



# PERFORMING MATERNITIES

Political, Social and  
Feminist Enquiry

Edited by  
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Political, Social  
and Feminist  
Enquiry

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# Introduction

*Kate Aughterson*

The South African performance poet Lebongang Mashile succinctly speaks about the combined internal, external, and global pressures bearing on the name, the identity, and role of ‘Mama’ in ‘Mama’s War’:

Mama’s gone viral  
Mama’s screen shuffles faster  
Than hashtags invented by Black women  
Who turn tech into culture daily  
Boardrooms and bedrooms are battlefields  
What’s today’s shareprice for Mama  
Mama’s the only profitable stock  
Mama’s baby is five years old, mining coltan in Congo  
Mama’s foster children’s root chakras never healed  
Mama’s who George Floyd called out to  
When home is a dangerous place  
How does Mama lockdown?

(2022: n.pag.)

Her eloquent dissection of the intersectional differences juxtaposed with assumed cultural universals about maternal discourses and identities plays out the contradictions and pressures of contemporary maternities. As a poet and a mother, Mashile’s voice scratches at the problematic: how to both be a mother and the speaker outside that identity – a performer, a poet, an artist, a writer? This question has been asked by women artists and writers for centuries – from Mary Wolstonecraft to Alice Walker, Virginia Woolf to Angela Carter, Alice Neel to Louise Bourgeois to Andi Galdi Vinko’s recent *Sorry I Gave Birth Disappeared But Now I’m Back* (Vinko 2023) – the list could go on (Philips 2022). Now nearly a century old, Cyril Connolly’s ‘There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram

in the hall' (1938: 116) conjures up both the monstrous assumptions of western patriarchal models of maternity and the material reality of those assumptions and expectations.

*Performing Maternities* acknowledges and weaves in contemporary debates about and challenges to maternity and the maternal through fusing philosophical, critical, and creative writing and art – aiming at articulating and realizing a maternal imaginary that speaks to this upsurge of voices about valuing maternal performance and the fracturing of voice, self, and work in maternity and art in our contemporary globalized world. As Šimić and Underwood-Lee eloquently discuss in their recent book *Maternal Performance: Feminist Relations*, maternal performance can be defined by its actual and conceptual reliance on both material and ideological notions of 'others' and 'othering' (2021: 8). The body bears an-other inside it, carries its burden as self and other fused for a time, and then breaks apart that physical connectedness in birthing, brings it back in caring and nurturing, conscious simultaneously of both intersubjectivity and subjecthood.

I first discovered Adrienne Rich and her *Of Woman Born* after reading sonnets she dedicated to a woman lover, and the fact that she was also a mother blew my mind. Rich was the first person to say to me that both these desires and identities were possible and compatible, and that we could write about these with both honesty and raw joy. I was blown away then by her eloquence about the painful and powerful emotions of maternal and personal experience, by her deep scholarship about the history and culture of maternity, and converted by her nuanced feminism. When I reread her work a few months ago, those same emotions recurred: but at the same time, her ideas and insights, her advocacy for new visions and valuations of maternity and different ways in which society and culture should change and the problematic of the fractured identity of the speaking mother in a neoliberal patriarchal world are still (depressingly) present in the accounts and demands set forth in these chapters.

The chapters in this collection emerged from a conference held at the University of Brighton in the autumn of 2020, a long-planned event which, like many in that year and 2021, had to be held online. It was an emotional and traumatic time for many – my own mother had died only six weeks previously after a rapid illness, and for myself and many attendees, the processing of the personal and collective grief and pain of our post-COVID selves was mingled with the laughter and joy of sharing maternally performed stories. The conference produced many rich conversations and performances<sup>1</sup> – but looking back, what struck us was how many were and are richly informed by both the theoretical and creative work of those women who are now seen as founders of an interdisciplinary academic movement – variously known as 'motherhood studies' and 'maternal studies'<sup>2</sup> which first emerged in the 1980s

and early 1990s – writers such as Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Marianne Hirsch, Patricia Hill Collins, Shari Thurer, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Susan Maushart. In the very changed world of TikTok, #MeToo, Insta-mums, global twitter debates, and pop-up political activism, this return to the grandmothers of a movement is an inclusive and necessary part of notions of a shared (but often forgotten) history of performing maternities. The ‘maternal turn’ which Šimić and Underwood-Lee (2021) celebrate is at least 40 years old.

