

Laura Bissell

Author of *Matrescence
and Performance:
Becoming/Unbecoming*

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Dr Laura Bissell is an Athenaeum research fellow and lecturer in contemporary performance at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Laura's research interests include technology, ecology, interdisciplinarity, matrescence, feminism and journeys, and she has presented her research on contemporary practices at conferences nationally and internationally.

Your Ph.D thesis explored 'The female body, technology and performance: Performing a feminist praxis'. What first sparked your interest in feminist performance and the politics of the body?

I was interested in the intersections between technology and the body and when undertaking an MPhil realised that most of the artists deemed significant in the field were all men. I was keen to write about feminist ways of engaging with technology and the politics of the body and this has been a key concern in my research for a long time now.

What inspired you to write *Matrescence and Performance: Becoming/Unbecoming*?

The obvious answer to this is becoming a mother myself seven years ago! It was such a huge transition that I wrote a memoir about my experience of pregnancy, childbirth and then parenting in the pandemic, which was published in 2021, and I also began researching contemporary performances that challenges some of the conventional depictions of motherhood. Despite teaching feminism and autobiographical performance for over fifteen years I realized I had hardly looked at the work of any mother/artists – recognizing this as a feminist blindspot made me want to write the book.

For readers who may be unfamiliar with the term, could you explain what 'matrescence' means and why it's such an important concept?

The term was coined in 1975 by anthropologist Dana Raphael and is defined as: 'the time of mother-becoming' (Being Female: Reproduction, Power, and Change, De Gruyter Brill, p. 66), describing the physical, psychological and emotional changes experienced when one becomes a mother. Although this was over fifty years ago, 'matrescence' has not been in common usage and I had already gone through it and written a memoir on it before I even heard the term! It was described to me as similar to the transition of adolescence, which is culturally understood as a time of significant change into adulthood; matrescence acknowledges the seismic shift into motherhood. Lucy Jones, in her brilliant 2023 book *Matrescence: On the Metamorphosis of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood* notes, that it is not only those who give birth to a child that experience this, that scientific evidence finds changes in the brain for those who provide primary care to infants. I think it is an important term as it gives those experiencing it a way of conceptualizing it and understanding it as a major life event. There is a current campaign to have the term added to dictionaries and to have this more widely acknowledged and accepted – 'when we name something, we validate it': 'The dictionary knows "IDGAF" but not word for becoming a mother'.

Why is performance a particularly powerful medium for exploring experiences of motherhood and matrescence?

The book was inspired by the work Emily Underwood-Lee and Lena Šimić have done in the field of maternal performance in recent years. They explore how the maternal is made visible through performance and compare live performance to the maternal as 'durational, embodied, relational practices' (*Maternal Performance: Feminist Relations*, Springer Nature, 2021, p. 226). I think that contemporary performance and live art as mediums which can push the boundaries of the body are perfectly situated to explore matrescence and make visible some experiences that have been deemed 'unbecoming' or unstageable.

How do you feel your book challenges outdated assumptions about matrescent bodies or becoming a mother?

This study explores areas of critical discourse that have been historically used to disparage or undermine female bodies – bodies which birth. The uncanny, abject, grotesque, monstrous and hybrid have been used throughout art history to render female bodies and their functions repulsive. While conventional representations of mothers on the stage have been limited (or revert to tropes of mothers as monstrous, mad, murderous), the contemporary performances I examine offer a wider range of maternal experiences. Artworks that are deemed as shocking or difficult can open up a channel for discussion and lead to greater representation of images that have previously been undepicted. In analysing these unbecoming performances of matrescence in this book, my aim is to expand understandings of how becoming a mother can be experienced and staged

In light of Women's History Month, why is it important to explore the history of motherhood or the maternal experience?

When I interviewed mother/artists in 2023 about their return to their creative practice, many of them were keen to explore matrescence in their work but were worried that it would not be of interest to audiences. We have all been born and mothered (in some way), so the perception of maternal experiences as niche or irrelevant needs to be challenged.

Who is the intended audience for this book, and what do you hope readers will take away from it?

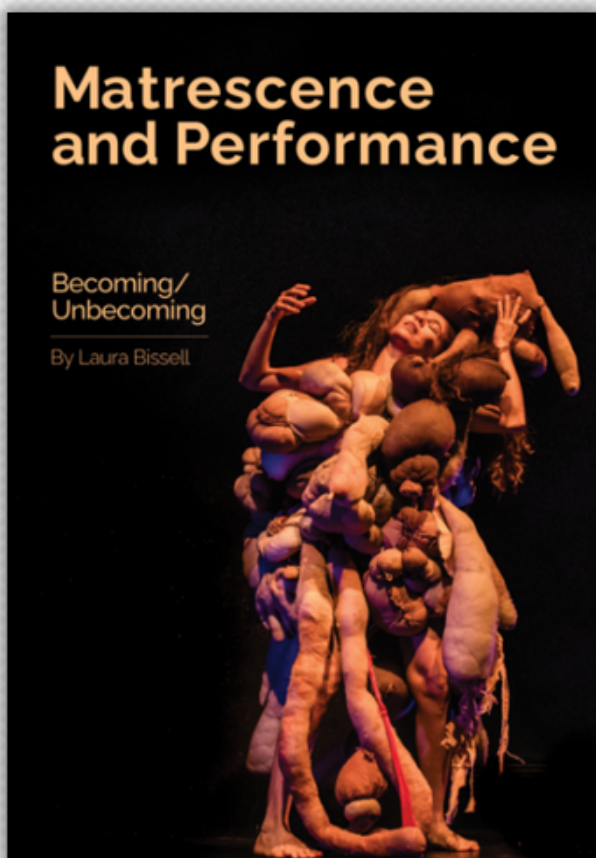
I hope that anyone interested in or studying contemporary performance, live art, theatre, installation and conceptual art, as well as practitioners, performance-makers and artists will enjoy the book. Making visible the work of mother/artists and particularly using case studies of lesser-known or emerging artists is part of the aim of this project, in accordance with feminism's ambition to 'lift each other up' (Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, 2017). I hope that readers come away with an expanded understanding of what matrescence can be and also to have engaged with some really amazing artworks!

Do you have a favourite part of the book that you enjoyed working on the most?

I have loved researching and writing all of it. I think a real highlight has been working with the brilliant artists I write about who have been so generous with their work so I want to thank them all for being a part of it!

Looking ahead, what conversations or areas of research do you hope this book will open up in the field?

Staging matrescence and making work about autobiographical experiences is not without risk. I hope that the final chapter on expanding matrescence will open up further conversations about who gets to call themselves a mother (for example those who experience infertility, pregnancy loss or stillbirth), who have perhaps previously been excluded. I also nod to areas for further research into when becoming a mother might end (or not), for example, for those who experience maternal bereavement. I think trans/non-binary experiences of matrescence/parenthood are an important part of the discussion that I would hope would continue to develop in artistic practice and critical discourse.



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