

What are the pressing questions for maternal health and policy? How might performance help us to explore those questions?

Chair: Emily Underwood-Lee

Speakers: [Prue Thimbleby](#), [Michelle Hartney](#), [Helena Walsh](#),
Leah Salter, [Vicky Karkou](#) and Emma Perris

Audience: 96 members

Joining from: Australia, Canada, Germany, South Korea, UK
and USA

Working in the fields of: arts and culture, education, research,
medical professions, allied health professions, policy, advocacy,
and care work

We hoped to explore how performance in many forms could shine a light on the diverse experiences and struggles of mothers. We believe that maternal performance can help to develop empathy and understanding, to open ourselves to the experience of another, and in so doing, improve our advocacy, support and allyship for mothers. We hoped that the community that gathered around this event would demonstrate ways in which they were already working with mothers and push our collective thinking and action forward. We were keen to use the term mothers inclusively to include all who do the work of mothering regardless of gender, sex or route to a maternal sensibility. We acknowledged that the boundaries between practice and lived experience are fuzzy, no-one is only a policy maker, only a healthcare practitioner, or only a mother. Instead, we are a community of complex and diverse people who often mother through and around our varied practices. Drawing on discussions from the four previous fora we used 'mother' as a verb to include all the disparate actions of extending care towards another. While thinking about our aims for this forum event I remembered a conversation I had listened to between the Australian psychologist Amanda Donnet and Sindhu Vee and Stuart Goldsmith on the *Child Labour* podcast (Amanda Donnet, 2020). Amanda Donnet described compassion as 'empathy plus action', a definition similar to the one offered by Jennifer Goetz et al, who define compassion as 'as the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help' (Goetz et al, 2010: 351). We hoped to bring together a community of people engaged in compassionate, ethical, active work through practices which included live art, storytelling, theatre, and working within the health care systems.

Prue Thimbleby

Prue discussed the way that stories within the NHS, when judiciously recorded and shared, can change policy and services for the better. She showed Hannah's story and Toni's story. We heard about post-natal psychosis, experiences of difficult births, women feeling disempowered, what worked and what helped, developing health services, how service provision has been improved by sharing stories, and the benefits of those improved services for new mothers.

“In 2015 Hannah told her story and the PRAMS service was set up. In 2019 Toni told her story and benefitted from the PRAMS service, and now her story has helped to bring a new mother and baby unit to Wales.”

“...policy is essentially about how resources are going to be distributed. By telling our stories we can influence that distribution.”

Michelle Hartney

We heard from Michelle about her projects working with performance and art making in order to highlight issues of maternal health. Flag ceremonies were appropriated, hospital gowns were sewn, tales of assault during birth and interventions performed without the birthing person’s consent were discussed, birth justice was fought for, infertility and fertility were highlighted, the invisible load was made visible. We heard about how performance art is synergistic with art about maternal health. We thought about how in order to change society you first need to change culture.

“The pressing issue in the states regarding maternal health is our high maternal mortality rate and mental health.”

“Black women are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women are.”

“As an artist we might need to find different ways of expressing ourselves because the mediums that we normally use might not be sufficient.”

Helena Walsh

Helena spoke from her body. A megaphone amplified her voice and moved it to her reproductive centre. Helena shared how her activism and performance combined in the work of *Speaking of IMELDA* and their work to advocate for access to free, safe and legal abortion in Ireland. She spoke of knickers for choice, red clothing as secret code, half eaten apples given to Jeremy Hunt.

“Performance places the body centre stage in the fight for bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.”

“Performance makes the impact of healthcare policy on maternal bodies visible.”

“Performance challenges the idealisation of motherhood.”

Leah Salter

Leah thought about maternal wellbeing in storytelling practices, particularly focussing on her own context as a psychotherapist working within the NHS. She told us about her work using stories with women and families who are impacted by mental ill health. Leah posed a series of questions: “how are we listening?”, “how are we being good companions to people’s stories?”, “how do we respect people’s lives?”, and “how do we move away from an individualised model of care to one where we think about family and think more systemically?”. Leah asked us to bear witness as she shared Laura and Cathryn’s stories with us.

“Performance enlivens us and moves us to action... we are moved to be in relationship to the storyteller.”

“...we know that mothers have a worry about their baby being removed if they talk about their mental health. This is enough to prevent people from accessing services.”

“A project around story doesn’t present a fear factor. Group work can be destigmatising.”

Vicky Karkou and Emma Perris

Vicky and Emma asked us to shift our attention from stories that are said to stories that are non-verbal; particularly in relation to arts-movement psychotherapy. They discussed the *Arts for the Blues* project which brings together a large team to work with people diagnosed with post-natal depression. They explored the *Arts for the Blues* model as a means for supporting perinatal mental health.

“The question of representation is at the heart of this issue... We need to be constantly asking ‘how can mothers be better represented?’, we need to listen to women without prejudice, and we need to disseminate and present their experiences.”

“Witnessing in a non-judgemental way... and allowing a safe and supportive space where emotions can be freely expressed.... Processing without needing to verbalise makes things safer.”

With this, our last forum, we managed the time better and had space for questions. We thought about how form and aesthetics, the capturing and reception of stories, and the careful deployment of art, can make real world change. We explored how visibility, accessibility and relatability were essential. We considered how stories begin before our birth and carry on our legacy. We discussed the need to bear witness and to amplify, to be seen and to be heard, who needs to hear the stories and experiences of mothers, and how stories should be at the heart of health and policy. We thought about the need to prioritise the experiences of mothers in medical interventions. We thought about how performance can inform health and policy and how health and policy research can inform performance practice. We discussed the ethical implications of sharing patient stories, shame, the sensitivity of bringing stories from the private to the public, the power of publicly speaking out, and the need for research to be driven by a desire for action and change. We discussed the cultural differences between working in countries with state-funded healthcare and countries without a national health service. We thought about the need to mix methods, disciplines, and perspectives.

Afterwards, the three members of the research team met. We felt a sense of celebration, five forums done, and many insights shared. We sensed that a community was created of international thinkers and practitioners who were concerned with making real change for people who birth and people who mother. Alone, I drank a glass of wine and felt hopeful.

Response authored by Emily Underwood-Lee

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