What do we mean by ‘maternities’? Throughout this book writers use the terms associated with maternity in a number of differing ways: the experience of birthing; parenting; the continued identity we might have after we have finished that initial parenting; the metaphors we associate with cultural and ideological values associated with caring and/or with the physical act of bearing children; the ethics of ‘interruption’ and caring (Baraitser 2008) which more broadly infuse our social and emotional lives. Throughout we as editors have aimed to be inclusive, using, for example, Stephens’s (2011) adaptation of Ruddick’s theory of ‘maternal thinking’ (1989: 134) as degendered – so that the maternal is transposed to mean any kind of ‘preservative love’ including ‘the needs and pleasures of any animal or plant’ (1989: 36). As Dally argued, and this continues to be true: ‘There have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented’ (1983: 17). Our world of birth mothers, egg-mothers, adoptive mothers, lesbian mothers, queer mothers, trans mothers, foster mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, mothers without children, mothers with students, othermothers has been transformed by a combination of technology and social change – we have extended the term maternal to mean so much more than a bearing and nurturing body – and a good thing too. Yet as Snitow explains – if we do not acknowledge the embodiment, the physical experience of the maternal, we also lose something material:

We give up something, a special privilege wound up in the culture-laden word ‘mother’ which we will not instantly regain in the form of freedom and power. We’re talking about a slow process of change when we talk about motherhood; we’re talking about social divisions which are still fundamental. Giving up the exclusivity of motherhood is bound to feel to many like loss.

(1992: 13)

Rothman’s deconstruction of the ideology of western mothering’s ideologies as core to a globalized, postcolonial world (‘an ideology of patriarchy; an ideology of technology; and an ideology of capitalism’ [1994: 139]) opens up possibilities of semantic inclusivity (mothers and fathers can mother), while Hansen’s (1997) dissociation of the term ‘mother’ from the body or even action of birthing fully



places mothering as a performative social act (as the chapters by Creswell, Ryder and Denton and Fournillier here suggest).

Rich's *Of Woman Born* was a radical intervention in 1976, born out of second-wave feminism and radical lesbianism. Her intervention was two-fold, one intellectual and one methodological – and it is both of these approaches that have ensured her ongoing influence and her radical future-looking model. The first was an analysis of ideas and terminology surrounding motherhood, making a conceptual distinction between three semantic and experiential understandings of 'motherhood': as an experience or role; as an institution and ideology; and as an identity or subjectivity. Yet her second innovation was equally significant and crucial for the questions this book asks about creativity – she chose to write in a style that intermixed philosophy, poetry, diary reflections and quotations, conventional historical writing, and literary criticism. This intermixed style was immediately immersive for the reader and stood apart from any history or literary criticism I had read before 1982. In our view, it was both these radical innovations – the conceptual and the methodological as practice – that make Rich still so relevant in today's sphere of maternal writing, where this intermixing of style, experience, and poetics forms the basis of works such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Rachel Epp Buller's *Inappropriate Bodies* (2019), Sarah Knott's *Mother Is a Verb*, as well as the work of Šimić and Underwood-Lee (2021) and Marchevska and Walkerdine (2019) – some of whom write new work for this collection. Rich's implicit plea was to find another language, another form that might speak alternative truths about and from outside the patriarchal constructions of the maternal. Such a mode and language can express that otherness in ways that make us stop and think – creativity and juxtapositioning of style, image, and communication disturbs our ways of thinking normatively and conventionally – and that make us ask questions about what our assumptions about identity (and maternity) are. This is a profound originating source for the concept of 'performing maternity' – Rich's analytic separation of social roles, ideology, and personal experience which is echoed in her creatively/critically fused writing – that foreshadows but does not explicitly articulate Butler's theory of performing identity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). While some triumphalist neoliberals claimed we were in a 'postmaternal' age at the turn of the century (Stephens 2011; Fanin and Perrier 2018), the revived inclusive discussion of the notion of the maternal and its associated words and ideologies seems alive and politically active (see Klein 2019, for example).

Key conceptualizations about motherhood and maternity which continue to resonate, be rediscovered, and feel current include Hill Collins's inclusive and communitarian notion of 'othermothers' (1994); bell hooks's celebration of 'homeplace' (1990) as a space for radical action and agency; Chodorow's 'reproduction of mothering' (1990) to theorize mother's place in a capitalist world; Ruddick's idea of



‘maternal thinking’ (1989) to ground a philosophical and potentially non-gendered subjectivity; Thurer’s deconstruction of the myths of the good/bad mother (1995); Maushart’s ‘mask of motherhood’s Althusserian take on imposed and acquired identities (1991); Juffer’s notion of the mother as domestic intellectual (2006); and Anzaldúa’s ‘borderzone’ (1987, 2012) as space where ambiguities of experience, identity, and language might reside and speak, all continue to inform contemporary writings on motherhood. Even a brief survey of recent work illustrates this continued legacy and life; for example, the opening of O’Reilly’s mistressful survey of maternal thinking (2021); Stephens’s spirited confrontation of the ideologies of ‘postmaternal thinking’ (2011); Rose’s fluid and passionate personal account of the subjectivities of maternal experiences (2019); and Fanin and Perrier’s reminder to acknowledge the continuity of our feminist histories of conceptualizing the maternal (2018) are communal testaments to the power of those past knowledges and ways of finding to speak differently, non-patriarchally about those experiences.

Perhaps the reason we return to these particular authors – hooks, Anzaldúa, Rich, Hill Collins, Maushart – is that they were often outliers to second-wave feminism and wrote from outside the structures and places of normative compulsory white European maternity? As black, queer, lesbian, single women, they articulated a standpoint that seems prescient to our contemporary intersectional sense of feminism. Their versions of maternal identity and agency were culturally complex and rich, spanned history and borders, acknowledged the power of oral and folk history in the daily lives of mothers and othermothers (queer and straight), as well as more fluid senses of how a maternal body might provide a model for intersubjectivity in contradistinction to the autonomous subject of late capitalism – a fluidity which has also informed the emergence of practices and concepts of trans-parenting.

How and what then is *performing* maternity(ies)?

Implicit in our title *Performing Maternities* is a four-fold acknowledgement of the intersections between performing and maternity/ies: first, of these foremothers who showed us how the analytic account of motherhood within patriarchal structures and discourses enabled us to see those roles and identities as socialized identities to be challenged and deconstructed; secondly that maternal subjectivities cross and are inflected by genders, sexualities, differing abilities, ethnicities, cultures, and histories – are plural as well as subjective; thirdly that the ‘metaphor’ of performance also acknowledges and valorizes a-doing, a practice of maternity; and finally that in making such performances self-conscious – whether through public formal performances (on stage, media, film, screens) or informal in our own sense of our own identities and practices as mothering – we are playing out Rich’s plea to enhance maternal agency through self-conscious ‘empowerment and political activism’.<sup>3</sup>

What seems like a postmodern notion (performing maternity) can be traced back through our foremothers and grandmothers: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*'s rallying cry 'one is not born, but rather becomes woman' ([1948] 2011: 330) fuelled the feminist theorization of gender as constructed – emphasizing the generic identity of 'woman' in the absence of the concrete article before the noun ('woman', not 'a woman') and equally inspired Butler's (1990) work on performing gender. de Beauvoir's concept of the socialized construction of identity also 'queoried' the maternal: 'It is as Mother that the woman was held in awe; through motherhood she has to be transfigured and subjugated' ([1948] 2011: 225), encapsulating simultaneously the west's reverence for the fructive and creative power of a birth-bearing birth-creating body and the simultaneous oppression of that insight and body through the institution, economies, and structures of patriarchy, religion, and capitalism. Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* opens 70 years later with an echoed plea:

[M]otherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes the task – unrealisable, of course – of mothers to repair.

(2018: 1)

There have been five (interrelated) strands in developing a critical perspective on performing identities: anthropological accounts of play as a natural human characteristic; (feminist) literary theory influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism; psychoanalytic theory about human identity, behaviour, and trauma; Critical Race Theory which uses concepts such as 'passing' and 'masks' as metaphors for the subjected ways in which non-white people have and do live in a society where power is predominantly white (see hooks, Hill Collins, Anderson, Anzaldúa); and queer and trans theory, which is indebted to all of these.<sup>4</sup> These critical-theoretical positionings implicitly inform all the chapters in this collection – which take such theorizing into the realm of creative practice.

Models of thinking about maternity and performance can liberate parents from the ideological pressures of maternity and parental roles. Maushart's critical argument about 'masks' is flipped on its head when she suggests that stories and storytelling might be appropriated as liberating tools:

If a society existed in which the way of the mother were the norm, tales of mothers would predominate the way tales of heroes do in cultures throughout the world.

(Rabuzzi 1988: 63)

Yet the way of the mother *is* the norm, and that's the infuriating part. This heroic journey, this steepest of learning curves, this drama of birth and rebirth – whatever fine metaphors we choose to dress it up in, the processes entailed in mothering children lie at the very cores of what it is to be human. The fact that it needs saying at all is quite remarkable. And enormously revealing. Like a superior athlete or (to use a more appropriate metaphor) a gifted actor, we make it all look so easy. So that instead of being seen as something we do, the work of mothering is something we are: the dancer become the dance.

(Rabuzzi 1988: 280)

The critical intersections of sociology, psychoanalysis, linguistic and literary myth analysis in Maus's work on 'masks' illustrates how the maternal crosses over many aspects of human experience and identity: but it is arguably in stories – and the performance and reperformance of stories – that we can 'tell' (simultaneously narrate, count, and measure) the doing of motherhood. Just as Adrienne Rich wove her personal stories through with historical and sociological ones, so does Paula Caplan (2000) who explicitly address cultural assumptions of blaming mother for social/personal ills through her use of creative play text of her own dramas to illustrate and intersect with theoretical performative notions in her play *Call Me Crazy*. This rich tradition – rich in sources, impact, and intent – informs much of the work in this collection.

The following chapters both build on and create anew debates about maternal performance. For example, Šimić and Underwood-Lee (Chapter 1) use epistolary writing to challenge the binary between critical/creative, public/private, self/other, reader/writer, performance/audience as an explicitly political act. In particular, they see this emergence into the public sphere as a performance: '[I]t is in the retelling that performance becomes a public act' simultaneously leaving open the question of the risk of making the maternal public. Their epistolary form enables the audience to problematize both private and the public:

I wonder about the danger in bringing the maternal out beyond our rarefied spaces. Is that the truly transgressive and resistant potential of maternal art? [...] Performances are not things but a kind of intervention into the world, a provocation that makes a difference, creates a new vision, a new narrative, upsets the flow. The maternal performances we write about affect as well as create new thoughts.

(20)

Baraitser (2008) develops a notion of 'interruptive ethics' to describe both the material experience of parental identity and the kind of art and writing that might emerge alongside it – fractured, juxtapositional, multivoiced, and multitonal – perhaps

the equivalent of Cixous's 'white ink' (Cixous 2008) – a formal, linguistic, and aesthetic expression of the 'other' experiences of maternal life. Moy's account of postpartum depression (Chapter 2) uses her personal trauma as the route into knowledge about a 'radical' intersubjective identity through a combination of drawings and critical theory and shows that performative creative practice enables a radical maternally based knowledge about the self as non-unitary and intersubjective. Through the notion of 'holding' she posits a new subjectivity of 'us' – a perception through her artistic practice that echoes philosophical accounts of maternal intersubjectivity and maternal thinking as well as those linking this philosophy to arts-based practice (Ruddick 1987; Marchevska and Walkerdine 2021; Ettinger 2007; Baraitser 2007). Her exploration of a mother/son relationship in terms of intersubjectivity, and 'through a non-attachment lens', nuances and explores ways in which future masculinities might emerge from creative and philosophical acknowledgements of the fluid intersubjective spaces of 'us':

[T]he 'us' that has emerged from my artmaking and those of others unfolds a new terrain of exploration, one that asks mothers what it is like to perform an identity that is larger than the 'I'; a performance of two.

(Moy, 48)

Autoethnography is a key methodological strand within contemporary arts practice research and echoes the methodology writers from de Beauvoir and Rich onwards have discovered as a way of crossing boundaries between self and other, private and public, the felt and the known. Lackey (Chapter 3) reflects on their own experience of stillbirth and the questions this raised for her about what motherhood means. She asks:

[W]hat does it mean to mother when there is no child to mother, what does it mean to mother a memory, and how do mothers exist and perform motherhood within the tensions of remembering, forgetting, and continuing to live without their children as time passes?

(52)

For Lackey, autoethnography helps weave her story into that of other bereaved mothers with whom she has worked, to remind and remember how loss and grief and trauma are part of the maternal story and experience. By using autoethnographic methods (as do O'Neil; Robinson; Ryder and Denton; Cresswell; and Bamblett in this collection), and through their punning adverbial title ('still mothering'), Lackey suggests that the 'performing maternity' model can be applied to

anyone who functions in/as a caring role at any point in their lifecycle. We are never not mothers – and her layered writing performs that task for us all.

Maushart's (1991) work on the mask of motherhood informs Robinson's account (Chapter 4) of their own experience of a late neurodivergence diagnosis in conjunction with her mothering experience. Robinson uses autoethnography to problematize and expose how 'masks' of expected identities are both enabling and destructive. Like Ettinger's (2005) concept of 'matrixial space', she advocates the time and space of the maternal as one to be reconceptualized by acknowledging 'matrescence' as an 'experience of dis-orientation and re-orientation [...] in multiple domains', including the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual ... it evokes a sense of becoming or unfolding over a period of normative adaptation (71). Robinson uses Athan (2020) to argue for reproductive identity as a 'life transition marked by disequilibrium and adaptation along with an opportunity for greater psychological integration and self-awareness akin to post-traumatic growth' (71). In using notions of transitional spaces and times and focusing on the pressures for and of 'performing maternity', Robinson shows how the maternal can be more inclusive of different models of identity and subjectivity. In using autoethnography theory and practice, she shows materially how cultural norms can be challenged by writing and art – performing maternities both deconstructs the norm and reveal alternatives: '[T]he pressure to perform is keenly felt by disabled mothers and mothers of disabled children, who experience guilt and self-blame over their perceived inadequate mothering' (80).

Ryder and Denton (Chapter 5) explicitly show how having to conform to 'the performance of maternity' can be mutually challenged by co-writing as queer son and feminist mother in dialogue. They deconstruct the 'masks' and conventions of maternity through performative and remembering inquiry. The nature of this autoethnographic enterprise demands an innovative methodology – performative enquiry – and enquiry enhanced and deepened by the choral repetitions of both authors. Writing and reading in a collaged patchwork of letters, prose, poems, and diary entries become part of the process and space of multiple performances of the maternal, and the reading experience echoes that interruptive enquiry.

Cresswell's work (Chapter 6) uses the physical touch, feel, and representation of clothes as a way of accessing and creating memories: as an artist who is not a birth mother, she creates a 'real/not real' daughter through clothes, arguing that the emotions and intensities of maternal identity can be accessed and traversed by women not able to bear children. Like Walkerdine (Chapter 15), Cresswell proposes that the performance of identity through objects enables more inclusive and nuanced versions of the maternal to emerge. Epp Buller's (2019) work on using art and performance to both destabilize conventional models of the maternal and

simultaneously to make them more inclusive has influenced many of the writers for this book. A new version of the ‘maternal imaginary’ (Jacobus 1995) enables a freeing of identities.

Michelle Hall and Teresa Izzard similarly argue that they are ‘repurposing maternal narratives’ (Chapter 7) by using a pregnant clown in a carnivalesque unveiling of some of the traumas of birth experiences re-enacted on stage. Like the Irigarayan model of mimicry and the Butlerian of repetition as consciousness, Hall invents a ‘punk maternity’ parodying the yummy mummy image and identity through ‘in-er-face’ theatrical performance theory and practice. By using the age-old metaphor of conception and birthing to describe (much longer) creative processes of both parenting and artmaking, she asserts and breaks a connection between ‘maternity’ and ‘creativity’. The formal circularity of her writing re-enacts their past (and past notions of identity) at a number of levels – diary/retelling/performance description. In the process, ‘re-enact’ing becomes a process of knowing, accommodating, reimagining, experiencing. Similarly, by appropriating the Persephone/Demeter myth, they actively address a cultural and historical ‘matrophobia’ through performance as direct action.

Chairez (Chapter 8) analyses a model of the world’s first artificial womb and the accompanying publicity around it to consider how we assess and think about bodies, birthing, and creativity. She shows how the rhetoric surrounding the medical invention still grounds the experience in masculinized sci-fi notions of future birth as a clinical experience removed from the mess of biology. She then asks the question, does the philosophy and practice of the post-human actually eliminate women? This is a reminder that there are some aspects of a non-binary and inclusive version of the maternal which does not address the very real stories and experiences of women who give birth and their physical and material experiences.

Bamblett’s resonant story (Chapter 9) of three generations of women’s experience of the maternal interweaves the voices of three women – grandmother, mother, and daughter. It uses literary devices, moving from first to third person and incorporating time changes over a 60-year period from 1953 to 2011. She interweaves the personal and the statistical, the immediacy of the first person with the distancing of the factual, to remind and immerse readers in the material experiences of loss, creation, and renewal.

In some ways, Ali’s story (Chapter 10) echoes this reminder that stories anchored in time, space, and experience are key ways of mapping an inclusive story of maternity. At the same time, she shows how that personal experience differed in three different countries, where culture, religion, and science all thought about the maternal and birthing very differently. Filtered through her own experience, this gives a rich authenticity to the way a self-conscious performance of identity is dependent on context and culture.

Jeong's comically immersive chapter (Chapter 11) takes the reader through the maternal/parental experience of bonding with a premature baby through the focalization on breastfeeding as an ultimately false signifier of the maternal experience while simultaneously showing the guilt-tripped grief many women feel at not meeting or performing this expected 'norm' of the maternal. Through comedy and self-deprecation, Jeong performs the anti-story to dominant versions of the maternal experience.

Fournillier (Chapter 12) appropriates the status and name of 'mother' to describe her Caribbean feminist relationship to her students and to pedagogy. By suggesting that teaching is a form of caring and mothering, she radically destabilizes both notions of the teacher and notions of the mother – taking us back to the work of hooks (1990) and Juffer (2006). In her incorporation of multiple voices, she traverses formal boundaries of academic and creative writing, as she argues does the role of teacher and mother in traversing private/public boundaries of self and other. Form and philosophy, aesthetic and pedagogy mutually interact and intersect.

Xeros-Constantinides (Chapter 13) provides a link to her fourteen-minute documentary film which readers are asked to view alongside her commentary and some stills, linking their own experience as a clinician with memories and the history of her refugee grandmother's childbearing and losses. In doing so she moves between ideological analyses of the 'masks' of maternity into material images of the 'cost' of maternal labour on individuals, historical, and contemporary through showing bodies as undone and lost. Maternal labour has concrete history and hauntings through remembering past experiences as (part of) present performance.

Abengoza (Chapter 15) uses Spanish popular music to show how the 1980s intensive motherhood movement replicated conventional patriarchal notions of femininity, specifically under a patriarchal dictatorship (General Franco in Spain):

However, history demonstrates that the transition to motherhood is not necessarily driven by an innate maternal instinct, and the emergence of motherhood studies as a unique and interdisciplinary field of inquiry has highlighted the significance of social and cultural (particularly religious) forces in shaping notions of mothering. Concepts of good and bad motherhood have been understood as patriarchal constructions.

(227)

Calderon-Berumen and O'Donald (Chapter 15) use Critical Race Theory and 'duoethnography' (a disruption of metanarratives) and 'conocimiento' (Anzaldúa 2013) in their concept of 'comadreando' to show through their communication between women friends on matters of personal relevance – gossip – a reworking of intersubjective relations. The authors cleverly note that their practice is



a rereading/rewriting of the ‘madre’ perhaps buried in the ‘comrade’. They use non-standard fonts, two languages (English and Spanish), and layout for their dialogue to show the ways in which silence can be worked to politicize speech, identity, and language. This self-named ‘queer’ practice draws attention to the intersection between their personal politics and performative practice in writing, teaching, and performing, as well as suggesting this might lead to more inclusive practices of performative maternity:

Duoethnography, by being polyvocal, challenges and potentially disrupts the metanarrative of self at the personal level by questioning held beliefs. By juxtaposing the solitary voice of an autoethnographer with the voice of an Other, neither person can claim dominance or universal truth.

(218)

Similarly, Walkerdine (Chapter 16) uses Ettinger (2005) and Hirsch (1989) as conceptual inspirations to reimage and reconceptualize her own relationship to family maternal history through the use of photographs, embodied re-enactment, and reflection. Thus, she experiments with the visceral transmission of affect, making the performative historical and affective. She expands Ettinger’s ‘matrixial borderspace’ to encompass affective connections we can make across time with our maternal foremothers as a radical way of rewriting, reimage(in)ing, reconceiving patriarchal histories – where inter/trans-subjective identities intersect, a concept which arguably enables us to read many of the artistic productions in this collection.

Ruchika Wason Singh’s richly evocative artwork emerging from her conceptual and physical weaving of maternity, creating, and gardening in an eco-maternal aesthetic deservedly sits as our journey’s finale (Chapter 17). Wason Singh’s work resonates internationally and locally and allows the viewer/reader to contemplate simultaneously the familiarity and the otherness of ours and others’ bodies in the world.

Many of the chapters in this collection remember and name maternal experiences and memories as integral to human identity and experience. If we are not mothers (in its most inclusive senses), we once had – happily, perhaps, still have – a mother (in the same senses). These chapters are a current upsurge of the radical domestic build on the past 40 years of writing and thinking and help us define and find new communities and transgressive models of using the maternal as ways to change our world. When my mother died in 2020, my children astonished me with their wisdom and care – a standpoint they have learned from her, indirectly through me, and her mother and grandmothers. Her death gave them adult life. Andrea O’Reilly presents mothering as ‘an explicitly and profoundly political-social practice, transformative and transgressive’ (2006: 13), and as

Stephens (2011) and Fannin and Perrier (2019) argue, the notion that we are in a ‘postmaternal’ world is as dangerous and as laughable as the notion that we are in a post-feminist one. The ‘matrixial borderspace’ is the utopian, creative, inclusive, supportive, caring, well-resourced, and socially constructive space of all of us othermothers and mothers whose collective voices, stories, and actions help us all survive. Phyllis Chesler radically articulated the ‘otherness’ and cultural erasure of motherhood and maternity in 1981, which demands we keep telling and performing these stories:

[P]regnancy and childbirth are savage tests of your ability to survive the wilderness alone. And to keep quiet about what you’ve seen. Whether you’re accepted back depends on your ability to learn without any confirmation that you’ve undergone a rite of passage.

(1981: 286)

Let these stories show that survival in the wilderness and then the stories and knowledge this brings are skills all our mothers are bringing to the rest of the (male)stream world as acts of transformation – social, technological, economic – a view shared by so much of the recent work on maternal creativity and maternal thinking (see Shiva 2020; Marchevska and Walkerdine 2019; Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2021; Epp Buller 2019; Knott 2021). As Naomi Campbell’s recent photography for the cover of *Vogue* (March 2022) shows, the maternal imagery and imaginary can be powerful for everyone<sup>5</sup> (accessed 4 December 2023) – and this collection of different versions and problematizations of that imaginary reverberates into that future.

## NOTES

1. Those specifically relating to experience during 2019 and 2020 have been published in two specially themed COVID-19 edition of the journal *Performance and Ethos* (2022 and 2023); others feature in this publication.
2. See O’Reilly’s lucid account of the development of this movement (2019: 1–3). Those ‘foundational’ mothers were: Rich (1976), Badinter (1981), hooks (1981), Hirsch (1989), Ruddick (1980, 1989) in the 1980s, and Hill Collins (1994), Thurer (1995), Maushart (1997) in the 1990s.
3. Green (2011: 31), as O’Reilly (2019: 2) acknowledges.
4. For accounts of the field more generally, see Demetriades (2005: 1–19); Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Lauser (2013: 189–97); Sikes (2007); Borthelo and Ramos (2013).
5. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/naomi-campbell-british-vogue-interview>. Accessed 12 December 2023.

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